

Parenting is one of the most daunting tasks that a person can face. Many parents feel overwhelmed and underprepared for the job and simply "hope for the best". This two part sermon focuses on the art of loving your child with limits and affirmation. Part One focuses on setting expectations and consequences (boundaries). Part Two focuses on affirming your child while still maintaining the boundaries you have set. These practical insights will provide you with ideas that you can implement today in your parenting.

Parenting with Love & Limits

By Remy Diederich

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Video Skit; *A family buys a new van and shows the young finance manager a chaotic side of parenting that he had never seen before.*

Well, I'd imagine that for some of you here today, that skit is painfully familiar! It's all too close to home. I think that manager came to see that parenting is a lot harder than you might realize.

And because of that I want to take a couple weeks to offer parents and *future parents* some wisdom that I hope will help them in their parenting – wisdom that I've gained from the Bible, from parenting experts as well as some of my own experience. And if you aren't a parent – don't worry – because you'll be surprised how much of this applies to you too.

You know, parenting is deceptive. Before I was a parent I was so naïve. I thought that all I have to do was love my kids and not do all the stupid things that my parents did and I'd be "good". But was I ever wrong!

In fact, children have no idea how intimidated most parents are of their task of parenting. I don't think there is any more daunting responsibility that a person can have than to raise a child to become a mature responsible adult. I mean, after all, we're not always so sure that *we* are mature responsible adults! So how can we raise someone to be something we aren't!

And the problem isn't just what to teach your child but how to keep your child from being influenced by the wrong things. It's not like when everyone lived on a farm with no TV or internet or cell phones. Parents have to contend with the pervasive influence of both media and peer pressure.

Brian Swimme is a sociologist and he said that today's greatest teacher is not the parent or the church or even the school but ... *advertisements*. He said the television is where a child's world view is shaped. This is where they come to understand what life is all about - where their "reality" is developed – which is a pretty scary thought.

And the reason he thinks this is because before a child enters first-grade they will have soaked in 30,000 advertisements. He says,

"The time our teenagers spend absorbing ads is more than their total stay in high school."

And then he makes this comparison...

"When one compares the pitiful efforts we employ for moral development with the colossal energies we pour into advertising, it's like comparing a high school football game with World War II. Nothing that happens in one hour on Sunday makes the slightest dent in the strategic bombing that takes place day and night 52 weeks a year." National Catholic Reporter, 12-17-04

Well, that makes you feel pretty hopeless as a parent, doesn't it? I mean how can you compete with that kind of overwhelming, sophisticated, outside influence? And if not the media, then what about the influence of your child's friends? One survey found that only 25% of parents felt that they have greater influence on their children than their children's friends do.

But here's the good news...that same survey showed that these parents were wrong. The researchers said...

Most teens reported that they think highly of their parents, want to be like them, and enjoy spending time with them. Child Trends 12-8-04.

Kids just have a little trouble showing how much they enjoy being with their parents!

So the church may not have much influence with only an hour on Sunday – or maybe another hour on Wednesday for youth group, but parents – in most cases – are with their child every day of the week.

My point here is that if you are a parent you have the potential of being the greatest influence on your child. Not the media. Not their friends. But you. So don't give up! And don't forget that God *designed* parents to *be* the greatest influence in their child's life. You know, God could have held onto the reigns of creating people but he didn't. God chose to share that privilege and responsibility with us.

Think about that. Why would God give us the responsibility of creating and raising children if we weren't capable of doing it and doing it well? In fact, the parent/child relationship is so important to God that God put parenting in the top five of the ten commandments...

"Honor your father and your mother so that you will live a long time in the land that the Lord your God is going to give you. Exodus 20:12.

I can't think of a better endorsement for your parenting, can you? God *himself* speaks to every child and says "Listen to your parents. Let them influence you". You see, God's got your back in this! So parents, I'm here to tell you to not give up.

Now I want to help you today by giving you a goal to shoot at and some ideas about how to accomplish that goal.

