

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
April 28 & 29, 2012
John Crosby
You & Me: Boundaries
Matthew 5:37**

(Shrek video shown.)

Theology 101 in relationships! Because part of relationships is deciding how close we let people get to us, what happens when people invade our space? Relationships are a challenge for Shrek, they are a challenge for me and, I believe, relationships, letting people close but not too close, are a challenge for you. There are two words that help commit us to relationships, two simple little words that Jesus says are at the center. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,

³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Let your *yes* be yes and your *no* be no. You want a relationship? Yes or no. In or out. But is there some area in your relational life right now where you are saying *yes* and maybe God wants you to say *no*? Or you are saying *no*, and God wants the word to be *yes*?

We have problems with words in relationships, the right word, the right time, the right way. Often we give in to the pressure that comes on us in the moment even though we know it does not lead to our beliefs or values or desires. We say something else. Somebody asks us, "Would you do this?" "Would you attend this thing?" "Would you lead this thing?" "Would you pay for this thing?" "Would you commit to this thing?" And we go, "Uhhhhh." They say to us, "Would you watch my hyperactive, insomniac triplets for me while my husband and I move to Iowa?" "Would you go on a blind date with my second cousin this Friday when he gets out of prison?" "Would you...?" And the pause kills us. There is a clear *no* in your mind but to your surprise, jumping up your throat and out your mouth comes *yes*. Jesus says you have the responsibility for all your words.

We live in a crazy world. We often have the illusion that we do not have any choice. If my life is exhausting or unmanageable or out of control, then it is my work or my parents or my family or my friends or my finances or my season of life. That is what is to blame. This is my one and only life. This is your one and only life, and one day we will give account for it because it is God who made us. **Our job in this life is to please God and love other people.** The problem comes when we get those confused. When we mix that up, we end up going through life trying to please all the people in our lives. We become exhausted and more than that, we miss what God has for us in the one and only life that God has gifted us with. My life does not belong to my church or my parents or my children. It does not belong to my friends or my neighbors. It does not even belong to my spouse because relationships are important but I cannot abdicate responsibility for my life.

One way of thinking about that responsibility in relationships is with the idea of boundaries that Laura introduced. I read a ton about this. I have stolen ideas from Remy Diederich and John Ortberg**. Much of this sermon is going to be played live tonight at The Table by a counselor, Todd Mulliken***, but the foundation of what I have for you comes from a book by Henry Cloud and John Townsend**** called *Boundaries*. It is crucial to understand whom God made you to be and what God called you to do. That is what boundaries are about. People have problems in relationships with that. There are three kinds of problems with boundaries in relationships. There are those of you who tend to be compliant, there are those of you who tend to be controllers, and then there are those of you who tend to withdraw. In the next couple of minutes, I'd like you to see which of these categories you lean toward. We are all combinations of them, but which one do you lean toward?

The first folks whom Todd calls the compliants have a hard time saying *no*. If you are a compliant, this word does not come easily for you. Compliant tend to have fuzzy boundaries. Often they don't realize the truth is that they can say *no*. They end up saying *yes* even though they want to say *no*. They commit to tasks or projects or relationships that they don't really want to. They generally seek to avoid conflict. They prefer harmony. They are peacekeepers, not peacemakers, which would be much more healthy. They don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. They want everybody to like them. Compliant, if you are one, you know that you have an over-developed sense of guilt. You often blame yourself even if it is not your fault. I will tell you a little secret about compliants that they do not want you to know. Compliant are sometimes not as nice as they appear on the outside because underneath all that yes-yes is grrrrrr, anger and guilt and frustration and sometimes even shame. Let's have a little show of hands. How many of you would say that in your relationships, you tend to lean toward the compliant side? Just raise your hands? Keep your hands up for a second. You see, complaints, they will keep their hands up all day.

If compliant were alone in the world, that would be fine, but there are other people in the world who Cloud calls controllers. If compliant have a hard time saying the word *no*, controllers are people who have a hard time hearing the word *no*. They may say *no* quite easily, but they have a hard time saying *yes*. When somebody says *no* to a controller, the controller hears *maybe*. When somebody says *maybe*, the controller hears *yes*. Controllers take *no* as a personal challenge to be overcome, an obstacle. It will just take them a little longer to get their way.

