moving beyond

PEOPLE PLEASING

LEARN TO SAY NO AND SET BOUNDARIES

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Moving Beyond People Pleasing:
Learn to Say No and Set Boundaries

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We gain strength and courage and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face... we must do that which we think we cannot.

--- Eleanor Roosevelt

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.

--- E.E Cummings

Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but to trust the Lord means safety.

--- Proverbs 29:25 NLT

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.

--- Zechariah 4:10 NLT
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Cindy is a lovely and talented woman who has a hard time saying “no” to others. She loves to help, enjoys making people happy and wants everyone to like her all of the time. This puts her in a terrible bind. Cindy sometimes feels that other people take advantage of her kindness and place unrealistic expectations on her friendship. But, she doesn’t want to make waves or disappoint people, so Cindy usually keeps quiet and gives in. But Cindy is getting tired. She’s beginning to feel resentful and she is teetering on the brink of burn out. Sound familiar?

The High Price of Being Too Nice

People pleasers typically say “Yes” when they want to (or should) say “No”. Recently someone asked me to do a favor for her. I didn’t want to, but I was uncomfortable saying no. But doing what I promised took much more time than I had planned and as a result, I wasn’t prepared for other responsibilities I had committed to.

Several years back, a graduate student asked me if I thought she would make a good counselor. I knew her gifts weren’t strongest in that area, but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She left our conversation believing I thought she was capable.

We all do it. We want to be nice, so we accommodate another person’s wants, needs, desires or wishes. And, there is nothing wrong or inherently sinful about wanting to please others or make them happy unless that desire controls our choices. When that happens, we won’t say no when we need to. We aren’t honest with how we feel because we don’t want to upset anyone, and we’re filled with dread and guilt when
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someone is angry or disappointed with us.

Let us begin breaking free from people pleasing by first looking at the cost.

**We Hurt People**

It amazes me how unaware we are of how we injure people by being overly accommodating. Isn’t that why we’re being nice to begin with? We don’t want to hurt people? When I wasn’t completely honest with my intern, I unintentionally hurt her. She spent time, energy, and money pursuing a career that didn’t reflect her true calling.

Lydia was another people pleaser I coached. She believed God wanted her to be a Proverbs 31 wife and mother so she over-functioned making everybody happy all of the time. The more she gave, the more her husband and children took, with little concern or even awareness of her needs.

Lydia became exhausted caring for everyone with no one giving back to her. Over time, Lydia’s niceness enabled her family to become more and more self-centered, self-absorbed, and selfish. Lydia didn’t mean to, but she weakened her husband and children by not inviting them into a more reciprocal relationship.

Here’s one more way we wound people by people pleasing behaviors. Debbie was a new believer who attended Nancy’s Bible study at church. Debbie began phoning Nancy at home, asking a question or wanting to talk something through.

Debbie always took Nancy’s calls, but soon grew weary. She didn’t want to discourage her new friend but found her neediness overwhelming. Instead of being
more honest with Debbie and setting boundaries such as having a better schedule for phone calls, Nancy started using her caller ID to screen her calls. Eventually Debbie caught on and felt hurt and abandoned. Nancy’s niceness and lack of boundaries gave Debbie the impression that she was always available any time night or day.

When we are too nice and fail to speak up or set appropriate boundaries, we may not mean to, but we hurt people. The only person who can be always available without getting crabby or tired is God. Don’t try to do his job. You will fail every time and the other person will get hurt.

**We Hurt Ourselves**

There is nothing unbiblical about being wise with people you give yourself to. While in college Sharon agreed to take a walk through a park with a young man she recently met. She wasn’t attracted to him nor was she very comfortable with going but she said yes because she didn’t want to hurt his feelings by saying “no thanks”. During their walk, he sexually assaulted her. Every day she deeply regrets that she was too nice.

It doesn’t have to be a dangerous or suspicious situation for us to learn to simply say, “No thank you. I can’t. Or, I don’t’ want to.” We all have limited resources of time, energy, and money. When we allow others to take from our resources without limits, it’s like giving them unrestricted access to our ATM Bank Card and then feeling angry when we discover we are constantly overdrawn.

If giving to someone hurts you, count the cost. Sometimes it’s appropriate to sacrifice yourself for another, and other times it’s foolish. In your homework assignment
you’ll learn how Jesus applauded five women who said “No” and refused to allow others to borrow their resources.

**We Miss God’s Best**

Each day there are endless things and people that clamor for our attention. Oswald Chambers reminds us, “the great enemy of the life of faith is the good that is not good enough.” People pleasers allow other people to determine their value, their schedule, and their priorities. They are other-centered, not God centered.

