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Just Breathe: Healthy Boundaries

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When we think about the word 'boundary,' all kinds of images probably come to mind. A tree line, a hedge row, a rock wall. Maybe a fence – which is a type of boundary marker to keep your dog in the yard, or to keep the deer out of the garden. You might put up a decorative panel or privacy wall to create a privacy boundary close to your house. I learned about boundaries as a kid in Elementary School. We looked at maps and talked about the types of lines used to show boundaries between states and countries. Sometimes there would be natural features like rivers or a mountain range that would create a boundary between one territory and another.

But not all boundaries are visible like a river or a yard marker. We also set emotional, psychological, physical, material, and time boundaries in our personal lives. And establishing these kinds of boundaries is important because they keep us healthy, they keep us safe, and maybe they even keep us alive.

Jesus had some things to say about boundaries. But even more than just talking about boundaries, Jesus modeled them for His followers. In our "Just Breathe" series, we want to pay attention to what Jesus did to maintain a healthy life on every level. This isn't just pop psychology. This is deeply healthy and important work we do as Christ's followers. The wisdom of Scripture is helping us learn how to create some breathing room in our lives. In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, there's a brief story about a time when Jesus had to set clear boundaries. Let me read this passage for us, and then we'll peel back some layers. Mark 1:35-39: *Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray. Later, Simon and the others went out to find him. When they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you." But Jesus replied, "We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. That is why I came." So He traveled throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.*

The choices Jesus made and the boundaries He modeled for His disciples have a lot to teach us today. Before we explore the specific practice that Jesus used to make those choices and create those boundaries, let me say something about why setting boundaries is so important and what gets in the way when we don't set good boundaries. When we don't set clear, healthy boundaries, what we're really doing is prioritizing other people's comfort over our own, putting the needs and agendas of others before our own. If you were raised in the church community, there's a good chance that you were taught that putting your needs first was selfish. To think of yourself first, to take care of your needs before the needs of others was somehow not Christ-like.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Setting boundaries is a courageous act of being aware of what we need to fully function in a healthy way. Think of it this way: Do you know how many flights take off and land every day all over the globe? Roughly 100,000 flights take off and land every day all over the globe. Let's say that the average length of a flight is two hours; that would mean that six million people fly somewhere every day. That's nearly 0.1% of the entire world's population. On nearly every single one of those flights, someone is communicating the important message that if there's a sudden drop in cabin pressure and the oxygen masks deploy, you put yours on first before helping another person. That is setting a healthy boundary. Making sure that we've got what we need is a great way to make sure we can help others when they have needs. But why do we struggle with that? Because most of us are hard-wired to be people pleasers. And being a people-pleaser always leads to a lot of complications.

The most effective way to break the people-pleasing habit and practice healthy boundaries and self-care is to speak the truth with love. Being honest in a difficult conversation is not unkindness. It's not rude to stand up for yourself. It's actually the most truthful and authentic way to interact with others. It's true, setting clear boundaries might make people feel frustrated or resentful. But you're not responsible for other people's thoughts and feelings. As the saying goes, "The only people who get upset about you setting boundaries are

the people who benefited from you not having any boundaries." It's not your job to protect people from feeling uncomfortable. In fact, the people imposing on your space aren't giving your comfort a second thought—so don't twist yourself into knots trying to protect their feelings. Setting boundaries and communicating clearly about your values, and what you are willing to do and what you cannot do is vital to spiritual, emotional, and physical health. You've heard me say this a hundred times: The best response to anyone demanding time and energy – or really anything from you that you don't wish to give is this: "Thanks for asking, but that's not going to work for me!" Jesus was a master at that. He knew what He needed and how to care for himself. He understood His boundaries. Two things leap off the page from Mark's Gospel that will help us with healthy boundaries.

First, Jesus' boundaries included taking time for Himself. In verse 35, we read this: *"Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray."* Jesus was a busy Rabbi. He had a schedule that could rival any of ours. When He wasn't teaching, traveling, healing the sick, and standing up against injustice, He was fully present with His friends, spending time with those He loved and those who loved Him. But He knew when He was running on empty and needed to be alone and recharge. And so, He did.

How about you? I won't ask if you've ever felt depleted because I know you have. The question is, what do you do to create a margin for things to renew, restore, and replenish? Jesus got up early in the morning and spent time in quiet spaces. Early morning was when He "emptied out" so that space could be made for what was most important.

What's your practice? What time of day or night is best for you? Let me challenge you to find a quiet place in your home or outdoors. Don't bring anything with you that could be a distraction. Just go and find a quiet spot and sit in the stillness. And in that place, let your thoughts and feelings be your prayer. Just sit with all of that in silence. God will speak to you. With a still, small voice, the Spirit will guide you. Pay attention to what surfaces.

Second, Jesus' boundaries helped him know the difference between what some people thought was urgent and what he understood to be necessary. In verse 36, we read: *"When [Peter and the others] found him, they said, everyone is looking for you!"* Can you imagine? "Jesus! Everyone! The whole town! Your whole family! Everyone! The entire city is looking for you!" I imagine a healthy Jesus looking at an impetuous Peter and saying, "No, Peter, they're not. Everyone is not looking for me. Maybe some people are, but not everyone. And besides that, here's the plan: We have to go on to other towns as well, and I must bring them the good news too." Jesus knew the difference between what others believed to be urgent and what he knew to be necessary.

One of my life-long friends was a chaplain in a large hospital in Portland, Oregon. Every day he'd encounter people needing his attention in some of the most difficult situations imaginable. It would have been easy for him to become overwhelmed by all the needs and demands. But instead, he used a very useful tool to help navigate those times when the lines between urgent and necessary became blurred. He would make a motion and say, "My stuff..." and then he'd make this motion the other way and say, "your stuff." Creating boundaries in his daily life saved his life on numerous occasions. Bob knew how to set a boundary and then keep it in place, which very often kept him in place.

So, let's make this sticky.

You might need to practice saying this: "Thanks for asking, but that's not going to work for me." Let's say that together: "Thanks for asking, but that's not going to work for me."

So here's how it works - someone sends you a text, or calls you and says, "I know it's late, but can you come over? I really need to talk to someone."

*Think: my stuff/your stuff and say, "Thanks for asking, but that's not going to work for me."

Now, of course – emergency, may need to help them get help. But it's okay to provide an alternative.

Let's say someone sends you a message, "Hey, can you stop by and pick up a box of donuts and some coffee on your way in tomorrow?"

*Think: my stuff/your stuff and say “Thanks for asking, but that’s not going to work for me.”

Or this, it’s the week before the Fourth of July Family Picnic. The hosts double-booked themselves and now they need a different place to host. You could say, “Sure, we’ll do it.” but you just don’t want to. You don’t want to hurt their feelings. They ask... “Can we host the whole thing at your place?”

Think: my stuff/your stuff and say, “Thanks for asking, but that’s not going to work for me.”

Or you're the grandparent who is expected to drop everything to go pick up the grandkids when mom or dad is at work. Hmmm... that gets a little dicey, right there, doesn’t it. “Can you pick up the kids?” “Thanks for asking, but that’s not going to work for me, but let me help you find someone who can.”

Setting boundaries is one of the most difficult but healthiest things we can do in our lives. Creating some breathing room in our lives everyday will make us healthier people. You might want to set aside some time early tomorrow morning when it’s still quiet in your home and dwell in this passage. Here’s what I know... if you pause and pray and ask the Creator of the Universe to meet you in that quiet space, here’s what I know you will here in your heart: “Thanks for asking, that will certainly work for me.”