

Beautiful Boundaries

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us to turn together for a wee while back to Isaiah chapter 30 which I can read for us. And tonight we're going to think a little bit more broadly. We're going to think about a topic that appears on the very first page of the Bible, that appears on the last page of the Bible and that runs like a thread through every book and every page in between. It's a massively important biblical topic and yet it's one that I am pretty sure you've hardly ever noticed. I'm pretty sure it's one that you've maybe hardly ever thought about and I know for a fact it's a topic that I have never preached on. The topic I want us to talk about tonight is boundaries. Boundaries run right through the Bible from the very first page where God's creative acts are described in terms of him establishing order by setting boundaries between light and dark, between night and day, between land and sea, from page one right through to the glorious visions of the new creation that appear in

Revelation chapter 21 and 22, the last two chapters of the Bible where you have this beautiful vision of the city of God providing eternal security and joy for God's people.

And outside that is everything that is unclean. It lies beyond the boundaries of that new creation. And in between the Bible's full of boundaries as well, whether that's the territorial boundaries of the nation of Israel when you read through the Old Testament and you've got the boundaries of that nation as they moved through periods of expansion and periods of decline, whether it's the ethical boundaries of the moral law setting out behaviour for God's people that was appropriate, that was inappropriate, or whether it's the spiritual boundaries between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil. If you look at the Bible, you very quickly see that boundaries are everywhere. And boundaries are also crucial for the life of discipleship. As followers of Jesus, whether we've been following Jesus for a long time, whether we've just started following Jesus, whether we've maybe not yet started following Jesus or not sure about all the claims of the gospel, for all of us,

God is giving us boundaries. And whether we realise it or not, we actually desperately need them. And that reality is captured powerfully in this chapter and especially by the words of verse 21, your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. And so our title tonight is Beautiful Boundaries. And as we unpack that a little bit, we are only going to, I was going to say scratch the surface, I think we're probably going to like just dab the surface because we're only going to look at a tiny aspect of this huge topic. But I want us to think about three things. I want us to think about the problem of boundaries. I want us to think about the importance of boundaries. And I want us to think about the selection of boundaries.

So first of all, thinking for a couple of minutes about the problem of boundaries, I want to start by suggesting three ways in which problems arise in relation to boundaries as we go through life. The first problem of boundaries is that boundaries are often overlooked.

[3 : 4 4] If I ask you the question, how often do you experience boundaries? The answer is all the time. We are constantly experiencing boundaries in our lives. How often do you think about them? Maybe not so often, maybe hardly ever. But it doesn't take us long to think about our experience of life as humans to recognize that boundaries are absolutely everywhere.

I'm going to give you 10 examples. The first one is the boundary between night and day. That's one of the most fundamental experiences of, fundamental boundaries of our experience on Earth. Every day is separated from the other because night comes in between. Example number two is land and sea. That's one that we know very well on the island. We're so conscious of the boundary set by the sea around land. Example number three is nations. That's maybe a very obvious one. The territory of a nation is defined by a boundary. I don't know about you, but when I was young and even still today, I love looking at a map. I love seeing where nations are situated, seeing where their boundaries lie, looking at the shapes of different countries. But of course, even within nations, there are boundaries.

Somewhere between here and Stornoway is a boundary that means that we're on the west side and they're not. There's many other boundaries like that within national territories.

But there's more, some that are maybe not so obvious. A fourth example where boundaries are crucial is in art. That's maybe not so obvious, but it's absolutely crucial because every painting functions on the basis of boundaries between colours or boundaries between shades.

There's only one exception to that and it's a class of artists that you will be very familiar with known as toddlers. What they do is they take all the paint and they eliminate all boundaries between colours and they just keep rubbing, rubbing, rubbing until all you have is a big splodge of brown and not really the best work of art you've ever seen. All other artists, apart from toddlers, use the boundaries between colours and shades to create something beautiful.

[6 : 15] Everything applies in music. Notes are separated by pitch, by rhythm in order to make beautiful music and boundaries are absolutely essential. That's why if I went over there and pressed every button on the keyboard at the same time, it would sound terrible. Boundaries are crucial.

Example number six is seasons. Spring, summer, autumn, winter. They're all distinct. They're all essential. They're all separated from one another. But not just in big categories like that. Even day-to-day stuff. Boundaries are crucial. Boundaries are essential at work.