As you read through the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) notice how many people asked Jesus to do things for them, but also notice how often He said no. Jesus always looked for what God wanted first even if it meant disappointing people. (See [Mark 1:29-38](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1:29-38&version=ESV) or [John 11:1-6](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+11:1-6&version=ESV).) When we are too nice and orient our lives around pleasing others, we will miss God’s best.
The Why of People Pleasing

Understanding why we do what we do is the first step if we want to move beyond people pleasing. Merely learning strategies on how to speak up and set better boundaries won’t be enough to break this stronghold. The Bible says, “Fearing people is a dangerous trap” (Proverbs 29:25). Before we learn how to speak up and set boundaries we need to understand what’s going on in our heart.

Jesus calls his followers to be peacemakers but not peacekeepers or peace-fakers. Our problem with people pleasing goes much deeper than our inability to say no, speak up, or set appropriate boundaries. Even if I taught you all those skills, without a change of heart, you would be powerless to implement them in a consistent way because you would continue to be ruled by your fear of man.

What Rules Our Heart?

God has created human beings as worshippers, and everyone worships something or someone. Once while speaking on this topic, a woman briskly informed me that she wasn’t into worship, meaning she didn’t like to go to church or sing hymns.

Worship is much deeper than a Sunday morning nod toward God or singing a few hymns in church. What we worship orients our everyday lives. We see it as our source of truth, hope, and well-being. In his commencement speech given to the graduating Class at Kenyon College in 2005, David Foster Wallace, a secular writer and novelist, said, “There is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping.”
Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”

God knows that what our heart loves the most will be the object of our worship. That’s why he tells us to love him with all of our heart, all of our mind, all of our soul and all of our strength (Deuteronomy 30:6; Mark 12:33).

God wants to be our first love and he is the only one worthy of our worship (Luke 4:8; Revelation 2:4). God knows that many times people pretend to worship and love him, when in reality, they love something (or someone) else more. Jesus lamented about the pretense of the Pharisees when he said, “these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8). Their worship was in vain.

We love God, go to church, we may even be a leader in our church, but when we are a people-pleaser, God is not our first love. We have other loves that take God’s place in our heart. People pleasers worship and bow down to the love and approval of people.

These other loves have a name; God calls them idols (Isaiah 44:17).

The apostle Paul warns us of this when he says that by nature, we tend to exchange the truth of God for a lie, worshiping and serving created things (people or objects) more than God (Romans 1:25). People pleasers live for people’s love and approval and it rules and ruins our life. We dread people’s rejection or displeasure far more than we fear God’s displeasure.

When people love us and are happy with us, we feel great. When they don’t we become a wreck. As long as we continue to believe we NEED their love and approval to live life in a meaningful way, we will stay shackled to our fears.
**A Change of Heart**

For us to grow into the people God created us to be and learn to speak up, set boundaries and handle our interpersonal conflicts, we first need to address the sin exposed in our own heart and repent. Today we don’t often like to hear the words sin and repent. They make us feel uncomfortable, but Jesus speaks so often in the gospels about sin and repentance that it is important that we know what they mean.

God says we sin whenever we turn from what he tells us is true, good, and right and instead substitute what we think is best, right and good, or do what we want to do instead of what he tells us. Eve did this in the Garden when she chose to eat the fruit, believing the serpent’s lie over what God said. In that moment, she thought she knew better than God about what would make her life work best and therefore, disobeyed what God told her.

The Bible tells us that everyone sins, because we all have disobeyed God and gone our own way (Isaiah 53:6). Biblical repentance involves more than feeling sorry or regretful about those choices or behaviors. It involves turning away from our sin and turning toward God. Repentance occurs in our heart and involves our entire being, our emotions, our mind, and our will.

In order for us to become a God-centered person and learn how to deal with interpersonal difficulties in a wise and godly way, we will need to turn away from our idolatry of worshipping people and their approval of us. We need to turn our heart away from fearing people’s disapproval and rejection so that we break free to turn toward God and to love him and be all he calls us to be.
To start this process, simply agree with God that you are captured by the fear of man and ask God to set you free. Confess out loud that you have loved the praise of people more than God, and you now want to change this longstanding way of life. Invite God to be your first love and seek to know and please him with all your heart.

As soon as you do this be aware that you will be tempted to revert to your old people pleasing ways. As you say your first “no” you will feel anxious or guilty especially if you sense someone’s disapproval. You will be tempted to back down but please don’t do that. You must walk through your fear if you are to get through to the other side of it. Remind yourself that you no longer want your life to be controlled by someone else’s approval or disapproval.

As you start to make these changes, you will feel uncomfortable because you aren’t used to putting God first instead of your mother, or your husband, or your friend’s feelings or desires. Your new decision to put God in the center of your life does not mean that your friend or husband or mother’s feelings or needs are no longer important to you. Loving God first never excludes loving others. Rather it frees us to love them well instead of worrying about whether they love us back or not. God gives us his wisdom to see what is best, and we are empowered to do it without fear that someone will be angry or disappointed in us.
What’s a Boundary?

