

I remember vividly the day I realized I was headed for burnout. I was 25 and working in my first job as both a youth minister at a local church and a college minister on the campus of the University of Missouri. It was early January, and I had just finished working on my calendar for the new semester - I used Outlook so I could see when all the various bible studies and lock-ins and retreats and everything. I was feeling pretty proud of myself for scheduling out the whole semester until I looked back over the next five months and I realized I only had three days off.

From January to May. Three days where I had nothing work-related - not a meeting or a study or a gathering or an event. Three days.

I realized I either had to back out of some of my commitments, or buckle down and get through it. I chose to buckle down, and that semester was not pretty. By March, people observed, "You look tired," several times a day. By April, I was grumpy all the time. By May, pretty much no one was talking to me unless they had to. The reserve tanks of my reserve tanks of my emotional energy were drained dry. I had nothing left to give anyone.

**[Gas gage on E]** You know that feeling - that you just need a break but a break isn't coming. That life is an endless series of relationships and obligations that, no matter how good they might be, leave you feeling drained, empty.

Friends, we are bad at boundaries. We don't care for ourselves, we don't ensure that we maintain enough gas in our tanks to be the persons we were created to be. And this is wrong.

Clear boundaries are healthy and holy. They're good for us. God intends us to create and maintain healthy boundaries for ourselves. When we learn the right time to say No, we're able to say Yes to God's call in our lives.

**[Illustrate: Boundaries separate Me and You]** Boundaries are a trendy topic in pop psychology today, but the concept of clear boundaries around our Selves is one that has deep roots in the Scriptures. Boundaries are all about our Self. Boundaries are how we distinguish between Me and You.

We're in a series called [w]hole. We're asking what a whole, healthy human life looks like. To find the answer, we're beginning with Jesus' response to a question he was asked:

**One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"**

This was a common question rabbis of Jesus' day debated. The root of the question is getting at what it means to be fully human - which of God's laws is the summation? Which most perfectly encapsulates what it means to be a people of God?

Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.” -- Mark 12:28-31

Jesus' answer frames our series: in one sense, it's a twin command - Love God and love others. But Jesus' command is also four-fold. We are to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength. During this series, we're using these four aspects of our humanity as a lens to examine our own lives.

Sin doesn't emerge fully grown. You don't burnout in one day. You don't show up at work and need to embezzle money. You don't decide to cheat out of nowhere, or become a chronic liar or a road rager in an instant.

Sin begins as small seeds within us. And God offers us these lenses - heart, soul, mind and strength - as opportunities to examine ourselves carefully, to seek out the seeds of sin and pluck them out of our lives before they can take root and grow into something ugly and painful.

Last week, we learned that loving God with all our hearts means with every desire we have - both the spiritual and the fleshy. This week, we'll ask how we can love God with all of our souls. We'll learn how to discern the seeds of Sin hiding in our souls so we can pluck them out so we can be whole and holy.

So let's talk about our souls.

We think of our souls as the spiritual aspect of ourselves. We can't point to our souls, but they're inside us somewhere. Many of us even think the "soul" is that aspect of ourselves that goes to Heaven when we die. It's eternal, while our flesh is temporary. So we think "love God with all your soul," and hear "read your Bible and go to Church." Do "spiritual" things.

But that's not what Jesus meant - Jewish people don't have the same concept of "soul" we do (and we got our idea of the "soul" from the Greeks - especially Plato). When Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your soul," he was quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6. It's a prayer Jewish people offer every day. The Hebrew word Deuteronomy uses for soul is better translated Self or Person. The same is true of the Greek word Mark uses for soul.

[Gas gauge again] The soul, or "self," is everything that makes you You and not someone else. I don't want us to get hung up on the soul/self language so we're going to talk about Self today in terms of energy. Our Self is limited. We all only have so much "in the tank" so to speak. We can't give all of our selves to everything. So we have to pick and choose. This is a boundaries issue.