The Goal: Character

So first, what's the goal of parenting? What is the target parents are shooting at? You could probably state it many ways but here's my attempt: *The goal of a parent is to raise children to become mature, responsible adults who honor God and contribute to society in positive ways.* That's our target. And to create that kind of person requires developing their character. So the job of the parent is to develop character in their child.

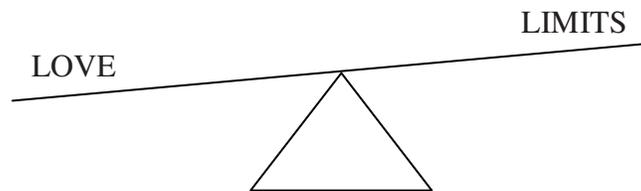
In the book *Boundaries with Kids*, Henry Cloud and John Townsend define character as having the ability to do six things:

1. *Recover from distressing emotional states*
2. *Delay gratification and take responsibility for problems and assigned tasks*
3. *Lose well, grieve fully and let go of hurts and losses.*
4. *Identify, admit and confess wrong.*
5. *Change behavior*
6. *Forgive others.* Page 32.

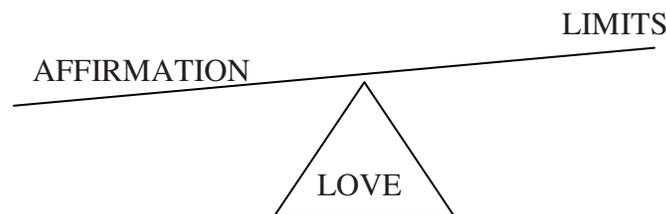
This is a picture of a mature person with character. But if that's the goal, then how does a parent go about achieving that goal? How do you take a child...fresh out of the womb and work with them for 18 years to produce a mature, responsible adult who honors God and contributes to society in positive ways?

The Method: Love with Limits

Well, as my sermon title suggests, it comes from a good balance of love and limits. You might visualize it like this...parenting is a balancing act between love and limits.



Although, once I named this sermon I decided I didn't like it because it implies that limits are the opposite of love. But that's not true. To the contrary, we limit our children *because* we love them. So, maybe it should look like this...*love* is a balancing act between *affirmation* and limits. They are both an expression of love.



But finding a balance is hard. In my parents' generation they were big on limits and light on affirmation. In fact, spanking was so accepted that they even did it in school. Then in the 60's and 70's kids grew up and rebelled against those limits. They were known as the "love" generation. And as they became parents they were big on *affirmation* and light on *limits* which created its own set of problems. One pastor noted...

These days parents make birthday celebrations into Broadway productions and honor pre-school graduations with floats and marching bands. Many parents think that if they pour on the love, that will somehow make up for their failure to set limits. — Bill Hybels

Well, because I see that our culture is light on limits right now I'm going to focus on how to bring limits back into the picture. You see, we've got to lose the idea that limiting our children is a bad thing. Just because kids complain about limits...and parents feel guilty imposing limits...that doesn't mean limits are bad. Limits are a good thing if they are done in love and balanced with affirmation. One psychologist said,

"Children need limits on their behavior because they feel better and more secure when they live within a certain structure." Laurence Steinberg, Newsweek. The Power of "No", Newsweek, 9/27/04

They feel *better* and more *secure*. Parents, you have to believe that if you want to parent well. Children may fight you about going to bed at a certain time each night. They may fight you about coming to supper at a certain time or coming home at a certain hour...but whether they realize it or not they *like* having that structure. Why? Because they like knowing that someone is watching over them and caring for them. And they actually like the excuse to say at times, "I can't. My parents won't let me." And so we do them a great disservice by backing down and yielding to their complaints.

I like what one person said in a letter to the editor of Newsweek as they responded to an article on parenting...

"One of the greatest gifts parents can give their child is that of setting limits and creating opportunities to feel disappointment that then can be dealt with in a healthy way." The Power of "No", Newsweek, 9/27/04

Did you get that? Setting limits for your child is providing them an "opportunity to feel disappointment". That's excellent. The next time you tell your child "no" and they complain, just tell them that you are simply training them how to handle disappointment in a healthy way! That sounds funny but it's really true.