A boundary is a verbal or physical guideline, rule or limit that helps a person define themselves, distinguish themselves from others, protect themselves, as well as helps communicate to others what kinds of ways they would like to be treated. Boundaries can be soft or hard, rigid or flexible.

For example, let’s say I’m the kind of homeowner who likes privacy. A large wooden fence around my yard would create a clear a boundary. It’s important to note that we only can set boundaries on our own selves; therefore, I wouldn’t put a fence around my neighbor’s property, but around my own. This fence creates awareness for both my neighbor and me of where my property begins and ends. It helps my neighbor and me know what lawn I need to mow and weed and what lawn she needs to mow and weed. In a pinch we may help each other out, but our property lines and responsibilities are clear.

Let’s say I put a few gates on my fence to let people in when I want them to come in, but I also have a lock on the gates to keep people out if I don’t want them to walk into my yard uninvited. These are hard boundaries. I’m communicating to my neighbor what kinds of behavior I would like from him or her simply through my boundaries. If my neighbor walked into my yard without asking, went into my garage and helped herself to my gardening tools, she would be violating my boundaries.

But let’s say I don’t have a fence around my yard although my neighbor and I
Now, let’s say she walked over into my garage and borrowed my gardening tools without asking but I never said anything to her about it. I would be guilty of not having good (or clear) boundaries.

By my silence, I’m teaching her how to treat me. I’m telling her that it doesn’t bother me if she borrows my tools without asking my permission. For some people that may be fine, for other’s it isn’t. Boundaries are not a judgment about who is right or wrong, it’s a clear way to communicate with other’s what is acceptable and not acceptable to you.

Why Are Boundaries Necessary in Relationships?

Boundaries help protect us. For example, our body has a fence around it called our skin. We have only a few openings, our nose, mouth, eyes, ears, and private parts. Our body is ours to maintain and nourish (unless we are an infant or incapable). Our body is separate from other people’s bodies. If we are healthy, we ought to be responsible about what goes into our body and what we do with our body.

It’s amazing how God has wired our body to be self-protective when things try to invade our body. When I put my contacts in if there is the tiniest hair or piece of dust still lingering on the lens my eye knows it and blinks, keeping the contact out. In the same way that my eye rejects the contact lens because it contains something harmful, our body often warns us that we are in danger or something toxic (physical or emotional) is happening around us. Our muscles get tense, our heart pounds, our skin crawls, we throw up. These are God’s internal warning bells for you. Something’s
wrong. Pay attention.

When Christians talk about having personal boundaries in relationships, they are sometimes accused of being selfish or uncaring by putting up walls. They’re told that they are self-protective or self-sufficient or not trusting God. That’s not true.

Personal boundaries are necessary so that we take responsibility for ourselves and exercise good stewardship over our body, our time, our energy, our talents and our money. We are not God – with unlimited resources, omniscience, and omnipresence. We are finite, limited, fallible human beings. God knows that. He made us that way. We need not feel ashamed by our limitations, but we must acknowledge and accept them.

For example, would you give someone unlimited access to your ATM card? I hope not. Why? Because your funds are limited and if your friend empties your account to meet her own needs, wants, or foolish financial choices, then what? You won’t be able to be responsible for your own financial obligations. Therefore, you keep your ATM card in your wallet and your password a secret. That is a boundary – a fence around your ATM card and bank account. You may choose to be generous or even sacrificial for a friend in need, but you decide how much.

If your friend is reckless and foolish with his spending, you are not responsible to bail him out of his own messes. His messes are meant to help him learn to take responsibility for himself. However, if he told you that you were selfish or self-protective or not trusting God because you had a boundary around your ATM card, I hope you would realize he is talking nonsense. He is trying to manipulate you into having no personal boundary when you know you must say no or not now, or not as much as he wants.
In the same way when you have a fence (hard or soft, rigid or flexible) around your time or your energy or body because you are trying to be a good steward of these things, don’t feel guilty because you aren’t able to do everything that the people in your life want or ask or need. Even Jesus accepted his limitations as a human being and disappointed people because he didn’t always do what they wanted.

**Boundaries in Relationships Help Us Take Ownership**

One of the biggest problems in maintaining healthy relationships is the lack of ownership. We don’t take ownership of our own feelings. We are not authentic. Instead we placate, please, pretend or pass off responsibility saying things like “It’s your fault I feel so mad.”

We also don’t typically take ownership for our own wrong-doing and confess it. Instead we blame-shift, minimize, rationalize, lie, and make excuses. And we don’t want to own our own limitations. Instead we over-function and end up feeling like victims (telling our self that we had no choice) or resentful martyrs (because we said yes when we wanted to say no).