When we don't have healthy boundaries, we give ourselves to everything. We give so much of our energy away that we end up drained, and we aren't ourselves. You know that feeling - we all experience it too often.

Of course we'll have *seasons* of this sort of exhaustion. We take a new job, or enter a new relationship (or end a painful one). Maybe we have a new baby or move. Seasons that drain us are inevitable. But as a culture, we've made this drained exhaustion the norm. We do more and more and more, give more and more of our energy away until we have nothing left to give.

Bad boundaries leave us gutted and hollow, unable to be who we were created to be. No one gets our best because we don't even *have* a best anymore. Our Self is muddied. It goes without saying that if our Self is muddied, we can't love God with our whole Selves, let alone our neighbors as well.

From the very first chapter of the Bible, we see that boundaries are God's idea. The whole first creation story in Genesis 1 is God making boundaries. God hovers over the chaotic mess of creation and separates dark from light. Sea from air. Land from sea. As we move through the days, we see God turn a shapeless mass of chaos into a beautiful world fit for habitation. Boundaries instill order, and we need order to thrive. Boundaries aren't for God - God is infinite. Boundaries are for us.

[**Scripture Slide**] Let's look at a more human example of boundaries. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Exodus 18. This is after God sent Moses to Egypt to rescue Israel from slavery. God has led the people to Mt. Sinai and they are preparing to receive the Torah, God's way for them. In the meantime, thousands of people are camped in the desert, and they run into problems. Of course, all those problems end up at Moses' feet. Fortunately, his father-in-law Jethro is there to advise him. Let's read what happens:

Moses took his seat to hear the people's disputes against each other. They waited before him from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he asked, "What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?"

Moses replied, "Because the people come to me to get a ruling from God. When a dispute arises, they come to me, and I am the one who settles the case between the quarreling parties. I inform the people of God's decrees and give them his instructions."

"This is not good!" Moses' father-in-law exclaimed. "You're going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself. -- Exodus 18:13-18

Moses spends all day, every day listening to the people, helping them settle problems, giving them God's wisdom. Thankfully for him, his father-in-law is there to talk some sense into him. His father-in-law takes one look at what Moses is doing, sees his gas tank is on empty and says, "What are you really accomplishing here?"

Moses answers like we all do in these gut-check moments: I'm doing *super* important work. Moses was working for God. Or we're raising the next generation. Or the company or the relationship depends on me. Or... fill in the blank. We convince ourselves that the only reason the world keeps spinning is because we're killing ourselves.

But Moses' father-in-law exclaims, "This is not good." In the Old Testament, "Not Good" is very bad. Creation is "Good", even "very good." To declare something is "not good" is more than just observing it's maybe not the best idea. Moses' father-in-law looks at how Moses is working and declares, "What you are doing puts you at odds with the very creative logic of the universe."

Boundaries are Good. Not having boundaries is Not Good. Look at what Jethro advises:

"Now listen to me, and let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you. You should continue to be the people's representative before God, bringing their disputes to him. Teach them God's decrees, and give them his instructions. Show them how to conduct their lives. But select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. They should always be available to solve the people's common disputes, but have them bring the major cases to you. Let the leaders decide the smaller matters themselves. They will help you carry the load, making the task easier for you. If you follow this advice, and if God commands you to do so, then you will be able to endure the pressures, and all these people will go home in peace." -- Exodus 18:19-23

Do what only you can do, Moses. You keep teaching. Keep being the go-between for the people and GOd. But Choose some good, honest people to help you out. Let *them* handle most of the problems, and only get involved with the really big stuff.

Then *you* can endure the pressure and everyone else will live in peace. What wisdom! Do what only you can do, let someone else worry about the rest. And then you can endure the pressure and everyone else gets to live in peace.

This sounds promising for those of us who feel stretched too thin, who feel as though we're losing our identity in the muddy waters of our life.

Here's the secret Moses' father-in-law knew that we forget: God created the world, not us. And boundaries are how God created the world to work. God sustains the world, not us. The world will not fall apart if we say No.

