



Reclaiming Your Boundaries After Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse occurs when people use God (or their supposed relationship with Him) to cross boundaries and control behavior for their own benefit. That is NOT the heart of God for us or how He operates. Agency, choice, and free will are treasures given to us by our Heavenly Father. He never forces us to do anything and never crosses our boundaries, even subtly. He desires for us to operate in health with Him, with others, and with OURSELVES.

Boundaries tell us where we end and others begin. Like a fence around your yard, boundaries help us know what WE are responsible for versus what OTHERS are responsible for. Reclaiming your boundaries is reclaiming your unique distinctness, personhood, and humanity—as one in whom God delights!



Gently Reestablish Personal Responsibility for What is Yours

God has entrusted you with personal responsibility for your life. As you disentangle elements of control you have given over to another, tend your heart gently, and do the internal work to take back ownership of those things which rightly fall within your boundaries:

- Your feelings and thoughts
- Your values and desires
- Your attitudes, opinions and beliefs
- Your time, words, and gifts
- Your behaviors and decisions
- Your limits and your love



Practice Being Distinct, Celebrating God's Unique Fingerprint on You

Becoming more and more like Jesus is a good thing, but making ourselves over in the image of those around us is *not*. You are made in *His* image, fearfully and wonderfully so. And while we all share a family resemblance with other Christ-followers, we're also distinct. We can be unified (Jesus' prayer for us) *and* our true selves. Exercise your agency and practice being distinct. You are a treasure.

- Practice using your voice
- Notice when you "go along"
- Offer an alternate opinion
- Choose something different
- Make a list of your unique qualities
- Practice saying no when you want to



Find Your Value and Approval in God Alone

If you need to be needed—or look to someone else for approval too much, you may have compromised your boundaries to get those things. Find your value and approval from God alone. Do the work to be content with who you are (just as you are)—and not how you wish to be seen. The sturdier you are internally, the more resilient your boundaries will be.

- Look to Jesus for His acceptance and approval
- Get an attitude—choose contentment *without* the approval of people
- Make a list what God says is true of you
- Forgive those who have withheld their approval of you



Respect God's Voice and Leadership in Your Life

While it's helpful at times to seek wise counsel, you don't need a leader's approval to make big life decisions. If you know Christ, you have the Holy Spirit in you, ready to counsel and lead you into all truth.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." - Proverbs 3:5-6 (nasb)

If you feel shamed or like people are disappointed in you because you made a decision they wouldn't make, be aware. It's not that you will make every decision perfectly, but YOUR decisions are YOURS to make.

- Seek God first and notice how He gently leads you
- Some abusive cultures manipulate the idea of sin; stand on His Word
- Notice "leading" questions from others and lean away from them
- Only ask for advice if you truly respect another's wisdom—not to earn favor with them; and remember the decision is still yours
- Spend time in His Word to know His heart and character



Own Your Own Responsibilities

God has given you this beautiful life to lead and to follow Him with your whole heart. It is your responsibility to own what He has entrusted to you. While your choices may have been undermined in the past, now is the time to step forward

- Do your own dishes
- Be honest about your thoughts, and feelings—write them down
- Take control over your choices
- Take charge of your health
- Update your resume

"It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth..." - Psalm 74:17a (niv)



Stop Overfunctioning

When we overfunction, we take on the emotions, responsibilities, wellbeing, and needs of others, often as a way of managing our own anxiety or insecurities. This is especially problematic in unhealthy cultures that promote "owning" what isn't ours. In reality, overfunctioning prevents you and the other person and/or organization from taking responsibility rightly for what is yours. Notice the discomfort you may be trying to avoid and:

- Allow a problem to go unsolved
- Sit with the discomfort of allowing someone else to make mistakes
- Get curious about what you may be trying to avoid by stepping in
- Don't solve others' problems



Get Curious

When something makes you angry or you feel yourself beginning to shut down, practice curiosity. Step back and allow yourself to notice your feelings and reactions without judgment. Don't rush to "fix" them.

Ask yourself:

- What am I feeling?
- Do I feel out of control? (And why?)
- What is upsetting me?
- What feels off-limits right now?



Stop Playing the Part You've Been Assigned

In church and family systems, we often take on "roles" that have nothing to do with our work or volunteer positions. You may have been "cast" as the scapegoat, the overachiever, the fixer, the favored one, the comedian, the thoughtful one, the helpless one, etc. While your innate wiring may have contributed to some parts you have played, this is NOT your identity. And the "system" will not be able to continue as is if you step back from playing your part. Allowing broken systems to be exposed is a GOOD thing and an essential part of reclaiming your boundaries.

- Notice when you're playing a part
- If you're "in favor," lift someone else
- If you're "helpless," step up
- If you're the scapegoat, stand up to abuse or walk away
- If you ease tension with humor, let the tension go without relieving it
- If you readily take on blame, stop



Beware of Those who See Themselves as “Exceptional”

We get it. It’s exciting to be led by a crazy-gifted song leader or noticed or taught by a powerful speaker. People who think they are exceptional also tend to want to be the EXCEPTION. As in, the rules don’t apply to them. Steer clear of such people. Surround yourself, instead, by those who are humble and wise, and lean into true humility so you will be able to recognize false humility when you see it.

- Don't show special preference to leaders or exalted/celebrity pastors
- Steer clear of those who act as if the rules don't apply to them
- Avoid cultures that lift some over others or call for blind trust
- Look for those who are humble and gentle of spirit and get near them
- Practice humility: follow the rules, wait your turn, allow someone else to go first



Decide What You Will and Won't Accept

You determine what behavior you will and won't allow in your life. While you cannot change another person or control their actions, you can exercise your God-given agency by choosing how to respond to inappropriate, wrong, or bullying behavior. This is part of the practical work of reestablishing your boundaries—letting others know how you expect to be treated and acting on anything that crosses your boundaries.

A helpful tool for those whose boundaries have been undermined for a long time is to consider whether you would want someone to treat your child or someone you love the way you're allowing yourself to be treated. Exercise your agency and stand up to those who encroach on your boundaries or put you down, even if they cloak their actions.

- Voice your boundaries with clarity (*i.e. "I expect to be treated with respect...if you call me stupid, I will walk away...if you demean me, I will leave...if you blame me for your mistake, I will go to HR," etc.*)
- Make a list of what you will and won't accept
- Take courage, establish your boundaries, and stand up for respect from those around you

Have I not commanded you?
Be strong and courageous.
Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged,
for the LORD your God will be with you
wherever you go.”