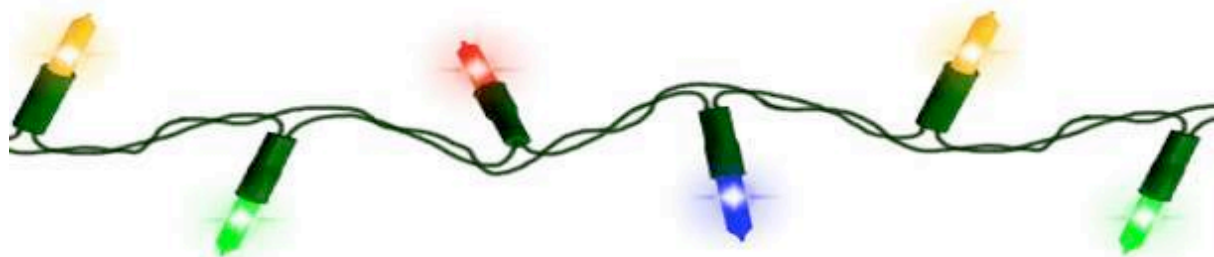


# BOUNDARIES FOR THE HOLIDAYS

3 WAYS TO ENJOY THE HOLIDAYS  
AND KEEP YOUR FAMILY FROM  
DRIVING YOU CRAZY



Material excerpted from *Boundaries and  
How to Have That Difficult Conversation You've Been Avoiding*

DR. HENRY CLOUD & DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

## Boundaries for the Holidays

The holidays are meant to be a joyous time that includes parties, vacation from work, and the opportunity for families to gather together. For many people, though, the holidays bring a period of uncomfortable conflict or awkward conversations that strain relationships.

This nine-page resource is designed to help you navigate three of the most common situations that families encounter during the holidays. As you read through the material, you'll become better equipped to face the following issues:

1. Make healthy decisions as an adult with your family.
2. Deal with awkward relatives or unpleasant behavior.
3. Set boundaries when your family gets too close for comfort.

This material is excerpted from the books, *Boundaries* and *How to Have That Difficult Conversation You've Been Avoiding*, written by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend.

### How to Make Decisions as an Adult with Your Family

When you were born, God placed you into a family for a season of time to help you grow into a mature adult. At some point this season ends, and your relationship with your parents changes from child-to-parent to adult-to-adult. The roles change from dependency and authority to mutuality. While you are to respect and care for your mother and father, you are no longer under their protection and tutelage. Children are to obey parents, while adult children are to love and honor them. Therefore, situations will occur where you need to make a decision apart from your family with which they may not agree.

For example, you might decide to spend some traditional holiday time apart from your family. This can often be a cause for a confrontational talk:

*You:* "Mom, I wanted to let you know as soon as I could that I've made plans to go to the mountains with some friends this Thanksgiving. I know this will be the first Thanksgiving I won't be with you and Dad, so I wanted to talk to you about it."

*Mom:* "What are you talking about? You always spend Thanksgiving with us. Your father will be so hurt."

*You:* "I'm so sorry you feel that way. I would never want to hurt you. But this year I have a really good group of friends that I want to spend the holidays with. It's not about not caring about you; it's about wanting to be involved with these people at a deeper level. I'm looking forward to being with you at Christmas."

*Mom:* "Can't you do that at another time? I mean, it will ruin our Thanksgiving."

*You:* "I hope it doesn't ruin things for you. That's why I'm telling you this several months in advance, so you can make sure you have time to make any other arrangements you need to so your holiday will be good."

*Mom:* “Don’t you care about how we feel?”

*You:* “Yes, Mom, I care very much. And I do like spending time with you. If you think that I don’t care, then maybe we can talk at some other point about your feelings, because I would like to reassure you that I care. But the point of this phone call was simply to give you a heads up so that we can plan and adjust for this change.”