When Moses drew some boundaries, he was able to endure in the role God called him to. Moses had to take care of Moses so he could lead Israel.

So he said no to a whole bunch of people. A seemingly endless series of tasks. He drew boundaries. And Israel didn't fall apart. Everything was fine. Because Israel is God's people, not Moses'.

**[Illustrate the gages]** What does it look like to draw good, healthy, life-giving boundaries? If you've never done this, it's going to take some serious self-examination. Spend a week (or two!) observing yourself. When do you feel energized? Why? What are you doing? Or who are you with? When do you feel drained? What are you doing? Who are you with?

Are you an introvert who doesn't get enough time alone? An extrovert who's trapped in a cubicle? Or maybe there's a particular relationship that constantly drains you. Maybe you don't have any margin - you're going 150 mph from the time you wake up to the time your head hits the pillow.

You need to get to know yourself (a professional counselor can be a tremendous help here - mine recently reminded me that I don't do enough to recharge myself, and that's to my detriment!).

Once you discern these patterns in your life, you need to take control of your life. The Spiritual Practice of Sabbath is God's original boundary for us. In the creation story, God works for six days and rests on the seventh. "Rest" in the Bible isn't naptime. It's enjoying life, doing that which energizes us. It's living the way we were created to live. Sabbath is the space our boundaries create, the space where God's abundant life flourishes in us.

Maybe you love to cook. Or go for walks. Maybe it's spending time with friends or taking your kids to the park. The practice of Sabbath isn't optional for us. Sabbath is woven into the fabric of creation - a pattern of Sabbath-taking is how we live well in God's "very good" world.

Sabbath can't happen without boundaries. There's *always* more work to do. But God says, No. You work six days. The seventh is mine - and yours! Jesus reminds us God made the Sabbath as a gift for us, not a chore. God instructs us to put down all we do to please others in our lives, to work, earn, do, produce, and just live together. If you have never made Sabbath a habit, our Spiritual Practices Guide has some great tips on how to start.

Once you have identified how you are drained, and once you've figured out the Sabbath practices that refuel you, you have to draw boundaries. This means saying NO. It means letting people down. It means letting some stuff not get done.

After that semester where I burned out, I sat down with my lead pastor (who was really good at drawing boundaries). He gave me some tips and helped me think through my schedule. We decided I would take Mondays off. Hard and fast, no negotiation. He helped me draw that boundary. The next semester, at the college ministry where I worked, we were trying to schedule our staff meeting. Since we worked with college students, the meeting day and time changed every semester depending on the class schedules of our student leaders.

This particular semester, there was only one day that worked for everyone: Mondays. My new day off. As respectfully as I could, I told my campus ministry boss I would be unable to attend staff meeting. He was much less good at setting boundaries than my pastor. So he begged, threatened and negotiated with me to come in. "It's just an hour. You're really letting everyone down. Everyone can do this but you." And so on.

But I stood my ground. I held my boundary firm. And I didn't go to staff meeting that semester. Guess what: everything was fine. The ministry continued to thrive. My work on campus continued to thrive. I drew a boundary. I said no, and let some people down and made some other people mad and *everything was fine*.

Friends, we have to get over ourselves. You're not that important. Neither am I. This world belongs to God, and God demands we love him with our whole Selves. That means we have to know ourselves. We have to draw clear boundaries between ourselves and our work, our families, our friends, our church. No one else will draw boundaries for you. This is your responsibility, and if we don't do it, we will spend our lives running on empty, limping from thing to thing, relationship to relationship. We won't be the vibrant, powerful world-changing force God calls us to be.

You need Sabbath. You need boundaries. Remember Jethro's words to Moses: What are you really accomplishing here? This is not good.

Friends, God is calling you to life, and that life begins by giving your whole self to God.

What would your life look like if you had clear priorities? If you were able to say No to toxic, draining relationships? If you had clear boundaries at work and at home?

### **Communion + Examen**

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