There are different kinds of controllers. Some are *aggressive controllers*. You know them. They will just steamroll right over people. They push and intimidate and shove and raise their voices and use force. They won't take *no* for an answer.

Then some people are *manipulative controllers*. They really want to be in control, but they are sneakier about it. It is not obvious with them. They might not even think about themselves as controllers. They will use indirect methods. They will use guilt or make you feel obligated or try to finesse you and so on, and you will find yourself being controlled, but it is not even really clear to you that you are.

In both cases, aggressive and manipulative, controllers have a hard time accepting limits. They may know their boundaries pretty clearly, but they don't respect other people's boundaries. Now I'm not even going to try to get you controllers to raise your hands because you won't do it. You will just deliberately be defiant, but you know whom you are. Here is a really interesting

question. What happens when a peace-loving compliant meets a controller? You know what happens? They get married. It feels really good to both of them at first but almost inevitably down the road, trouble follows.

The third group is the people I would call wall builders. In the face of a choice to engage or challenge, they withdraw. They never really let anybody get close enough to control them. They are Shrek. They have been hurt and nobody is going to do that again. They don't make demands on people, but they don't get into deep relationships. They don't like the deep, meaningful conversations. Do you know anybody like that, men? They are civil versions of Rodney King, "Why can't we all just get along?" But that is as far as they want to go. Wall builders often mask that by being really busy, never having quite enough time when they are in joint activities with you. They are pleasant, but they are always deferring the challenges of relationships. They withdraw or they isolate other people.

Whichever side you tend to fall on, compliant or controller or withdrawer, you can damage your own heart. You can damage other people. You can miss out on God's will for your life. You go through life just exhausted because of the demands of others or the demands you place on yourself, and you can be very, very lonely. So this business of getting clarity on whom God wants you to be and what God wants you to do, getting a clear sense of boundaries, is crucial. It makes real relationships possible. Jesus was a master of the boundary. The Book of Philippians says your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had

Even though Jesus was God, He didn't demand to be treated like God. He walked through His life saying *yes* to what needed a *yes*. He knew when to say *yes* even when it was costly. He said *yes* to becoming a human being like one of us. He said *yes* to a ministry of teaching and healing. He said *yes* to washing His friends' feet and living as a servant. He said *yes* to touching a leper. He said *yes* to entering into the suffering of other people. At the climax of His life when He was in the garden and God was calling Him to the cross, He said, "Father, even though I don't want to do this, though I wish the cup would pass from me, not My will but Yours." His whole life was saying *yes* to His Father.

That is an important phrase here *to His Father* because that meant Jesus also knew when to say *no*. Jesus said *no* to temptation, right? Like when the Evil One came to Him and said, "Just turn these stones into bread. You can do it. You are hungry." Like when His misguided friends came up to Him and said, "Jesus, hey, when You are the King, let one of us sit on Your right and one on Your left. That way we will look like little kings in heaven." Jesus said, "You don't know what you are asking for. No!" The Bible says they attempted to make Jesus King by force. Jesus said *no*. He said *no* because He had clarity about His identity, His heart, His calling, His mission. His *yes* was *yes* and His *no* was *no*. And He loved people as they needed to be loved! He lived with great freedom and great purpose, and He said, "You ought to be able to live that way. Just walk through life with a clear understanding of whom God made you to be and let your *yes* be *yes* and your *no* be *no*."

Let's walk through the four key areas of life where having clear boundaries is essential. First is friendship. We need boundaries for good friendships. All of us want to have healthy, life-giving, God-honoring friendships. I bet everybody in here wants friends, but effective, long-lasting

friendships require a mutual give and take. Most of us, at least once, have had a relationship where you are the one who is doing all the giving. You know that relationship, don't you? You always make the calls. You always invest the energy. You always make sure you get together. It feels like if you didn't, the relationship would die. That relationship has boundary problems.

Or maybe you are in a relationship with a needy person. It feels like that relationship is becoming a black hole. No matter how much emotion and energy you give it, it would never be enough, and you feel torn by guilt and anger toward that friend. In healthy friendships you need to understand limits because we are finite, limited people. We are not infinite. Love involves limits, and very often the Bible reflects this. Jesus talks about healthy limits in one of His best stories. Remember the parable of The Good Samaritan? It is about boundaries as much as about care. In Jesus' story, the Samaritan helps but helping has limits. He bandages up the man that he finds sitting on the road, but he doesn't perform surgery. He takes him to an inn but doesn't move him into his house. He pays for a few days' expenses so he can recover, but he doesn't write a blank check. He is the Good Samaritan but not the enabling friend. He knows how to say yes but he has limits.