Having a clear understanding of our boundaries changes that. Boundaries help us own OUR feelings, OUR thoughts, OUR needs, OUR desires, OUR beliefs, values, and attitudes, OUR behaviors, and OUR words. They are 100% ours. Our boundaries help clarify what we have to work on (ourselves), and that we are not responsible to manage the thoughts, feelings, values, words, or behaviors or another adult person any more than we are responsible to manage what they put into their mouth to eat.

Knowing our boundaries helps us communicate with people more clearly. I feel
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I was wrong for ________, please forgive me. No, I can’t do that for you. Please stop screaming at me, I feel scared.

People may not always like our feelings, thoughts, values or limitations but if we want a healthy relationship with someone, they must be respectful of them. The Bible tells us, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” (James 5:12) Mixed messages happen and negative feelings build up when we say yes when we wanted to, or should have said no.

Two unhealthy relationship patterns that become destructive have to do with lack of good personal boundaries. The first is where one person in the relationship refuses to take ownership for their own thoughts, feelings, words, attitudes or actions. Instead they are always blaming their partner or making excuses. They believe everyone else is responsible for how they feel or act. That is not true but when you live this way you and your relationship are incapable of changing or healing.

The second relationship pattern that becomes toxic is where one person assumes responsibility for the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions of another person – somehow thinking that it is their responsibility to fix or change him or her. When you work harder at managing someone else’s life and you are not being a good steward of your own, you are not healthy.

Summary

It’s important to have boundaries and know what they are. It’s important to share those boundaries with the people you have relationship with. For example, a
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A personal boundary might be I refuse to be in someone’s presence if they are going to smoke a cigarette. It would be important for me to communicate that boundary to him or her if I know he or she is a smoker or starts to light up in my presence. I can’t control whether or not they respect my boundary, but if they choose to smoke, I can choose to leave their presence. That is being a good steward of me, not trying to control them.

In the same way if I’m becoming weak or sick or harmed (emotionally, mentally, physically, financially, or spiritually) because of someone else’s negative behavior, I can ask them to stop or to change but I cannot control their behavior or change them. However, what I can and must do is to take care of me including removing myself from his or her presence if necessary.
Consequences

Consequences are part of God’s plan to help people learn to take responsibility, to be good stewards of our lives. Paul wrote, “Whatever a man sows, he reaps.” (Galatians 6:7) This farming metaphor made it crystal clear to the people in biblical times that if you didn’t take ownership of what seeds you planted you shouldn’t expect to reap good crops.

God told the Israelites “Because you have forgotten me and cast me behind your back, you yourself must bear the consequences of your lewdness and whoring.” (Ezekiel 23:35).

Negative consequences result from not taking ownership of your finances, your health, your feelings, your mind, and your part of relationship maintenance and repair. When we over-compensate for someone’s irresponsibility or sin and remove or mitigate the negative consequences we are enabling someone to stay deceived and shirk responsibility. They will continue to believe the lie that they do not have to take responsibility for their own choices. That’s not good for them, for you, or for the relationship.

Sometimes we believe implanting consequences is wrong because of the Bible’s teaching on grace. We believe (or are taught) that true forgiveness means mitigating any and all consequences but that’s not true. Both the Old Testament and New Testament talk about the consequences of sin and its effect on relationships even if forgiveness is granted.
Here are some verses that speak about the consequences of broken trust, distancing one’s self from repeat abusers, and an inability to believe what someone says to you:

1 Corinthians 5:9  “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindles, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to each with such a one…..Purge the evil person from among you.”

Romans 16:13 Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve. (So, Paul isn’t saying here – let’s just forgive and forget every problem)

1st Corinthians 15:33 Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals.”

2 Thessalonians 2:3 “Don’t let anyone deceive you” Peter 3:16

“…There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and stable twist to their own destruction, as they do other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.”

2 Timothy 3:1---5 – For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.”

2 Thessalonians 3:6 “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

Titus 3:10 “As for the person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”
Paul in warning young Timothy said:

"Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message." 2 Timothy 4:14, 15

Here are some OT verses that support the idea of consequences:

In Numbers 14 – read the chapter up to this point but Moses pleaded with God:

“In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just has you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.

The Lord Replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times – not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.”

Proverbs 19:19 “A man of great wrath will suffer punishment; for if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.

Consequences are the best teacher for a person who has not listened to words.

Proverbs 29:1 “He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing”

Jeremiah 4:18 “Your own conduct and actions have brought this upon you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is. How it pierces to the heart.”

Proverbs 22:24-25 – “Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man

Proverbs 29:9 If a wise man contends with a foolish man, whether the fool rages or laughs, there is no peace.

Psalm 1:1 “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers,”

Psalm 26, 4, 5 “I do not sit with men of falsehood nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the assembly of evildoers and I will not sit with the wicked.”