Crucial boundaries exist between staff and customers, between teachers and pupils, between supervisors and team members, between different roles, different companies, even different offices. If we were in London and we thought, I think I'll just go to this office at number 10 Downing Street and work for the day, we wouldn't get very far. Boundaries exist at work. But they also exist at home. Our personal property is set by boundaries. That's clear on our title deeds, marked out by our fence, sometimes by our wall, whatever it may be, even within our homes. There are boundaries, especially with children. My bedroom's not your bedroom when it comes to children. Or my half of the bedroom's not your half of the bedroom. When I was young, for most of my childhood, I shared a room with my brother.

Most of the time we got on well, but it was one day he was just getting on my nerves. So I got a ball of wool and I just made a boundary that said, this is my half and that's your half and you're not allowed in. It didn't last long, but boundaries are crucial in our homes. Boundaries are crucial in society. Law and order can't work without boundaries.

Governments can't operate without boundaries. And economy can't function without boundaries. And then number 10, and this is maybe the most significant of all, boundaries are essential to our identity. Boundaries are essential to making you, you. Because there's a boundary between my life and yours, between my thoughts and your thoughts, between my conscience and your conscience, between my desires and your desires. And of course that makes perfect sense because many of the most appalling crimes that we see occurring happen when those boundaries are transgressed, whether that's people being exploited, people being robbed, women being raped. In all of these cases, the power of one person is being used to trample over the boundaries of someone else's life. And so just like with music and art, human beauty and harmony is only possible because of boundaries. So boundaries are everywhere, but they're so easy to overlook. That's the first aspect of the problem with boundaries.

[9 : 31] Second aspect of the problem with boundaries is that boundaries are elusive. Boundaries are elusive. Boundaries are like sheep in Lewis or like taxis in Edinburgh. They're everywhere, but they're impossible to pin down. You think about the difference between night and day. Even tonight, thinking about going out, maybe standing on the beach, can you go and stand at Dalmore and wait for the sun to set and look at your clock and find the exact second when day becomes night? You can't. It's not really possible to pin it down like that. Same with seasons. When does summer actually start? Maybe living in Lewis will sometimes ask the question, does summer actually start? But this year's been a little bit better. But when exactly? When exactly does it start? Is there a precise second between summer and autumn? Between autumn and winter? And even something more clear cut, like the border between land and sea, that's elusive because the tide moves in and out. It's two of us as humans as well. There's a boundary between childhood and adulthood. But where exactly is it? 16, 17, 18, 21? When does middle age begin? When is there a line that if you step over it, then all of a sudden you are old. It applies to relationships. When does someone go from being an acquaintance to being a friend? When does someone go from being a colleague to being a mate? When does someone go from being a friend to being a really good friend? In all these areas, boundaries are often elusive.

You think about the island, for anybody who's not from Lewis, there's two categories of people in Lewis. There are townies who live in the town and there are moors who live outside the town. But where is the dividing line? Is Marybank, is that a moor? I don't know, back? Are you a moor if you live in back? You're definitely a moor if you live in Carlyway. Some people are born, some people convert. I converted from townie to moor in a wonderful act of God's grace. Where is that line? Where is that boundary? Whatever it may be, often boundaries are very hard to pin down. But there's a crucial point arising from this that I want you to recognise. Even though we may not be able to pinpoint the exact location of a boundary, that does not mean for one second that that boundary doesn't exist. The boundary line between summer and autumn, between childhood and adulthood, between acquaintance and friendship, those boundaries all definitely exist, even though no one can draw exactly where they lie. So boundaries are elusive. And then the third thing regarding the problem of boundaries is that boundaries are often resented. And that's probably the biggest problem with boundaries. And it's especially true today, we live in an age where people do not like boundaries. People do not like boundaries in terms of the way that our culture functions today. We don't like boundaries in terms of our entertainment. We don't like boundaries in terms of our consumption of goods. We don't like boundaries in terms of our accumulation of wealth. We don't like boundaries in terms of a sexual ethic. We don't like boundaries in terms of how we understand gender. We don't even like boundaries in terms of the clothes that we wear. We don't like boundaries in terms of our manners, our judgments, our preferences. We live in a period of history where boundaries in all of these areas are being questioned, they're being stretched, or even being abandoned altogether.

And one of the great ironies of the age that we're living in just now is that the one voice that's not tolerated is the one that says, I think boundaries are a good thing. Today, that opinion is out of bounds. And of course, the Bible explains all of this. And it highlights to us that a key aspect of the brokenness of humanity, a key aspect of what the Bible describes as our sinful nature, is that we are attracted to things that we are not allowed.

We want the thing that lies on the other side of the boundary. I have a question for you. What is the most appealing food in the world? What is the most appealing food in the world?