### **Distinguish Between Hurt and Harm**

Ultimately, you may have to distinguish between hurting and harming your family. You might cause your parent or relative discomfort in the conversation, which hurts, or you might say something unkind or unloving, which harms. The truth you want to communicate may be painful for your family (hurt them), but it will not injure them (harm them). Some adult children perceive their family members as fragile and brittle, and they do not confront needed problems because they fear any hurt will injure them.

Give your family time and space to evaluate their reactions, and see if they are being hurt or harmed. If they are angry or somewhat pouty, that is one thing. But if they seem more deeply affected—for example, withdrawing from the relationship due to pain, rather than in a manipulative “Look what you did to me” way—that is another thing. Consult with others who know your family to see whether they are genuinely unable to digest feedback without injury or is merely reacting.

You shouldn’t avoid setting boundaries over holiday issues because someone responds with hurt or anger. Deciding to set boundaries is difficult because it requires decision making and confrontation, which, in turn, may cause pain to someone you love. We need to evaluate the pain caused by our making choices and empathize with it.

Take Sandy, for example. Sandy chose to go skiing with friends instead of going home for Christmas vacation. Her mother was sad and disappointed, but she was not harmed. Sandy’s decision caused sadness, but her mother’s sadness should not cause Sandy to change her mind. A loving response to her mother’s hurt would be, “Oh, Mom, I’m sad that we won’t be together too. I’m looking forward to next summer’s visit.”

If Sandy’s mother respected her freedom to make choices, she would say something like this: “I’m so disappointed that you’re not coming home for Christmas, but I hope you all have a great time.” She would be owning her disappointment and respecting Sandy’s choice to spend her time with friends.

We need to evaluate the pain our decisions cause other people. We need to see how this hurt is helpful to others and sometimes the best thing we can do for them and the relationship. As adults, we are to respect our family, but we are no longer under their authority. The holidays represent unique challenges where you may make a decision that your family dislikes. But, as you and your family give the freedom to make your own choices, genuine love can be expressed that works to strengthen your relationship.

## Dealing with an Awkward Relative or Unpleasant Family Behavior

For some people, the holiday season represents running through a gauntlet of awkward relationship situations, such as:

- Sitting through uncomfortable conversations with relatives you rarely see and know
- Interacting at parties with intoxicated or obnoxious people
- Enduring intrusive comments from “well-meaning” family members

The holidays offer unique circumstances where you may need to set boundaries with people who don't understand how their behavior affects you. For example, many years ago, our (Dr. Townsend's) family spent a lot of time with another family who lived nearby. Our kids were about the same age, and the grownups all got along well. Our lives intersected around birthdays, school events, and holiday parties. During this time, I also got to know the wife's mother, Fay, who was at many of the family events we attended.

Although Fay was pleasant, she was also very intrusive, inappropriately inserting herself into other people's spaces. When chatting with a small group, she would sometimes interrupt and change the topic to herself. At other times she would break in on private conversations. Most times she would stand uncomfortably close to others, so that they found themselves backing away from her to get some space. I could tell she was totally unaware of her effect on other people. She thought she was fitting in fine with everyone and everybody was enjoying her company.

It might seem funny in a way, but actually it was sad. I could tell that the family was annoyed by Fay's behavior, but nobody would talk to her about it. They would avoid her, roll their eyes, and joke about her behind her back. I once asked Jayne, Fay's daughter, why no one said anything to her mom. She looked embarrassed and said, “I don't know. I guess we don't want to hurt her feelings.” Yet I often thought that it might have been worth it for Fay to suffer some hurt feelings in order to be aware of how she was putting people off. At least then she could have had an opportunity to change.

I even thought about talking to Fay myself. But when I asked Jayne about it, she said she'd prefer that the family handle the matter in house. I don't know whether that ever happened.

If someone in your life behaves in a way that causes problems but he doesn't know his behavior is a problem, you are dealing with unawareness. It can be something bothersome but not dangerous, as with Fay. Or it can be something life threatening, as with an alcohol, drug, or prescription pill addiction.