Some of you are in friendships where limits need to be set. Maybe you have been afraid to do that because you are afraid the truth is going to come out, which is that the other person is just not as committed. If that is the dynamic and you don't talk about it, you are in trouble anyway. Maybe you are in a relationship with somebody where they are always the focus. You always talk about their needs or problems or life's agenda. If you don't talk about that with your friend, they are going to push everybody away because of their constant obsession with themselves. Somebody needs to love them enough to speak truth about that, and it ought to be somebody who considers himself or herself a friend. If you have a person like that in your life, you need to have a frank talk about that dynamic.

Maybe your boundaries are too rigid. Maybe you have been withholding help that you ought to give, and so the relationship is sterile. Maybe there is somebody who really wants to be involved with you, and you don't really want it. You know this person does stuff for you or gets you into good places and the truth is, really, you are just using them. That is not a friendship. That needs to get addressed and be corrected.

Some of you here don't have any close friends because when the moment comes to be vulnerable and disclose your heart, open up the wounds that you carry around with you, talk about failures and so on, opening yourself to receiving help, you say *no* when you ought to say *yes*. Some of you need to take a relational risk if you ever want to live in intimate friendship. You are Shreks. You are withdrawers! Friendships are crucially dependent on having an appropriate healthy understanding of boundaries, knowing when to say *yes* and when to say *no*.

The second area of your life where having clear boundaries is essential is families. Families teach us about relationships. Most of us learn our relational skills or lack thereof in families. That is where we learn about boundaries. Sometime around the age of two, a child will learn one of these two words, and it will become that child's favorite word. Anyone want to guess which one? No! Drink your milk. No! Eat your vegetables. No! Take your nap. No! It is not, "I don't think so" or "May I do it later?" It is no, no, no, no! The child will grow to love that word and say it all the time with great joy. Parents often don't like it when the child says *no*, but learning to say *no* is a very important exercise for the development of every human being. *No* is maybe the most important boundary word. You are going to want your kids to be able to say it.

John Ortberg tells a story about his daughters that I can identify with. When one of them was about two years old, John asked her questions to see if her vocabulary was getting boosted. "Honey, what does a cow say?" "Mooooo." "Honey, what does a dog say?" "Woof." "Honey what does a girl on a date say?" "No." Over and over and over. We are both hoping that training helps when our daughters start to date in another 20 years or so. Boundaries!

Some of you have had this experience. You grew up in families where you were loved if you were compliant. You were loved when you said yes. But if you said *no*, if you got angry, if you pushed back, love was withdrawn so you learned to never say *no*. Children need to learn to say *no* in their families, but there is something else. Children also need to learn to *hear* the word *no*.

There are families in our community where children are not appropriately hearing the word *no* and are not learning to live in the fact that there are boundaries that are set for them. Children don't particularly like boundaries. Who does, right? They want to be able to go where they want and do what they want to do. They want to be able to satisfy every desire. They want to be able to complain about food they don't like. They want to push for more TV, fewer responsibilities, higher allowances, no rules, and later bedtimes.

Did you ever hear of kids old enough to take care of their own laundry just leaving dirty clothes scattered around? I've never heard of that because that just wouldn't happen. They are waiting for the dirty clothes fairy to come along behind them and pick up their things because parents will not say *no*. I am concerned about that in our community because we so often say *yes* to our kids at the wrong boundary. When children do not experience the natural consequences of dirty, wrinkled, clothing, they do not learn healthy relationships that are a part of reality. Children desperately need to learn boundaries and that those boundaries have consequences. Children need to learn that she or he can say *no* and still be loved and embraced, and every child needs to learn to be able to hear *no* or they will not be equipped to deal with life. What we want most for our children is what God wants for them, which is that they should live wise, God-honoring lives.

The third area of your life where having clear boundaries is essential is work or school for those of you whose work is school. There are a lot of people here for whom work is threatening to take over your whole life. You go to work, but then pretty soon work starts coming home with you. First, once in a while, and then more often than not, and then almost every night. It feels like your life is just flooded by it. There is a time to say *yes* to work and a time to say *no* to work. Let's start with the *yes* first. The Bible says, whatever you do, do with all your heart so that means when you go to work, work! A recent study showed that the average worker spends 41 percent of their time at work not working, doing something else. What has really helped us though is the introduction of Facebook.