Has anyone been disappointed with life this week? Of course, we've all been disappointed this week because life is full of disappointments. One of the ways we prepare our children for those disappointments is by not giving them everything that they want. We *strategically* disappoint them by imposing limits. And by doing that, not only are they prepared for life's disappointments but they are prepared for when other people, including God, disappoint them by saying "no, you can't do that".

And so as parents we have to be relentless in our commitment to developing *mature, responsible adults who honor God and contribute to society in positive ways* and not give up.

The Parenting Tool: Boundaries

Okay, now I want to narrow my focus here and get more specific in regard to limits. Let me introduce what might be a new term for some of us and that is the word "boundaries". Boundaries are a specific tool that we use to create limits in the life of children. Boundaries are the result of rules with consequences.

Rules + Consequences = Boundaries

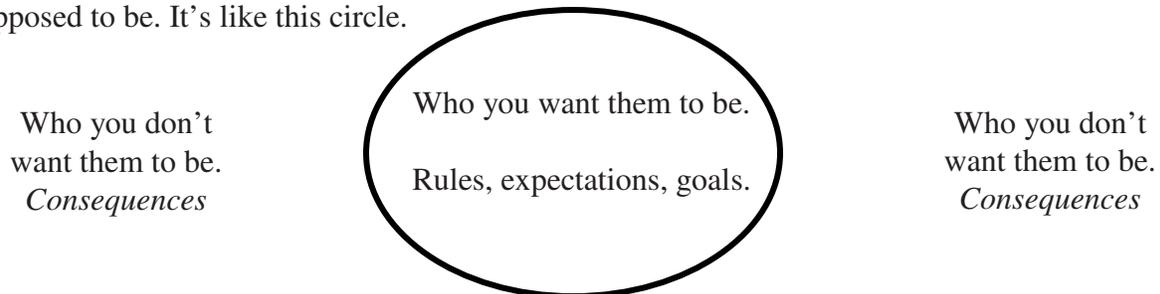
In the book, *Boundaries with Kids*, it says that children are not born with boundaries...it's the job of the parent to impose *external* boundaries until the child is able to embrace the boundary *internally* – that is – they own it for themselves.

Maybe the easiest way to describe boundaries and their benefit is to compare it to a soccer game. Imagine that there is a bunch of kids and you throw them a soccer ball and tell them to “Go play soccer”. Now, if they’ve never heard of soccer, that’s going to cause them some problems. And that might cause you a few problems as well.

You might come back in an hour and find that they are using the ball to break windows. You get all mad at them but it would have helped if you told them what soccer is. Showed them a soccer field and its boundaries. Showed them the goals and tell them the rules. By giving soccer some structure the game suddenly makes sense, they start having fun and the problems go away.

The same is true in a child’s life. A lack of boundaries often frustrates and confuses children and that can breed resentment and eventually rebellion. But if you bring structure to their lives along with affirmation, good things can happen.

You see, boundaries help a child to understand who they are supposed to be and who they are not supposed to be. It’s like this circle.



Everything inside the circle is who you want your child to be. This includes rules, expectations and goals for them. And everything outside of it is who you don't want them to be. Consequences sit out there waiting to happen should they decide to venture outside the circle. Consequences help to reinforce who they are and who they are not. So, if you are a parent you need to decide what you want inside the circle.

For example, let's say a parent wants their child to be a healthy person. And so rules are established with appropriate consequences to help them reach that goal: you want them to get eight hours of sleep, have three healthy meals, brush their teeth and so on.



Or, another example, you want your child to live a life that honors God so you instill rituals to that end: prayer, church participation, financial giving, acts of kindness, etc. These are simple rules or expectations that are put in place to help your child become the person you want them to be. They are non-negotiable and there are appropriate consequences if the child chooses to go outside the boundaries.