Jeremiah 9:4 “Let everyone beware of his neighbor and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a
deceiver and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Everyone deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity. Heaping oppression upon oppression, and deceit upon deceit, they refuse to know me, declares the Lord”

Jeremiah 12:6 “For even your brothers and the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously with you; they are in full cry after you; do not believe them; though they speak friendly words to you.”
Speak UP

Whenever we try to change the status quo of a people pleasing relationship – better known as rocking the boat - we will face resistance (a little or a lot). It’s scary to start making changes because we know others may feel unhappy, uneasy, angry, or disappointed with us. They might resist our efforts, make fun of us, or even reject us. It’s important to know up front that when we initiate a change - we will need to press through this awkward and uncomfortable stage until a new pattern is established. Sometimes, with some people, that never happens, and you’ll need to determine whether or not you can continue the relationship as is. However, the longer we tolerate the intolerable, the more difficult it will be to alter the relationship and the sicker we will become.

Facing Your Giants

Change is hard and sometimes we’re only motivated to change when the fear of staying the same becomes bigger than our fear of making a change. Here are two giants you will need to face head-on:

1. Fear

People pleasers fear something bad might happen and it would be our fault if we don’t give into the other person’s wishes or demands. We worry that if we don’t do what the other person wants, we will lose her love and perhaps even the relationship.

These fears are possibilities with a manipulative person. But that is the risk we
must take if we want to stop being a people pleaser. We must face our fear not give into
it. The alternative is to be captured by the fear of man and to capitulate again and again to everyone else’s agenda.

Moving Beyond Fear

The Bible warns us that the fear of man lays a snare (Proverbs 29:25). When we are controlled by fear, we can’t love well. God tells us to anchor ourselves in his love, not in the love of another fallen human being, even if that person is as close as our own mother, husband or best friend. When we are confident of God’s love for us, it empowers us to love others well without being held captive by them to do what they demand. Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Therefore, we don’t have to react negatively if the other person resists. We can respond kindly, yet firmly, with our no.

How do we do that without capitulating and giving in once again? First, we need to mentally and emotionally accept that the other person may indeed feel disappointed and angry with our decision or boundary. Accepting someone’s disappointment with us sounds easier said than done. We don’t like people to be angry with us because we want everyone to approve and be happy with our decisions (Approval idol working here).

It’s more realistic to acknowledge that most people (even our mothers or our daughters or spouses) won’t feel happy when we won’t do what they want. That’s not sinful, it’s human. But when that happens, healthy people understand that sometimes we don’t get what we want. Also, when we are healthy we will accept that our friend, our spouse, or our mother has separate feelings and needs of her own and we give him or her time to work through their feelings instead of telling ourselves we must cave in so that they won’t experience their negative emotions.
As we move beyond people pleasing, we remain firm in our boundaries and decisions because we no longer need everyone to approve of our decision or even be happy with it. As we’ve identified our idolatry and confessed it, we no longer allow approval seeking to take God’s place in our heart. As we grasp God’s perfect love for us in Christ it frees us from our bondage of having to please everybody in order to feel secure. We are already secure in God. That is enough.

It’s important to note that when we receive kick back from the other person and they retaliate by withdrawing or giving us the silent treatment, we must not give in. Stay focused on pleasing God and not the other person. It’s not that you don’t care about the other person’s feelings, you do. You can show empathy and compassion for someone else’s sadness, hurt, and even anger and still not accommodate them or reverse your decision. You may say something like, “I know you are disappointed (or hurt or sad) that I won’t reconcile right now or won’t drop the PFA or won’t come over for dinner tomorrow and I hope you come to understand that I have not made this decision lightly but I’m not changing my mind.”

A second giant that keeps us stuck in our people pleasing ways is because we feel guilty whenever we say no.

2. Guilt

When we attempt to speak up or share our own feelings and needs, or say no, other people may exploit our sensitive conscience and tell us that we are selfish and accuse us of doing something wrong because we aren’t putting their wants and needs ahead of our own.
These people define love in a skewed way. They believe “If you loved me, you’d do what I want”. Two-year-old children use this tactic on their mothers to get her to buy them something while standing in line at the grocery store. Most mothers are wise enough not to be manipulated by these tantrums. Nor do they feel guilty when they say no to their child. We know we can love our child and say no at the same time.

When the other grown up in our life has a tantrum it’s much harder not to get sucked into her drama. When she accuses us of being unloving and selfish because we’re not giving into her demands, we’re tempted to feel guilty. It’s tough to stay clear minded and firm under that kind of pressure.

Moving Beyond Guilt

We know that Jesus never sinned. He was always loving, never selfish, yet he said no and didn’t always do what everyone wanted or expected him to do. Jesus took time to meet his own needs for friendship, rest, relaxation and prayer (Mark 6:30,31, 46). Healthy people live in reality. They accept the hard truth that when we say yes to one thing, we will have to say no to another and not everyone will agree that we made the right choice. Even Jesus’ mother was disappointed with him at times (Mark 3:31-33, Luke 2:48).

