

Stop Being the Messiah of Your Relationships

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Antonio. I'm the director of prayer at the table church. I'm also on the preaching team. Today's sermon topic is embracing a theology of limits, aka the necessity of embracing boundaries and your own boundedness.

In order to make sure we're all on the same page, I want to provide some examples of how therapists define boundaries. One example is the line between where I psychologically end and you begin.

Another type of boundary are things that are intended to keep me physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe. In some ways, it feels like a divine appointment that Pastor Tanetta randomly assigned me to a sermon topic.

When my friends and family found out that I'll be preaching a sermon about cultivating healthy boundaries and embracing limits, there was a uniform and consistent response.

Laughter. And my friends and family aren't wrong. In this current season, I've spent a lot of time wrestling with how to cultivate healthy boundaries. How do I love friends and family who are going through really tough times without falling into codependency?

[1 : 13] How can I advocate for racial justice as a civil rights lawyer under an autocratic federal government without falling into burnout? In some ways, this morning's sermon is almost like I'm preaching to myself.

There is so much need in our current moment. The need for mercy and grace abound. In our personal lives, many of us have loved ones who need emotional and relational care for brokenness. Washington, D.C. also carries a deep need in this moment. Our city is under occupation by military forces. Our unhoused neighbors face displacement and contempt.

Our undocumented siblings fear being hunted down by masked ICE agents. Young black and brown men experience racial profiling and unjust arrest. All of these needs beckon our intervention. All of these needs can also be overwhelming. Yet we also must take care of ourselves as our loved ones, our city, and our nation undergo unprecedented tribulation.

[2 : 21] Grounding ourselves in a theology of limits and embracing boundaries serves as the key to keeping our minds and our hearts in perfect peace. Boundaries and limits do not undercut our advocacy.

But actually do the opposite. Boundaries are key to keeping us spiritually and emotionally healthy enough to serve those in need. This morning, I want to leave us with a few points.

First, boundaries remind us that we are humans and not messiahs. Second, boundaries allow us to partner with Jesus. And finally, boundaries allow us to shake the dust off of our feet.

First, boundaries remind us that we are humans and not messiahs. As I contemplate what it means to see a deep need but cultivate healthy boundaries and omit our own limitations, I think of the story of John the Baptist.

Scripture introduces John the Baptist as the older cousin of Jesus and as a prophet. The Gospel of Luke chronicles the beginning of his ministry. The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

[3 : 32] He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, A voice of the one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth, and all the people will see God's salvation.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus ascribed John the Baptist and said, Truly I tell you, among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.

I can't remember any other time in Scripture where Jesus gave someone such a ringing endorsement. Jesus essentially called John the Baptist the goat. And yet, even John the Baptist acknowledged his limitations and boundaries.

In the third chapter of John, we read, They came to John and said to him, Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one you testified about, look, he is baptizing and everyone is going to him.

[4 : 48] To this John replied, A person can only receive what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, I am not the Messiah, but I am sent ahead of him.

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine and it is now complete. He must become greater. I must become less. John the Baptist, the greatest prophet of all times, acknowledged his limitations in the light of Jesus. The key to embracing our own limitations is to follow the example of John.

In this passage, John creates a dichotomy. On the one hand, we have John, the one who is the voice crying out in the wilderness, the one who prepares the way for the Lord, the one who points people to salvation.

On the other hand, we have Jesus, the subject of John's voice, the one who is salvation himself, the bridegroom, the Messiah, the one who is the only source of deliverance.

[5 : 54] John's boundaries were an acknowledgement that he could prepare the way for Jesus, yet John the Baptist knew that he was not the way. John knew that Jesus and Jesus alone was the way, the truth, and the life.

John's boundaries acknowledged that joy was found in making room for Jesus, to humbly magnify Jesus over his own limitations. John recognized at the end of the day, Jesus is God and he is not. At a certain point, we end and Jesus begins. We are finite, Jesus is infinite. Unfortunately, many of us resist these limitations.

In the book, Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, Peter Scazzaro juxtaposes many of us to John's embrace of limitations and says, in contrast, many of us are like a baby.

A baby screams for his mother to feed and take care of him. He is the center of the universe, with others existing to care for his needs. He suffers from grandiosity, arrogance, and childishness.

[7 : 02] Growing up will require learning he is not the center of the universe. The universe does not exist to meet his every need. This is a painful lesson for us all to learn. Our egos tend to be so inflated that we act as if we were God.

Often we have larger fantasies and wishes for ourselves than our real lives can support. As a result, we work frantically trying to do more than God intended. We burn out thinking we can do more than we can.

We get stressed and blame others. Even the most gifted of us are merely prophets. None of us are saviors. None of us are messiahs.

However, this acknowledgement is important in the journey to cultivating healthy boundaries and acknowledging our limitations. I think about the wisdom of these limitations can even be found in the Ten Commandments.

And next to us, God instructs, you shall have no other gods before me. God instructs his people to avoid idolatry. When we do not have healthy boundaries, we fall into idolatry.

[8 : 05] We become false messiahs for loved ones struggling with addictions and unhealthy behaviors. We become false gods, seeking to overturn empires, or confront a police state using only our own power.

Yet it is Jesus and Jesus alone who has the power to save, heal, and deliver. As we see in John chapter 3, for Jesus to be greater, we must become less. This is not about self-deprecation or fostering low self-esteem.

To the contrary, acknowledging our boundaries becomes a sacred act. We leave room for Jesus, the true messiah, to show up in our lives. When we do not cultivate boundaries, we place ourselves in the role of a false messiah when we are meant to be prophets.

We usurp from God the space that rightfully belongs to him. We engage in idolatry of self. The fruit of this idolatry of self is anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout.

