



DIGGING DEEPER

WEEK 4

Loving Boundaries

At the end of a women's conference where I taught on God's message of love from 1 Corinthians, a sweet mother approached me in tears. She said she wanted to love her grandson who brought drugs and friends into her home without permission. Having pleaded with him not to do it anymore, she felt at a total loss. After telling her story she said, "I know I'm supposed to love him, but I just don't know if I can keep doing it."

I assured her that love does not mean

- always giving in to someone (especially when it comes to bad behavior),
- approving of all choices, or
- allowing others to abuse, manipulate, or control.

Actually, those things are not very loving. If we are not careful, we can find ourselves codependent, enabling others in their bad choices. God loves us perfectly, yet He does not give in, approve of sin, or appease controlling people in His love. The Lord is patient, kind, and sacrificial, but He loves with discipline at times. In Jeremiah 31:20 we read,

*"Is not Israel still my son,
my darling child?" says the LORD.
"I often have to punish him,
but I still love him.
That's why I long for him
and surely will have mercy on him."*

Knowing when love should say yes and when it should say no can be a fine line to walk, especially in difficult relationships. The Holy Spirit and good counselors are our allies when it comes to discerning when relationships need a loving boundary. As Scripture tells

us, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future” (John 16:13), and “Plans go wrong for lack of advice; / many advisers bring success” (Proverbs 15:22).

In her book *Can Christians Love Too Much?* Dr. Margaret J. Rinck offers a few warning signs that our behavior may not be as loving as we might think:¹

- **Self-neglect.** Rinck writes, “We love others ‘too much’ when loving others causes us to chronically and severely neglect our own needs.”² Though we make sacrifices for others out of love, we should check to be sure we are not out of balance. God calls us to rest and care for our own bodies so that we can serve Him and others. If we are loving others to the point that our own physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental needs are neglected, we must consider if we might have some unhealthy patterns in the name of “love.”
- **Identity loss.** Another way we love “too much” is when we lose our identity in the relationship. In 1 Corinthians Paul compares the church to a body. We are to work together in harmony but retain our individual uniqueness. We must be careful to find our identity in who we are in Christ rather than in what we do for others.
- **Compulsion.** Loving because of fear or a sense that we “have to” is a sign that we are loving too much. If we love others because we are scared that we might be neglected, disliked, or hurt in some way, we can find ourselves always saying yes when we would like to say no. Authentic love is free to choose.

Though I believe that what Dr. Rinck is describing is not love in excess but rather a misplaced definition of love, I understand why she chose the phrase “love too much.” As followers of Jesus, we serve a sacrificial and loving God. At times we can equate love with always giving others what they want.

However, real love gives people what they need rather than what they want. When it comes to children, for example, we know it is not loving to give them everything they want. If we did, they would be unhealthy and unhappy—much like Veruca Salt in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Sometimes when my husband and I disciplined our children, they would say, “You don’t love me!” We were quick to affirm our love and point out this biblical truth: “Those who love their children care enough to discipline them” (Proverbs 13:24b).

It can be easier to give in, pretend we did not see bad behavior, or sacrifice our own needs in the name of love. However, we must ask ourselves, “What will actually be the most loving thing to do in this situation?” Love does not give an alcoholic a drink, cover up for a physically abusive spouse, or lie for our children. Often real love stands up for injustice, rejoices in the truth, and allows others to experience consequences so that they can grow.

If you are in a situation where you question whether love has crossed the line into codependency, I encourage you to talk with a trained counselor or pastor in order to determine if setting a boundary might be the most loving thing to do.

1. Margaret J. Rinck, *Can Christians Love Too Much: Breaking the Cycle of Codependency*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 16-18.
2. *Ibid.*, 17.

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