When we feel that ping of guilt telling us we’re selfish because we’ve said no to someone take a moment to read Mark 1:29-39. In this passage we learn that Jesus went to Simon Peter’s house for a relaxing dinner and the text says that people brought the sick to Jesus and the whole town gathered at the door. Can you imagine the pressure Jesus felt with everyone pressing in on him to do something? That evening he healed
many people but eventually said no more and he took care of his own need for sleep and went to bed. Those who were left unhealed must have felt disappointed.

While it was still dark, Jesus woke up, went off by himself to pray. Peter eventually came looking for him. “Jesus, where have you been? Everyone back home is waiting for you.” Jesus’ response gives me hope that good Christians do not do it all. Jesus answered Peter saying, “I’m not going back to your house. Let’s go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

Jesus knew he could not do everything everyone wanted him to do and still do what God wanted him to do. During that quiet time of prayer, Jesus asked the Father to help him discern between the good things and the best things. Just like we do, Jesus had to make some hard choices – to please God or to please others. He chose pleasing God. Jesus describes himself as always doing what his Father wanted him to do. That focus regularly cost him the disapproval and disappointment of others, including his disciples, religious leaders, and family (see Matthew 26:8; Mark 3:21, 22).

If we want to break free from the trap of guilt, we must learn to distinguish the difference between true guilt and false guilt. Healthy guilt is a God given warning signal that we are violating his moral law. Unhealthy guilt results when we or another human being judges our actions, ideas, or feelings as wrong, even if there is nothing sinful about them.

If we’re not sure, then pray and ask God to search us and know our anxious thoughts and see if there is any wicked way in us (Psalm 139:23-24). We can trust the Holy Spirit to bring to mind if there is anything we need to repent of or do differently.
Jesus never violated God’s moral law so was never guilty, but he refused to accept false guilt about disappointing people who expected otherwise. Jesus never equated love with being accommodating.

That brings us to the last reason we don’t want to stop our people pleasing behaviors. We naturally enjoy giving, serving and making people happy— and as we learned earlier, this can get us into trouble.

**Remember:** People who naturally are nice and accommodating are often surrounded by people who will take advantage of this attribute. Sometimes the more you give the more others take. You over-function and allow them to under-function.

This is not the way God calls us to live. He doesn’t want us to be people centered women but rather God centered women. God calls us to love others, but we will get in trouble if we love them more than we love God. God says that what we love the most will rule us and control us (*2 Corinthians 5:14*).

When we love God first, he will show us how to love others well. When we are too nice or overly accommodating, living for people’s approval rather than God’s, we not only hurt ourselves, as we’ve already learned we can hurt them as well as miss God’s best.
Conflict Resolution Skills

Below are some basic skills necessary to discuss difficult issues and differences in a God honoring way. (These skills may not work with all people - but these are important skills to navigating most relationships).

Be Direct: Say How You Feel and Ask for What You Want

Many misunderstandings and conflicts arise because we never tell someone how we truly feel or ask for what we want. We assume the other person knows or should know those things without us having to say them. But trust me, they don’t. Women are taught to communicate indirectly and, most of the times, people in our lives, especially men, don’t get it. For example, when taking a long trip, I used to say to my husband, “Are you hungry yet?” What I really meant by that question is “I’m hungry; let’s find a place to eat.” But that felt too bold, too direct, too selfish, so instead I asked him if he was hungry. Unfortunately, he often answered, “Nope not yet.” And then I sat and starved, waiting until he decided he was hungry enough to stop.

When I wanted to enlist his help over the weekend, I said, “What are you doing this weekend?” Of course, he always had plenty he wanted to do so then I wouldn’t ask him to help me. Now I’ve learned to say, “There is a lot of yard work that needs to be done; I’d like you be available to help get this done on Saturday.” There are times when he says, “That’s fine.” and other times when he says, “I can’t. I planned something else.” But at least I’ve asked, and he’s responded. That’s a good starting place to begin negotiation and/or compromise.
Another problem I see when I encourage women to be more direct in asking for what they want is that they feel it’s selfish to ask. Asking directly for what we want, or need is not being selfish, it’s being honest. When Dana’s mother asked Dana to bring the children down to her home for the weekend, she was not being selfish; she honestly expressed her desire to see her grandchildren. But when Dana told her “No, it’s not a good weekend” Dana was expressing her own needs and boundaries to her mother. When her mother tried to give Dana a guilt trip for saying No, and she didn’t allow Dana’s needs and feelings to matter to her that’s when she became selfish.

The Bible tells us that we are to “look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). It never says we are wrong to look out for our own interests. Asking for what you want or desire or expressing how you feel is not selfish. Demanding everyone always give you what you want is selfish. No one always gets everything he or she wants, but it is not selfish to have legitimate desires or to want something God says is good for us to want. We are, however also to be considerate and thoughtful in regard to what someone else wants. That allows loving communication and compromise to occur.