But some of you are working way too much. Maybe work is just kind of seeping over the boundaries into the rest of your life. You have somebody at work who is just not taking their fair share of the load. They expect you to cover for them and that has become par for the course. Or you are working too much overtime. You have an unreasonable amount of work on your plate, and you are being asked to do work that is not what you were hired for. It is not in line with your gifts or your passion. Some of you are going through life obsessed with work because it is easier than relating at home. Or it is dominating you so much that you do not have the energy or the freedom or the time to be the right kind of friend or spouse or parent or volunteer that you

know God wants you to be. Friends, you don't want to get to the end of your life when you have to give an account to God and say, "Lord, I know I was never the kind of dad or mom or friend that You wanted me to be, but look how many hours I put in at work." Some of you need to ask, am I saying *yes* to work when I need to say *no*? Or the other way around, do I need to get off my rear and get to work?

The fourth area infuses all the others, spiritual boundaries. Temptations or peer pressures or religion or even church itself can become distractions to following God. **Saying *yes* to God means saying *no* to a lot of other things that get in the way of following God.** Right in the beginning of the story of God, we see the Evil One wanting to ruin our boundaries. The Evil One appeared to Eve and said, "Oh, God didn't really mean *no*, you can't eat that. He knows that if you do it, your eyes will be opened, and you will find out the difference between good and evil, right and wrong. You will be like God. Eat the fruit." What does Eve say? Does she say *no*? She doesn't say *no*. She says *sure*, and she takes some fruit and eats it and hands it to Adam. Does he say *no*? No, he says *okay*. Then God comes to Adam and Eve and asks, "What have you done?" They say, "I was wrong. I said the wrong word," and they start to blame everybody. They blame each other and do not come clean.

Friends, some of you have said *no* when God wanted you to say *yes*. You have crossed over a boundary, and your healing will not start until you say, "I did it," until you own responsibility and just fall on your knees before God. God is gracious to forgive everyone who will ask, but you've got to ask. You have to ask God not just to forgive you but to help you. He wants to do that, and He wants you to live the way Jesus showed us.

Even though Jesus was love itself in human form, He was God. Sometimes He said *no* to people's demands and would withdraw, not because He didn't care about His friends, but so that He could be alone with His father. Sometimes saying *yes* to God means saying *no* to pressures, to demands, to temptations when it is really difficult, and sometimes it means saying *no* to people. Jesus was not in nonstop relationships. When He was alone with His Father, it was clear whom He was. He needed to hear that voice again and again and again say, "You are My Beloved Son. I love You." He needed to hear that just like you do. Jesus was ready to say *no* to the whole world, to pressure, to temptation, to false demands, to say *yes* to His Father.

Jesus invites all of us to this table today. He doesn't say, "Come when you get your act together." He says, "I want all of you compliants to know that it really is okay, I want all of you controllers to come here anyway, and I want all of you withdrawers, especially you lonely ones, to come up here." He says, "I forgive you. Let me show you how to live so your *yes* can be *yes* and your *no* will be love itself."

Lord Jesus, I thank You that this is a place of safety and healing where we do not have to pretend to be someone we are not, where we can ask forgiveness for the broken or strained relationships in our lives, where we can learn from You how to say *yes* to life and *no* to everything that is not love. Teach us the way You taught Your disciples what real love looks like when You held up the bread and said, "This is My Body, broken for you." You said *yes* when You looked at the cup and said, "This is My Blood for the forgiveness of everything. Eat this and drink this until I come again for you." Jesus, bless this juice and this bread. Make them be the *yes* and the *no* of Your love for each one of us. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

This sermon would not have been possible without extensive help from several sources:

*Remy Diederich, pastor and speaker of four-week series, Boundaries That Help Relationships.

** John Ortberg, sermon on Boundaries, author of *Everyone's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*

***Todd Mulliken, counselor, speaker at The Table on April 29, 1012 (from classroom presentation on boundaries and conflict)

****Henry Cloud and John Townsend, authors of *Boundaries: When to Say YES, When to Say NO; to Take Control of Your Life* (phenomenal resource on dysfunctions and aids for healthy relationships)

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.