Like Fay's daughter, you may be acutely aware of the issue yourself, much more so than the person with the problem. You may want to address it with the person for his sake and yours. At the same time, you may be at a loss on how helpfully to approach him. Use the following seven steps to help that person come to awareness and find a solution to the problem:

## 7 Steps to Help Someone Move from Awkwardness to Awareness

### 1. Take a “Presumed Innocent” Approach

Until you know better, assume a person is innocent of bad motives or intents, and approach him accordingly. If, like Fay, the person truly does not know what he is doing, he needs compassion and gentleness from you. Being innocently unaware is a far cry from being resistant, defensive, or blaming. The other person may simply be unable to comprehend the problem. Perhaps he is afraid to see it or does not possess the tools to look at himself.

In other cases, he may simply not know the full extent of the severity of the issue—how it may be ruining his life as well as your relationship with him. Or he may not want to know something about himself because it would interfere with his concept of his own goodness and perfection. Here is an example of how to confront a person who is unaware of an issue:

“I wanted to let you know I have noticed something in our relationship that could end up being a problem. Sometimes it seems that when we talk, you aren’t really listening to me. You say the right things, but you look around and don’t make eye contact. It even feels at times as if you are waiting for me to finish so that you can talk about whatever is on your mind. I don’t know if you are aware of this, but before it becomes a big deal, I wanted to bring it up. What do you think?”

Here the confronter starts with the stance that all the person being confronted needs is some basic information, and she gave him room to give his own input on the question. When a person genuinely is not aware, often making him aware is all the “nudge” needed for change to take place.

### 2. Be Humble

Approach the person and the situation humbly. Humility is not about perceiving yourself as lower than you are. It has to do with perceiving yourself as you really are, with both weaknesses and strengths.

A humble approach sounds like this: “I want to make you aware that sometimes you control the situation in our relationship and others. Please don’t misunderstand where I’m coming from here. This isn’t about putting you down or saying that I’m better. I have many things I’ve been working on for some time, so I’m in the same position you are. My intent is to let you know about the problem, not as a judge, but as a friend.”

### 3. Empathize

Empathy is the ability to identify with the feelings of another person. Think of times when someone was unloving or harsh with you, when he told you about a problem you had that you were unaware of. Think also of those occasions in which someone made you aware of a problem and you were able to receive it well. Most likely the second person gave you empathy and warmth along with the truth.

When you are aware of your own needs for empathy and kindness, the dynamic between you and the other person changes: “I want you to be aware of your financial irresponsibility, because if I were in your position, I would want someone to tell me. I would hope someone would care enough about my situation to take a chance and approach

me on it. That is how I feel about you. I'm on your side, and I know that hearing about this is not easy for you. Hang in there with me."

#### **4. Find Out How Unaware Is Unaware**

Some people, for various reasons, have little self-awareness; they possess little ability to look at themselves and perceive what they are doing or why they are doing it. They have often not had many relational experiences in which they had to look at themselves. This type of person has usually suffered from her lack of awareness. She may have lost romantic, relational, or career opportunities due to her inability to check and correct herself.

You may need to shepherd a person like this into the world of awareness. She may not fully understand what you are telling her. Don't be impatient with her. Say something like "I want to let you know that what you do affects me for good and for bad. When you are kind to me, I feel loved and close. But when you snap at me for giving you directions, you hurt my feelings, and I shut down." This clarity and specificity gives the person some association between her behaviors and her relationship with you.

#### **5. Be Direct**

When you need to make someone aware of a problem, the best approach is always to be loving but direct. If a person does not know what he is doing, it is no favor to him to hint around or be indirect about what you know is true. Remember that he is blind to this behavior, so he has no context for understanding it.

We often are indirect out of a desire to be kind or to not hurt the person's feelings. Yet, sparing feelings now can lead to injuries later. It is certainly possible that you will cause the person you are confronting discomfort or pain. This is one of the effects of the truth: It makes us uncomfortable as it points out a problem. However, your directness can also give life to someone who needs it. Try to avoid the following examples of indirectness and use the better approach that is more direct:

Indirect: "Can you consider picking me up on time tonight for the Christmas party?"