If you never ask for what you want or never share how you feel but find yourself resenting not getting what you want or growing tired of being in a lop-sided relationship, then you must start to take responsibility for your own passivity. When we start to make a change and speak up, a conflict may occur because what we want is not what someone else wants. That brings us to our next skill—careful listening.

**Listen Carefully and Respectfully to What Someone Else Wants**
There are always at least two sides to every issue, two different perspectives on how to see something. If we want to have loving relationships, we must accept that our perspective might not always be the only way to see things, and it might not even be the best way. God has put us into relationships not only to meet our human desires for intimacy and companionship but also to grow, mature, and learn how to love better. One of the ways we love is to listen carefully and respectfully to someone else’s feelings, thoughts, needs, dreams, and desires.

James tells us that we are to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (James 1:19). One way to show that we’re listening is through our body language. Face the person and look in his or her eyes. Turn off the television or other distractions. By doing so you are communicating, “What you’re feeling, or thinking is important to me and I want to try to see things from your perspective.”

After careful listening, it is a good idea to paraphrase what you think you heard the other person saying. This helps to facilitate communication in two ways. First, if you’ve misunderstood what was said, it readily becomes apparent and can be quickly corrected. Secondly, when you’ve correctly understood the other person’s feelings or what she wanted and communicated them back to her, she feels heard and understood, even if you disagree or can’t accommodate what she wants.

For example, when Dana heard her mother sigh (guilt trip - “you’re disappointing me) after Dana told her that the children couldn’t come for the weekend, Dana was tempted to give in. Instead she said “Mom, I know you were looking forward to having them come this weekend and that you’re disappointed it won’t work out, but it is bad
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timing for us.” Dana’s response showed that she heard her mother’s disappointment and cared about how she felt. She didn’t give in to her mother’s manipulation, but she did show compassion for her feelings.

**Aim for a Win-Win Solution**

Some conflicts are solvable and temporary, and others may be more chronic, but when possible, look for a solution that both parties can live with and feel good about.

For those who are married, sometimes we misunderstand biblical headship and submission to mean that the husband always gets his way in every conflict or disagreement. God never describes headship in that way. In fact, Jesus sternly cautions those in authority over others not to misuse their positions for selfish purposes (Mark 10:42, 43). Godly headship always leads to sacrificial servant hood, not demanding one’s own way.

To work together toward a mutually agreeable solution, whether it is a marital conflict or a disagreement among family members or friends, you must define the problem you’re working to solve. For example, Sandy felt angry because Ted spent money without telling her, but why was that a problem? Was it because she didn’t think that was fair or was it because she didn’t like what he bought? Sandy needed to think about why Ted’s spending was a problem for her. As she looked at the situation more closely, she saw that the problem was what happened to her budget when Ted overspent. As Sandy defined her problem and communicated directly how she felt and what she wanted, she may have said something like this, “Ted, I don’t like it when you
Spend money without telling me first. It throws our budget off and then I’m scrambling to find money to pay the bills. I’d like you to talk with me before you make a purchase over $50.”

Sandy defined the problem and asked Ted directly for the changes that she wanted him to make. She told him how she felt without assaulting his character with ugly words like, “You’re so irresponsible, how could you be so selfish.” As she listened to his response, Sandy needed to show respect and consideration for Ted’s feelings and a willingness to work with him to find a mutually acceptable solution to her problem of not having sufficient money to pay bills with. Sometimes this feels like very hard work. It is, and this work is what builds better and closer relationships.

This is the kind of work that allows my husband and me to go on vacation even when our preferences are very different. We talk about how we will spend our time together, being considerate of each other’s desires, so that at the end of the vacation, we’ve both had a good time.

*Commit to Do No Harm (Romans 13:10)*

We have already learned that our words are powerful, and they can be used to help and heal or to hurt and attack another person. Commit to God that you will not use your tongue as a weapon to murder someone else (Matthew 5:22). If you are unable to restrain your words because you are too angry or hurt, take some time out until you can. Make a plan to return to the issue when you are in a better frame of mind or can emotionally handle the discussion. Do return to it. Don’t ignore it, hoping it will go away (Ephesians 4:25, 26, Matthew 5:23, 24). My pastor once said, “You can sweep
broken glass under the rug, but it will always work its way back up and eventually cut your foot.”

If married couples, families and friends would practice these basic interpersonal skills, ugly conflict would significantly decrease from their relationships.

