

# CHAPTER 1

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## **The Number One Killer**

PROFESSIONALS SAY, HANDS DOWN, THAT THE BIGGEST CAREER, marriage, and family killer—regardless of age, socioeconomic status, education, or faith—is a lack of strong, clear boundaries.

My own experience as a pastor, and as one who has counseled countless men and women, underlines the critical importance of creating and enforcing boundaries in one's work and personal life.

The key boundary-struggle areas for most people revolve around:

- work areas, such as job description, work hours, staff issues, and expectations that others have for you and your work; and
- non-work areas, such as marriage, parenting, relatives, personal finances, and social obligations.

### **A JOB CAN BE A FRIENDLY MONSTER**

Work can eat away at your personal and family time so subtly that you barely notice its effects until it's too late and you have no life apart from your job.

Slowly but surely, your whole existence is taken over by your career, at the cost of neglecting your loved ones and yourself.

PGA (Professional Golfers' Association) caddie John "Cubby" Burke made a shrewd observation about how golf hooks many pro golfers. He said that after a while they come "under the influence of golf." By this, he meant that their obsession with golf ends up being the only thing left in their lives.

In similar ways, workplaces, marriages, and families are tragically littered with the skeletal remains of individuals who didn't set good boundaries and simply couldn't say no. Unfortunately, they sacrificed their family life and personal time to do whatever it took to "become all things to all people."

Recently, I saw a T-shirt that perfectly describes the life of a vast number of people:

LET ME DROP EVERYTHING  
& WORK ON YOUR PROBLEM!

During the first twenty years of my ministry, I worked an average of more than seventy hours a week. It was a hectic schedule jammed with meetings, counseling, preaching, speaking, staff issues, hospital visitations, weddings, funerals, and a slew of other responsibilities. There was little time left over for my family, let alone my own needs.

I certainly echo the sad truth that a Christian college professor lamented to his class: "Busyness is the only sin that is *applauded* by the Church!" I don't know if you've ever been praised for your long work hours, but I have. Sadly, this motivated me to work even more.

## **BOUNDARIES IN THE BIBLE**

Boundaries, both physical and emotional, play key roles in the Bible. For example, the Lord said to Moses:

*Command the Israelites and say to them: “When you enter Canaan, the land that will be allotted to you as an inheritance is to have these boundaries” . . . This will be your land, with its boundaries on every side.<sup>1</sup>*

Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan who helped an injured man who’d been robbed and beaten? This story is a great illustration of boundary setting.

The traveling Samaritan came upon an injured man. He could have gone on, but he stopped, applied first aid, and paid for the man’s recovery. Then he took the fellow to a local inn and left him in the care of the innkeeper, promising to pay any future expenses. But the Samaritan didn’t allow this to delay his trip. While he chose to allow an unexpected interruption, he guarded his time and stayed on schedule. He maintained boundaries that limited *how* he used his time.

Jesus clearly used boundaries in his life and ministry. Whereas many people are tempted to please everyone, Jesus stuck to his limits and didn’t try to meet everyone’s needs or agendas. For example, even when facing multitudes of people needing his help, Jesus took time off for strategic rest and prayer:

*Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed*

*of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.* <sup>2</sup>

How often do you get away from your ministry pressures to find refreshment and renewal? In what ways can you do this in the midst of dealing with needy people and programs?

### **BOUNDARY PROBLEMS IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE**

There is an interesting parallel between professional football and full-time work. Like other large corporations, the NFL (National Football League) is a big-time profit machine. The sole, driving purpose of its coaches and office staff is to win football games. To do this, some teams' management will ignore a player's injuries and long-term health. They will use players until they are absolutely drained or are severely, sometimes irreparably, injured.

Unfortunately, like the NFL, many companies and organizations also exploit their leaders and staff, saddling them with unrealistic demands that disregard their personal well-being.

However, we can't totally blame our management—oftentimes the villain in our workplace is *us*. We can be our own worst enemy when it comes to our priorities and time use.

### **DEALING WITH A "MESSIAH COMPLEX"**

Many people live with a "Messiah Complex," believing they are the single most important link in the chain of their job's effectiveness. Sure, intellectually they believe God will take care of everything. But in practice, they act as though their

company's or organization's success depends primarily on *their* personal actions. Despite their biblical beliefs, their actions flesh out, "If *I* don't do it, it won't get done."

I labored under this Messiah Complex for a long time. Now I can joke about my foolishness:

**Question:** Do you know what the difference is between God and Jim Stout?

**Answer:** God doesn't think he's Jim Stout!

With such hectic schedules, it's no wonder that individuals "grow weary in well-doing" and experience burnout. How about you? Do you feel overworked or overcommitted?



## CHAPTER 2

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### Types of Boundary Problems

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO BUILD A HAPPY, BALANCED HOME life when you are always gone? If you say yes to too many work-related requests, your family and personal life will suffer.

Obviously, some hard questions need to be raised: What does your job description say about your overtime work? Do you have the courage to bring up with your supervisor the tension between your job description's use of time and your *actual* use of time? What kind of boundaries can you set to protect yourself from exceeding reasonable work hours?

What is meant by a "boundary"? *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines it as, "Any line or thing marking a limit." <sup>1</sup>

It is also important to clarify the difference between a goal and a boundary. A goal describes a desired accomplishment. A boundary is a limit—a barrier that is used to protect, improve, or enhance goals. Clear, firm, and enforced boundaries are critical prerequisites for goal achievement, whether in work, personal, or family areas.

#### **BOUNDARY TYPES**

Most boundaries are physical or emotional. They mark what you will and will not tolerate from others. They also serve to protect you from your own potentially destructive words or actions.