I have personally experienced these fruits of idolatry in my personal life. You see, I grew up in a single-parent home, and for most of my life, I was the only man in my house. I felt as if it was my responsibility to provide outsized care to meet my mom, grandma, and sister's emotional and economic needs.

[9 : 21] I can testify from experience taking on mantles that belong to Jesus is a recipe for anxiety and stress. Yet, the opposite is true when we create boundaries, which leads me to my second point.

Boundaries allow us to partner with Jesus. However, I want to be clear. Boundaries do not lead to a complete abdication of responsibility for people in our lives, our communities, and our world.

Instead, like John, embracing the theology of boundaries allows us to partner with Jesus instead of acting as uncommissioned delegates. The reason why partnership with Jesus is so important is because when we partner with Jesus, we can tap into the source, the Holy Spirit.

As the author of Acts says, for in him we live, and we move, and we have our being. When we create boundaries, we're able to accomplish acts of love and justice while maintaining emotional and spiritual health because we are animated by the Holy Spirit.

I am reminded by the words God gave to the prophet Zechariah in the Old Testament. So he said to me, this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Almighty.

[10 : 39] When we partner with the limitations God has placed on us and acknowledge our boundaries, we can be fueled by this source. In my professional life, this looks like integrating worship into my racial justice advocacy.

Earlier this year, I led a lawsuit against the state of Alabama. Big surprise. Alabama passed a law banning diversity, equity, and inclusion at public universities.

It has had devastating consequences for professors and students, especially black and queer professors and black and queer students. I remember I flew to Birmingham in July to argue our case before a conservative, straight, white male federal judge.

On the plane, I remember listening to a spontaneous worship set by a group called Upper Room. In this song, the worship leader kept repeating the lyrics, every high thing must come down, every high thing must bow down, echoing the proclamation of John the Baptist.

As I flew to the deep south to fight an uphill battle, I was reminded that I was carrying the heart of Jesus, no matter what happened in the courtroom. Every high thing that opposed the love of Jesus would one day come down, even if the judge ruled against my clients.

[11 : 58] It is through worship that I connected with the heart of the Messiah, the true source of racial justice, and remembered I was showing up as a prophet and not as a Messiah. This approach helped me remember that my voice in the courtroom was actually echoing the voice of Jesus.

It also reminds me that what we see in front of our eyes is not the end of the story. Belief in Jesus does not make me fight less hard. Instead, it gives me fuel to know that even when I feel like I'm on the front lines, the battle truly belongs to the Lord.

Boundaries help me remember that justice is not a matter of if, but a matter of when. Finally, boundaries allow us to shake the dust off of our feet.

I think about a boundary that Jesus gave his disciples when he commissioned them to share the gospel. He said, if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.

Jesus' admonition to shake the dust off their feet was a symbolic phrase, an example of a boundary. If people did not want to accept the gospel, he instructed his disciples to keep it pushing.

[13 : 13] The Messiah himself was telling them that they should not keep pursuing people who are unwilling to accept the good news. I think about my own life and times where I've had to implement boundaries.

You see, Jesus has taken me on a journey where I've learned that yes, I need to love and care for my family, but I'm not their Messiah. Jesus cares about my family way more than I do.

I learned that I could trust Jesus to provide for them and take care of them. And yes, I partner with him sometime, but it cannot be from a place of codependency, anxiety, or fear.

He desires for me to love my family, but also have peace in the process. And this journey will look different for all of us. For some of us, boundaries will need to show up when we tell our close friend that she is trapped in cycles of harmful behavior.

and needs to go to therapy. But if she doesn't listen, we cannot become false messiahs. Instead, we need to shake the dust off our feet and trust the Lord to take care of her.

[14 : 17] Like John the Baptist, we can act as prophets, pursuing relational wholeness ourselves. We can let our lives be the voice in the wilderness, calling our loved ones to pursue healing. For some of us, boundaries will show up as we protest the treatment of unhoused folk and undocumented individuals in our city.

In the face of a police state and ice raids and deep economic inequality, we cannot become false messiahs. Instead, we must shake the dust off our feet and trust the Lord that his goodness and mercy will still pursue all of his children in the face of unjust despots.

In the waiting, we, like John the Baptist, can call it acts of oppression and dehumanization and remind unjust despots that every valley will one day be made low. For some of us, boundaries will need to show up as we advocate for the humanity of black and brown boys in our city.

But in the face of racist policies, we cannot become false messiahs. Instead, we must shake the dust off of our feet and ask the Lord to examine our own hearts. There are so many ways in which we, too, harbor implicit bias against those populations, which is actually the root of the current moment.

Like John the Baptist, we can call out comments laced with implicit bias and racism in our friends and neighbors to inspire straight paths where all of God's children are treated with dignity.

[15 : 43] God does not delegate to us. God partners with us. We are not doing things because God is absent. We are doing things because God empowers us. Zachariah reminds us that we have to do acts of justice and love in God's strength and His Spirit and not by our might or power.

I'm reminded of the serenity prayer that so many of us have heard before. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

This prayer reminds me that we need God to help us realize our own boundaries in the midst of a world that is constantly pulling on our intervention. My prayer in this next season is that we gain a fresh revelation of the power of Jesus, a God who has no limitations, a God who will never leave us or abandon us, and from that place of worship and revelation, invite God to reveal the places where we need to place boundaries, not as an abdication of our responsibility or love for our loved ones, our community, our country, but as an invitation to let God increase her presence in our lives.

An invitation for the God of intimate communion to show up in a fresh way in our relationships. An invitation for a God of true justice to show up in our communities, our cities, and our world.

And to be a partner with God, not to be uncommissioned delegates. If we make room for her, she will fill every space and do a better job than we can ever do on our own.

[17 : 24] Thank you.