**When There Seems to Be No Solution to A Conflict**

There are times that you do all you can but there seems to be no resolution to the conflict. This often puts a strain on the relationship, but it doesn’t have to. For example, Dana and her mother may permanently disagree on what’s best for Dana’s children but as long as Dana is able to say “no” and her mother respects Dana’s no, even if she disagrees with it, they can still have a good relationship. It’s when Dana can’t say “no” and inwardly resents her mother, or her mother refuses to accept Dana’s “no’s” that their disagreements will ruin their relationship. There are many times we can agree to disagree and leave the conflict alone yet still get along with one another. However, there are other times when the other person won’t listen, talk, compromise, or won’t even agree that there is a problem and you feel stuck. What should you do then?

The first thing we can always do is pray. Prayer doesn’t always change a situation, but it does change the way we look at it. Let it go and trust God to work in the other person’s heart *(Matthew 5:44)*.

Second, work on being willing to forgive the other person if they have offended you or hurt you in any way. Let go of unresolved anger or bitterness so you don’t allow Satan to get a foothold in your heart *(Ephesians 4:27)*. The devil may have influenced the other person; don’t allow him to influence you too *(Romans 12:19-21)*.
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Third, achieving peace is not up to you alone. The Bible tells us that as much as it depends on us, we should be at peace (Romans 12:18) and we are to work toward preserving unity (Ephesians 4:3), but sometimes the other person is unwilling. In those instances, we must recognize and accept our limitations.

Lastly, we are to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). That does not mean that we can overpower another person’s will or choices, but it does mean that we must guard our own heart so that the evil that has been done to us does not change us into someone that responds with more evil. When this happens, Satan wins and both individuals in the conflict lose. When we surrender not only the outcome of conflict to God but also accept that God sometimes uses difficult things (including people) to mature us, then we can look for the good and respond with godly love, even when someone sins against us or we are in a difficult relationship.

Keep in mind when someone refuses to accept responsibility for the ways they damage the relationship or the ways they hurt us, we can love them but a close mutually caring relationship with them is impossible.

Practice “I” Statements

One of most useful skills for people who are learning how to express their feelings or confront problems is the “I statement”. Here are two different ways Sandy could have described her feelings and her concerns to Ted about his spending problem.

1. “Ted, I have a problem. I get upset when you spend money without checking with me first. It puts me in a dilemma of not having
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enough money to pay our bills. I’d like for you to check with me before you purchase something over $50. Can you do that for me?”

2. “Ted, you’re driving me crazy when you spend money without telling me. You don’t even think of how that will impact our budget. How can you be so irresponsible and thoughtless?”

Which approach do you think made a discussion with Ted more probable? In the first example, Sandy didn’t demean Ted or accuse him of wrongdoing. She stated clearly what she was feeling and asked for a specific change. In the second example, Ted likely responded by arguing with Sandy and getting defensive or throwing back some of his own criticisms.

**Practicing “I” Statements**

*I want or I’d like (describe as specifically as you can)*

For example:

- I want to go to the mountains for vacation this year.
- I’d like to see a chick flick tonight.
- I’d like you to help me cook dinner tonight. I’m tired.

*I don’t want, or I don’t like (describe as specifically as you can what you don’t like or want to be different)*

- I don’t want company tonight.
- I don’t like it when you swear at me. It makes me feel disrespected and unloved.

*I feel (emotion) when (describe an unacceptable behavior or attitude) and I’d like you to (describe a specific change you’d like to see).*

For example:

- I feel hurt when you are constantly interrupting me when I talk with you. I’d like you to give me five minutes of uninterrupted time to listen to me while I’m talking.
I feel angry when you leave all your dirty clothes all over the floor, and I’d like you to clean them up before we go to bed.

Mom, I have a problem. I feel guilty and anxious when you tell me I’m too strict or too protective with my children. I’d like it so much if you could try to support my parenting decisions. It would mean a lot to me.

Be sure when you’re describing a problem that you describe a behavior or a specific attitude versus an overall character quality. For example, here’s an “I statement,” that digresses into a global criticism. You’re not likely to get much cooperation when you say something like this.

“I feel angry when you leave all your dirty clothes all over the floor. You’re such a slob.”

Or:

“Mom! I’m so hurt. Can’t you ever say anything nice? It’s never good enough for you is it?”

Remember; pick a good time to talk about the issue when possible. Be specific with what your problem is and the changes you’d like to see. Avoid using words like “always” or “never.” Be considerate of the other person’s feelings and point of view and work toward reconciling the relationship even if the problem remains unresolved. Very few conflicts are worth ending a relationship over. Don’t turn minor issues into major battles. No one always gets everything he or she wants. When all else fails and there is a significant impasse, enlist the help of other believers, such as a Christian counselor, your pastor, or otherwise people in the church. The apostle Paul pleaded with Euodia and
Syntyche to settle their disagreement and asked others in the body of Christ to help them (Philippians 4:2, 3).

Relationship difficulties can contribute to the overall stress in life. Growing through difficult relationships means acquiring the skills necessary to create and maintain godly relationships and facilitate connection with others.