The most appealing food in the world is someone else's chips. You see somebody with chips and oh, man, they look so good. And when you get them, they're never quite as good as when they're someone else's. And there might not be chips. There might be whatever it may be.

[14 : 41] And maybe it doesn't apply to food with everybody. But you know what I mean. The thing that we don't have is so often the thing that we want more than anything else. And the Bible describes that with the word covetousness. And that covetousness, that desire for what we don't have has a massive influence on our behavior. And if you think about it, covetousness is just a resentment of boundaries, the fact that we don't like the boundary between us and the thing that we don't have. But the Bible also tells us, not just, it doesn't just explain this for us in terms of the reality of our sinful nature, it also tells us that that resentment of boundaries is nothing new. And so yes, we see it prominently in our society today, but you actually see it in Isaiah 30 and you see it in the history of God's people as it's recorded for us in the Bible. Isaiah 30 comes at a time in Israel's history. It's around, you're around 720 BC-ish, that kind of area. And it's a time when the nation of Israel is under threat from external opposition, particularly from the north, from the Assyrian Empire. And at the same time, it was a period when the nation of Israel had, in many ways, abandoned its faith in God and abandoned its observance of God's commands and instead had embraced the idolatry of the nations around him. And one of the things that Isaiah 30 speaks about is that it's rebuking Israel for its idolatry. In many ways, the whole of Isaiah is doing that. And that was the persistent sin of Israel in the Old Testament period. Israel had been set apart as a nation to worship God and for hundreds of years, Israel repeatedly rejected that privilege and repeatedly fell into idolatry.

And that sin of idolatry was a transgression of boundaries. From the very establishment of the nation of Israel as they came out of Egypt, as Moses spoke to them in Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy is just a big summary of a kind of final sermon that Moses gave to the people of Israel. He said to them, when the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go into dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in the land, in other words, when you enter into the land that's promised to you, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them after they have been destroyed before you and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, how did these nations serve their gods that I may also do the same?

You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do.

You shall not add to it or take away from it. That paragraph is saying, Israel, you are going to go into a new nation and you are going to find in that nation a people who are worshipping idols and as part of that idolatry, they do all sorts of horrific things.

Do not copy them. Do not be like them. That was the great commandment to Israel. That was the boundary that was set around them and yet they continually crossed over those boundaries. But not only did they seek to worship the gods of other nations, they also looked to other nations for help. That is the other thing that has been spoken about in Isaiah 32. Remember I said a moment ago, at this period in Israel's history, they are threatened from the north by the Assyrian Empire and as they faced that threat, Israel felt vulnerable and so they thought, we will go to Egypt to help us. So you had a threatening empire in the north and so they wanted to go to what they hoped would be a powerful ally in the south and God was saying, do not do that. And yet that is what they did. And you see that described that they add sin to sin, they go down to Egypt without asking for my direction and they look to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt. And so instead of looking to God for help, they just chose a different idolatrous nation and they thought that Pharaoh would be their saviour rather than God. Again and again and again God set boundaries. Again and again and again Israel resented them, reached over them and in doing so they rebelled against God. Boundaries caused lots of problems, they are often overlooked, they are often elusive, they are often resented.

[19 : 45] So it was through Israel, it was through us today as well. So life is full of boundaries and we need to recognise that they are incredibly important. You need them for an economy to operate, you need them for a criminal justice system to work, you need them for global politics to remain stable, you need them for communities to function, you need them even for families to be happy. All of these things need boundaries. If you take boundaries away you end up with a mess. Imagine a bank with no boundaries, imagine there was no boundary between your bank account and mine. Well if there was no boundary you wouldn't get much if you got into mine but you would probably lose much if there was no boundary around your bank account. Same in a courtroom, same in a hospital and in so many different areas. A hotel, you can think of hundreds of examples. And all we need to recognise is not just that it's important for a society to function, we also need to recognise that theology is full of boundaries. And as we seek to understand what the Bible reveals to us, we need to recognise that there are boundaries everywhere and these boundaries are incredibly important. There are boundaries in our doctrine of God. By that we just mean what the Bible reveals to us about God and that the heart of the biblical doctrine of God is the doctrine of the Trinity.

That one God consists of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and there are boundaries right there. The Father alone is the Father, the Son alone is the Son, the Holy Spirit alone is the Holy Spirit and together they are God, one God. There are boundaries there.

There are boundaries in our doctrine of revelation, what we talk about in terms of God revealing himself to us. We make a boundary between general revelation, how God has revealed himself in the universe around us and special revelation, how God has spoken to us through scripture.