Now I want to make sure you understand what I mean by consequences. Consequences are not punishment given out in the heat of anger. Consequences are rational, well thought through outcomes to crossing a boundary that are best communicated in advance of an offense. If not in advance then they should be communicated after the offense (after sufficient thought has gone into it) but not *during* a confrontation. That's because it is too easy for the child to attach their negative feelings to the consequence if it is given in haste or harshness.

If there are no consequences in your parenting then you really haven't established boundaries, only suggestions.

Rules + no consequences = Suggestions

But children don't need suggestions. Especially in the early years, they need concrete rules and consequences to help them understand what's expected of them because they don't know who they are until you tell them and reinforce it with boundaries. Isn't that what God did when he gave us the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount? The Bible is full of rules with consequences that help to shape us to become the people God wants us to be. (And for that matter all of life has rules with consequences so it's important that we prepare our children for that.)

And so just like God teaches his people with rules and consequences, parents teach their children with rules and consequences. Everyone needs to learn that we reap what we sow. Consequences teach that there is a cost to bad decision making (and there are rewards for good decision making.) Just like the Bible says...

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness [Note, holiness is a character issue]. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace [more character issues] for those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12:10,11

How to teach boundaries

So, if we want to be the influence on our child that God has called us to be how do we teach boundaries? Well think of any teaching situation. Who do you learn from best? We learn best from people who *live* what they teach. When teachers live what they teach they give their teaching credibility. But when they don't live what they teach they undermine their credibility, don't they?

I read an advice column a few weeks ago and a single father wrote in asking when it was appropriate to bring his dates back to the house to spend the night. He wasn't quite sure what to tell his children. And the columnist – I can't remember who it was – wisely said,

“Well, if you want to teach your child that sexual relationships are casual and that they can engage with different people on a regular basis then you can start bringing your dates

home now. But if you want to teach your child that sex is a special gift reserved for marriage then you should wait until you are married.

Kids may be young but they aren't stupid. They can smell out an inconsistency a mile away.

So don't think you are fooling them. That's why when Jesus walked the earth he established his credibility for thirty years before he started teaching. The Bible says...

The Word became a human and lived among us. We saw his glory -- the glory that belongs to the only Son of the Father -- and he was full of grace and truth. John 1:14

So if you want to be a parent of influence you want to first walk in "grace and truth" as much as you possibly can. I'm not saying you have to be perfect. That's not realistic. But I think your children should at least see that you are trying – that you are doing your best. Let me give you just a few examples.

One of the biggest credibility busters that kids sniff out is a bad marriage. They look at you and think, "*Who are you to tell me what to do when you two can't even talk to each other without fighting.*" I'm convinced that a lot of rebellion comes from children that are angry about their parent's poor marriage.

So parents, one of the best things you can do to influence your child is to work on your marriage. If that means reading a book together or seeing a marriage counselor or attending a marriage retreat, do what you need to do to address your marital issues. Even if your marriage isn't perfect, just the fact that you are working on it gives them hope and models character development for them.

But there are other ways we undermine our credibility as parents. Let me ask you a few questions...

- *If you want your child to be responsible, are you responsible?*
- *Can they count on you to follow through on your commitments?*
- *Or do you leave them wondering what happened to you?*
- *Are you available to talk or play with them or help them with homework or do you waste countless hours on the internet or playing video games?*

One time Lisa and I had gone to the Cities to visit some relatives and we told our kids that we'd be back by 10pm. We ended up not leaving until 10pm meaning that we wouldn't make it back home until 11:30pm. It dawned on me that if one of our kids showed up an hour and a half late I'd be pretty mad. I don't know why it never struck me until then but I bet the thought crossed their minds. So I gave them a call to let them know we'd be late. And I've tried to do it ever since.

Here are some more questions for you.