**Physical boundaries** can be barriers like fences, walls, hedges, doors, and gates. They are used to keep people and things in or out—such as thieves, bad weather, pets, or insects.

But physical boundaries also include limits on work or other activities. This can mean abiding by written or verbal contracts, or avoiding situations that can physically hurt you or others, like reckless driving or physical abuse. Good physical boundaries can also be applied to control job descriptions, days off, exercise times, or even time limits for phone calls.

**Emotional boundaries** are usually used to manage the harmful words and deeds of others. These boundaries often limit their verbal abuse like shouting, threatening, cursing, belittling, or bullying.

Emotional boundaries can also apply to you, personally, when your own words or actions could have harmful effects on you, your family, or others. Self-set emotional boundaries can include taking a walk before you explode in anger, making time for regular peer support, going on a vacation when you're feeling overwhelmed at work, getting therapy for yourself, or limiting your own negative self-talk.

#### **EXAMPLES OF COMMON BOUNDARY ISSUES**

Can you relate to any of the following common boundary collisions? Each situation requires making a choice to either surrender your boundary limit or maintain it. How would you respond to these real-life circumstances?



### ***Phone Calls During Mealtimes***

The phone rings and you hear a non-urgent voice message. Do you take the call and interrupt your family time or a social event with friends? Or do you observe your “no-phone-call-interruptions-at-mealtimes” boundary and return the call later?

### ***Verbal Abuse from Toxic People***

A family member or coworker has another temper explosion and starts raising his voice at you with all kinds of accusations and putdowns. Do you silently take the criticisms? Or do you stand up for yourself and say, “I’m sorry you’re so upset, but I won’t tolerate you talking this way. If you continue, I’ll walk out of the room. When you’re able to cool down, call me and we’ll talk again”?

You are invited to a Thanksgiving dinner with your relatives. One uncle has always been toxic toward you by repeatedly criticizing your occupation. Do you decline the invitation? Or do you accept the offer and risk more verbal arrows? If that uncle starts up his criticisms, do you have the courage to say, “I’m sorry you disagree with my career choice, but I refuse to listen to any more of your unjust criticisms. If you continue, I’ll leave”?

### ***Violations of Days Off***

Saturdays and Sundays are your days off. You receive a call from a neighbor asking you to visit another neighbor who’s been hospitalized for a non-emergency problem. Do you interrupt your family time? Or do you say, “Thanks

for letting me know this. I have other commitments today, but I will see her later this week”?

You are invited to a coworker’s 60th birthday party on your day off. Do you agree to attend? Or do you say, “I’d love to, but I can’t”?

### ***Violations of Evenings Off***

You have saved Thursday evenings for a family movie night. You get a call from your boss requesting that you attend a last-minute meeting. As you listen, it’s clear that this really isn’t a critical situation that truly needs your immediate presence. Do you give in and rush out to the meeting?

Or do you silently reason with yourself that if your boss had a non-emergency on a Thursday evening and called a plumber, electrician, or doctor, wouldn’t that professional ask him to call for a regular daytime appointment? Would you then say, “I’m sorry for your difficulty, but I’ve got a commitment this evening and can’t discuss your issue right now. Please call me tomorrow and we’ll set a time to talk”?

Due to evening meetings and other work-related responsibilities, you have only three nights a week at home. Inevitably, something goes wrong at work and you get called in to solve it. Soon, one or two more evenings are eaten up by overseeing these extra meetings, doing emergency “crisis repairs” at the office. Do you continue to let these “emergencies” steal your family time, or do

you say, “I’m sorry, I already have a commitment with my family on those evenings.”

### ***Violations of Personal Limits***

You have an established, three-afternoons-a-week routine at the gym. A friend wants you to skip a workout and go to a movie with him. Do you bend your exercise boundary? Or do you say, “No, thanks. I’ve got to stick to my exercise program”?

You’ve started a diet program. At lunch, a friend offers to buy you a piece of apple pie for dessert. Do you give in? Or do you stand up for your diet limits and say, “Thanks, but I’ve got to stick to my food plan”?

Your teenager asks for a loan to buy a stereo system. Do you respond, “Sure, here’s the money. Pay it back whenever you can”? Or do you say, “Sure, but first let’s write up an agreement on when and how you’ll repay me”?

### ***Violations of Professional or Moral Limits***

Let’s say you are a male business professional. You have plans to travel alone to a meeting an hour away, but then a woman from your office asks to carpool. Do you encourage her to go with someone else? Or do you take her with you?

A woman at work tends to hug you extra long, mixes her hugs with kisses, and makes suggestive comments. Do you back away and avoid future contact? Or do you ratio-

nalize that she is just needy and benefits from a physical connection?

A female coworker invites you to lunch to discuss a work project. Do you accept and sit in an open, visible place? Do you tell your wife or girlfriend ahead of time that you will be having lunch with another woman? Could you invite someone else to join the two of you?

### ***Unclear Job Descriptions***

You receive invitations to serve on various committees, boards, and task forces outside of your job. These might include a local hospital, little league, the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Red Cross, AIDS Foundation, homeless assistance, or domestic violence prevention. Each represents a worthy cause, but all are voluntary. Which should you choose? You can't do them all—something has to give. But where do you start cutting? What do you say to those who desperately insist on your help?

You are asked to take on an extra project at work. In addition to your current responsibilities, it will require working on Saturdays and one evening a week for the next six months. It will provide great financial benefits, but it will cut into valuable time with your teenage daughter, who is having a rough time with school and friends. If you decline, your boss may be upset with you. But what about the support your daughter desperately needs right now? What can you say to your supervisor that will enable you to address the needs of both your daughter and the extra project?