And even within scripture there are boundaries between the Old and the New Testament, between the Gospel and the epistle, between history and poetry. There are boundaries in terms of our biblical understanding of anthropology regarding people. Anthropology, the fact that humanity is unique compared to the rest of creation. So we are not just another animal.

We are not just a cog in a machine. We have a unique status. And within humanity there is a boundary between male and female and within individual humans there is a boundary between body and soul. There are boundaries in regard to our doctrine of sin, what is known as ha-martiology, that is just a fancy word for ha-martiology, the doctrine of sin.

[22 : 56] And we frequently transgress those boundaries, the fact that God sets out a path for us that we frequently stray from. There are boundaries in terms of our salvation, our doctrine of salvation between believer and unbeliever, between before we come to faith and after we come to faith. There are boundaries in terms of our discipleship, how we follow Jesus and there are certain patterns of behaviour that are out of bounds and that we need to leave behind. There are boundaries in ecclesiology, so there are boundaries between the church visible and invisible, there are boundaries between what the Bible describes as sheep and wolves, those who are genuine believers and those who aren't. And of course there are lots of boundaries within the church that shouldn't be there as the church has divided when she never should have. And perhaps most serious of all, I have to rub it out because I've run out of space, most serious of all there are boundaries in regard to eschatology.

Eschatology refers to the doctrine of the last things, it refers to eternity and there's a big, big boundary there. The boundary between eternal life and eternal death between heaven and hell. Theology is full of boundaries, but the same problems apply, these boundaries are often overlooked, these boundaries are often elusive, they're hard to find. For many of us for example, it can be very hard to pin down the exact moment when you became a believer, most of us can't do that. So we know that there is a line between when we weren't following Jesus and we weren't believing and we weren't interested and now when we are interested, but we don't know when it actually happened and that's the experience of most people. So never ever worry if you can't draw the exact boundary on the day or on the hour or on the moment when you went from unbeliever to believer, most of us cannot do that because for most people, God working in our hearts is a gradual process. So that boundary is elusive but it's definitely, definitely there and it's the same when you think about

Jesus, Jesus is both divine and human, where exactly is the boundary? It's not always easy to say our boundaries can be elusive and it's also the case in regard to theology that these boundaries can be resented. Some people don't like the idea of the Bible being set apart in a category of its own as God's word. Some people don't like the idea of anything that feels like a restriction on our behaviour and some people don't like the idea of humanity being separated into those who are saved and those who are lost, those who are trusting in Jesus and those who are rejecting Him. Life is full of boundaries. Theology is full of boundaries and the key point we need to recognise in all of this is that what you believe, how you behave and everything that you aim for in life is going to be shaped by the boundaries that you recognise. In other words, your life and my life is shaped by your boundaries. Your life and my life is shaped by your boundaries and that raises two utterly crucial questions. Who sets your boundaries and where are they? Whether that's in terms of how we behave, in terms of what we believe, in terms of what we're living for, who sets your boundaries and where are they? In answering that question, there's a crucial thing that we have to think about. What we need to think about is the fact that our boundaries are going to be set by two things. They're going to be set by the authorities that we recognise and they're going to be set by the people or the objects that we idolise. Shaped by the authorities we recognise or by the people or the priorities that we idolise. You see that in Isaiah 30. The people looked to Pharaoh as the authority to be recognised and the people had abandoned God and gone after idols just like the nations around him. Exactly the same thing happens with us. Our boundaries are set by the authorities that we recognise.

Sometimes these can be good. Whenever we drive, we are recognising the boundaries that have been set by the authorities over us and that's a good thing. That's what keeps everybody safe on the roads. Often these authorities that we recognise are not so good. There's the authority of our friends at school. There's the authority of our colleagues and what they think of us. There's the authority of what people are going to say about our looks or our house or our salary or our social media. All of these things can set the boundaries that we live by. Our boundaries are shaped by the authorities that we recognise. Perhaps even more so, our boundaries are set by the things that we idolise. When I say idolise, I don't mean bowing down and kneeling before something. I know none of you do that. When we say idolise, we mean making something the most important thing in your life. If we idolise comfort, then we're going to set tight boundaries around our lives to make sure that we're never inconvenienced. If we idolise wealth, then we're going to set tight boundaries around making sure that we have got our possessions increasing all the time. If we idolise our careers, then we're going to set tight boundaries to make sure that nobody gets in the way of our work. If we idolise control, then we're going to set tight boundaries to ensure that things are always done our way. And this is challenging us all to think about the voice that says to you, this is the way, walk in it. And there are so many voices speaking to us in that way today. Even in terms of what we wear, there's the voice of fashion saying this is the way, walk in it. The voice of wealth saying this is the way to happiness, walk in it, get more money. The voice of popularity, making sure everybody thinks well of us, making sure that we always impress people. That's saying this is the way, walk in it. The voice of a successful life whereby you've got the house and the car and the holidays and the salary and the reputation, this is the way, walk in it. The voice of the morality around us saying this is what's right and wrong, this is the way, walk in it. Those voices are speaking to all of us. And all the time these voices are setting the boundaries that we live by. Who sets your boundaries? Where do your boundaries lie? And all of that brings us to our last point which will be very quick, oh my goodness the time has come by very quickly.