Better: "Please pick me up on time tonight for the Christmas party."

Indirect: "Doesn't that bother you when you are so mean to me?"

Better: "Please don't correct me in front of my mother."

Indirect: "Are you sure you want to buy this DVD player for Uncle Bill?"

Better: "Please don't buy that DVD player. We can't afford it this Christmas."

#### **6. Be Specific**

Specifics add substance and meaning to your presentation of a problem. They flesh out what you are trying to convey and clarify the point you are trying to make. When you use specific examples, approach the person anticipating that at first she is likely to be open to what you have to show her. Give her the benefit of the doubt.

Often a goodhearted person will be surprised at seeing evidence of a problem. Sometimes she will even be remorseful, feeling bad about the effects of her actions. These types of responses are good indicators that the person is taking the specifics to heart and will do

something to resolve the issue. Even if the person proves to be more resistant, however, don't avoid giving specifics. Specifics can help break through defenses.

### **7. Request Change**

When helping a person become aware, make sure you make a request for change. Since she has not realized until now that her behavior or attitude is a problem, she may also not know what to do about it or even if she should do anything. Requesting change helps clarify what is expected and gives her a structure for reestablishing any connection between you and her.

A request for change is specific. It also preserves freedom. In other words, it is not a demand; you are aware that the person has a choice. Also, a request should originate from your heart; it needs to be based on your care for and about the person. Here are some ways to ask for change:

- "I'd like for you to refrain from cursing in front of the kids. They hear you and might repeat what you say."
- "When I am talking, I would like for you to let me finish my thoughts and sentences before responding."
- "I need for you to work on your anger; it makes me uncomfortable when you burst out in front of others. There is a counselor I want you to suggest to you."

## **When Your Family Gets Too Close For Comfort**

Susie was a thirty-year-old woman who would return from a holiday visit to her parents' home and suffer a deep depression. When she described her problem to me (Dr. Cloud), I asked her if she noticed that every time she went home to visit, she came back extremely depressed.

"I don't live there anymore," she said. "How could the trip affect me this way?" When I asked her to describe the trip, Susie told of social gatherings with old friends and family times around the dinner table. These were fun, she said, especially when it was only family. "What do you mean 'only family'?" I asked. "Well, other times my parents would invite some of my friends over, and I didn't like those dinners as well." "Why was that?"

Susie thought for a minute and then replied, "I guess I start to feel guilty." She began to recount the subtle remarks her parents would make comparing her friends' lives to hers. They would talk of how wonderful it is for grandparents to have a "hands on" role in raising the children. They would talk of the community activities her friends were doing and how wonderful she would be at those activities if she only lived there. The list went on and on. Susie soon discovered that, when she returned home, she felt as if she were bad for living where she lived. She had a nagging sense that she really should do what her parents wanted her to do.

Susie had a common problem. She had made choices on the outside. She had moved away from the family she grew up in to pursue a career on her own. She had been paying her own

bills. She had even gotten married and had a child. But on the inside, things were different. She did not have emotional permission to be a separate person, make free choices about her life, and not feel guilty when she did not do what her parents wanted. She could still yield to pressure.

The real problem is on the inside. Remember, boundaries define someone's property. Susie, and others like her, do not really "own" themselves. People who own their lives do not feel guilty when they make choices about where they are going. They take other people into consideration, but when they make choices for the wishes of others, they are choosing out of love, not guilt; to advance a good, not to avoid being bad.

### **8 Steps to Resolve Boundary Problems with Your Family**

Establishing boundaries with your family members is a tough task, but one with great reward. It is a process that follows these eight steps:

#### **1. Identify the Symptom**

Look at your own life situation and see where boundary problems exist with your parents and siblings. The basic question is this: Where have you lost control of your property? Identify those areas and see their connection with the family you grew up in, and you are on your way.