- *If you want your child to respect you, do you respect them?*
- *If you don't want to be interrupted while you are speaking, do you interrupt them?*
- *If you don't want them to be harsh or rude to you, are you harsh or rude to them?*
- *If you don't like them nagging you about things, do you nag them?*

For some reason parents often think that they can play by a different set of rules. That - because they are parents – because they have the power – that they are somehow above the rules and the rules don't apply to them. But kids pick up on that and it undermines a parent's credibility and influence.

Years ago I had an employee who did something wrong at work. I can remember how careful I was to correct them, making sure that I didn't shame or humiliate them. But then God seemed to tap me on the shoulder and say, "*How come you don't treat your children with the same respect that you treat your employees when they make mistakes?*" That really got my attention.

Finally,

- *If you want your children to grow spiritually, do they see you growing spiritually?*
- *Or do they see you just going through the motions – just doing the bare minimum so you can claim to be spiritual and fulfill your parental obligation?*
- *Do they hear you talk about spiritual things?*
- *Do they see you give generously or serve sacrificially?*
- *Do they see you regularly attending church or do they see you making lame excuses for why you should stay home?*

Kids aren't dumb. They see through that. So, if they don't see that God has made a genuine change in your life then it's going to be really hard to get them to take God or church seriously.

Parents, I'm not trying to beat you up. But someone's got to ask the hard questions and I volunteered! God created you to be the greatest influence in your child's life but that means you need to build credibility with your children. You see, parenting starts with the parent. But you can do it! You can not only develop your own character but you can develop your child's character to become that mature person that I've been talking about.

Now, I came across a music video by Rodney Atkins that I want to show you (Watching You). But before I do that I want to make a few suggestions. First, if you feel like your parenting needs help, maybe you want to come forward for prayer. Second, I want to invite you to become a part of a new parenting club. I'm not sure how often it will meet but I've put three options on our feedback form and I'd like you to let me know what interests you.

The idea is that parents would meet either monthly or weekly to discuss a book that we will read together and then we'd break into small groups based on the age of your child to answer questions to specific questions that parents have. The idea is to provide some level of coaching to parents so they don't feel so alone and when things go wrong, they have a place to turn. So please mark your interest and put it in the offering.

Next week I'll talk specifically about how to teach boundaries. Maybe you can invite some parents that you know could use the help.

Watching You

By Rodney Atkins

Drivin' through town just my boy and me
With a "Happy Meal" in his booster seat
Knowin' that he couldn't have the toy 'til his nuggets were gone.
A green traffic light turned straight to red
I hit my brakes and mumbled under my breath.
His fries went a flyin', and his orange drink covered his lap
Well, then my 4 year old said a 4 letter word
It started with "S" and I was concerned
So I said, "Son, now where'd you learn to talk like that?"

Chorus:

He said, I've been watching you, dad ain't that kool?
I'm your buckaroo, I want to be like you.
And eat all my food and grow as tall as you are.
We got cowboy boots and camo pants
Yeah, we're just alike, hey, ain't we dad
I want to do everything you do.
So I've been watching you.

We got back home and I went to the barn
I bowed my head and I prayed real hard
Said, "Lord, please help me help my stupid self."
Just this side of bedtime later that night
Turnin' on my son's Scooby-doo nightlight.
He crawled out of bed and he got down on his knees.
He closed his little eyes, folded his little hands
Spoke to God like he was talkin' to a friend.
And I said, "Son, now where'd you learn to pray like that?"

Chorus:

He said, I've been watching you, dad ain't that kool?
I'm your buckaroo; I want to be like you.
And eat all my food and grow as tall as you are.
We like fixin' things and holding moma's hand
Yeah, we're just alike, hey, ain't we dad.
I want to do everything you do; so I've been watching you.

With tears in my eyes I wrapped him in a hug.
Said, "My little bear is growin' up."
And he said, "But when I'm big I'll still know what to do."

Chorus:

'cause I've been watching you, dad ain't that kool?
I'm your buckaroo; I want to be like you.
And eat all my food and grow as tall as you are.
By then I'll be strong as superman
We'll be just alike, hey, won't we dad
When I can do everything you do.
'cause I've been watchin' you.
hey yeah
uh huh