The selection of boundaries. We all need to make a decision about what boundaries are going to shape our lives. In other words, who's going to tell us this is the way, walk in it. And here's what you have to ask the question, who has the right to set your boundaries?

[31 : 56] Who ultimately has the right to set your boundaries? And the Bible's answer to that is so simple, so clear and so satisfying. Because the Bible says that there is only one person who has the right to set your boundaries, your maker. Our boundaries are set by the God who made us. And this is where we see that boundaries are a key aspect of our relationship with our Creator. And all of that makes perfect sense. If God made us, which is one of the most fundamental claims of the Bible, that God made you and he made me, if that is true, then it is utterly logical. In fact, it's just basic common sense that he sets the boundaries for us to live within. And one of the most irrational patterns of behavior is when humanity pushes back against that. Where we say to our Creator, you made me, but I know better than you. And yet Israel did that all the time. And you see that in the words of verses 9 to 11, the people did not want to hear the instruction of the Lord. They did not want to guide him to guide him. And they were instead, they were saying, don't prophesy to us what is right. In other words, it's sarcastic the language here. It's saying, don't, don't tell us what's right. God speak to us smooth things. Tell us illusions. Tell us to leave the way to turn aside the path. Let's hear no more about the Holy One of Israel. Israel did it all the time. We do the same. But the key point I want you to leave you with today tonight is to recognize is that, is that if you stay within the boundaries of your Creator, there you are going to find the place where you will thrive. I've used this illustration before. So forgive me, those of you who've heard it, but I love it because I used to be an engineer. I love machines. I love big machines. I want you to imagine a steam engine.

I think steam engines are so magnificent. They are just the coolest thing ever. And I want you to think of that steam engine with all its wheels and shiny, big, powerful. And I want you now to imagine it on a beach. A steam engine sitting in the sand, it's a pathetic sight because it can't do anything. It can't move. It can't function. For a steam engine to thrive, it's got to be on its rails. It's got to be within the boundaries of what it was made for. And there the steam engine can blast through the Highlands of Scotland and it's free, thriving because it's within the boundaries of what it was made for. It's the same if you think of music. You take one of these guitars and if you move the threads and untune the strings, you don't improve it, you ruin it. It's the same with your garden.

We sow and we fertilize, we harvest, we prune, all at the right time, all within the right boundaries in order for the garden to grow. Whether you're an engineer or a musician or a gardener, if you stay within the right boundaries, there you will thrive. As humans, if we stay within the right boundaries, we will thrive. And the great message of the Gospel is that those boundaries are set by God. And in our sin, we have wandered to the left and to the right, but God is calling us back. And this emphasizes one of the most fundamental truths that you've got to recognize that we must come back to, is that when God is calling us to follow Him, He is not trying to ruin our lives. He is not trying to spoil things.

And He's not trying to make life boring. He's bringing you back to the place where you will find peace and joy and hope. He's bringing you back to where you belong. God is calling us and He's saying, this is the way. Walk in it. And that way is the pathway that's set by God, our Creator. It's the pathway that leads us to God, our Savior, to Jesus, who came to die and rise again to put right all our mistakes and all our transgressions of boundaries. And it's the path that leads us home to an eternal home, a place and a pathway where we can thrive. But God's boundaries don't just provide the place where you can thrive. God's boundaries also mark the area where you're safe. And that is the amazing thing about following Jesus. By following Jesus, you have a life that brings so much joy and peace and so much purpose. And time's running out, but I want to talk about it because it's so good. It's the place where you can thrive. And it's also the place where you are safe. You're safe forever when you are listening to Jesus' voice, trusting Him and following Him. God's boundaries are beautiful. And He's saying to you and to me tonight, this is the way we walk in it. Amen.