#### **2. Identify the Conflict**

Discover what dynamic is playing out. Do you take responsibility for a sibling or parent instead of being responsible to them? Do you fail to enforce consequences and end up paying for their behavior? Are you passive and reactive toward them and the conflict?

You cannot stop acting out a dynamic until you understand what you are doing. Then, you will be able to see clearly to deal with your family members. See yourself as the problem and find your boundary violations.

#### **3. Identify the Need That Drives the Conflict**

You do not act in inappropriate ways for no reason. You are often trying to meet some underlying need that your family of origin did not meet. Maybe we are still entangled because of a need to be loved, or approved of, or accepted. You must face this deficit and accept that it can only be met in your new family of God. Those who understand His will and can love you the way He designed.

#### **4. Practice Boundary Skills**

Your boundary skills are fragile and new. You can't take them immediately into a difficult situation. Practice them in situations where they will be honored and respected. Begin saying no to people in your supportive group who will love and respect your boundaries. When you are recovering from a physical injury, you do not pick up the heaviest weight first. You build up to the heavy stuff. Look at it as you would physical therapy.

#### **5. Say No to the Bad**

In addition to practicing new skills in safe situations, avoid hurtful situations. When you are in the beginning stages of recovery, you need to avoid people who have abused and controlled you in the past.



When you think you are ready to reestablish a relationship with someone who has been abusive and controlling in the past, bring a friend or supporter along. Be aware of your pull toward hurtful situations and relationships. The injury you are recovering from is serious, and you can't reestablish a relationship until you have the proper tools. Be careful to not get sucked into a controlling situation again because your wish for reconciliation is so strong.

### **6. Forgive the Aggressor**

Nothing clarifies boundaries more than forgiveness. To forgive someone means to let him off the hook, or to cancel a debt he owes you. When you refuse to forgive someone, you still want something from that person, and even if it is revenge that you want, it keeps you tied to him forever.

Refusing to forgive a family member is one of the main reasons people are stuck for years, unable to separate from the dysfunction. They still want something from them. It is better to receive grace from God, who has something to give, and to forgive those who have no money to repay their debt. This ends your suffering, because it ends the wish for repayment that is never forthcoming and makes your heart sick because your hope is deferred.

If you do not forgive, you are demanding something your offender does not choose to give, even if it is only confession of what he did. This "ties" him to you and ruins boundaries. Let the dysfunctional family you came from go. Cut it loose, and you will be free.

### **7. Respond, Don't React**

When you react to something that someone says or does, you may have a problem with boundaries. If someone is able to cause havoc by doing or saying something, she is in control of you at that point, and your boundaries are lost. When you respond, you remain in control, with options and choices.

If you feel yourself reacting, step away and regain control of yourself so family members can't force you to do or say something you do not want to do or say and something that violates your separateness.

When you have kept your boundaries, choose the best option. The difference between responding and reacting is choice. When you are reacting, they are in control. When you respond, you are.

### **8. Learn to Love in Freedom and Responsibility, Not in Guilt**

The best boundaries are loving ones. The person who has to remain forever in a protective mode is losing out on love and freedom.

Practice purposeful giving to increase your freedom. Sometimes people who are building boundaries feel that to do someone a favor is codependent. Nothing is farther from the truth. Codependents are not doing good; they are allowing evil because they are afraid. In contrast, doing good for someone, when you freely choose to do it, is boundary enhancing.

Setting boundaries does not mean to stop loving your family. They mean the opposite: you are gaining freedom to love. It is good to sacrifice and deny yourself for the sake of others. But, you need boundaries to make that choice, especially during the holidays!

We hope this resource has given you new ways to approach difficult family situations. The balance of honoring your parents and relatives while making your own decisions as an adult is part of God's maturity process in our lives.

For more information about setting healthy boundaries with your family and all other important relationships, we encourage you to go deeper by reading the New York Times bestseller *Boundaries* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, **now Updated and Expanded!**

Purchase this book from your favorite retailer. Visit  
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