



SETTING LIMITS IN MINISTRY:
Dealing wisely with manipulative people
and the “Tyranny of the Urgent”

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The Importance of Boundaries

Setting safe boundaries is a priority for those of us who work with at-risk people. Otherwise we will burn out. We must learn how to fulfill our needs on a daily basis through a healthy balance of giving to others while also receiving affirmation and support from others and from God. People who are involved in mercy ministry make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. Personally, I've made some blunders. I saw myself as a rescuer, I succumbed to the tyranny of the urgent, and I had no safe boundaries to protect myself.

If we want to serve wisely, then we must learn to understand and respect our limitations. In order to love ourselves, we must set up reasonable boundaries. Our Lord tells us to do our best and to serve in a way that is pleasing to Him (1 Cor. 10:31). And that means being realistic and having common sense.

Learning from our Mistakes

In 1970, the first year of my diaconal career, I thought I knew what I was doing. However, sometimes I provided assistance out of feelings of guilt. Many times I did not establish proper limits. The truth was I did not know what I was doing. I am reminded of an incident that now seems absurd, yet it happened. I was benevolence treasurer. One night, I received a telephone request from a stranger who needed help in paying his rent. The caller told me he was referred by my pastor, and stated "I have to have the money by six o'clock tonight or I'll be evicted." He sounded desperate. After a few unsuccessful calls to verify his referral from my pastor—and not knowing I was

being manipulated—I agreed to help him. I told him I could write out a church check to his landlord, but he said that his landlord only accepted cash. I told him that giving cash was not possible. He repeated his landlord’s need for cash only until I gave in. I did not want to disappoint this person, this stranger, so I agreed to give him cash. And, not only did I agree to give him cash, I agreed to leave it in an envelope for him at a downtown bar! My desire to please overshadowed the need for common sense and wisdom. What I did, essentially, was feed the requester’s heroin habit.

At that time, mercy meant giving. I did not consider or question the responsibility of the requester, nor did I think about how the money would be used. Giving made me feel good. I didn’t know then about being “wise as serpents and as gentle as doves” (Matt.10:16, KJV). Today, I have learned to follow Jesus wisely, and not be manipulated by guilt or the tyranny of the urgent. I have learned that *not everything that cries the loudest is the most urgent.*

Setting Boundaries

How do we balance the need presented with the need to evaluate the request? Is the need an interruption to our own agendas or an opportunity to serve in the name of Jesus? When do we say “yes,” and when do we say “no?” How can we be most loving at this moment? How can we love ourselves and our neighbors at the same time?

Where do we set the boundaries?

Listen to this heartbreaking story of a young woman who in the beginning thought service meant accepting any and all demands on her time and energy. Her tale

describes how people were always dropping in and staying into the wee hours of the morning. Her relationship with her husband and children suffered because she was always physically and emotionally exhausted. She admits:

I became the dumping place for preschoolers until I was just about berserk from the responsibility. I became the maker of clothes for many of the women who were working outside the home and simply did not have enough time to sew. I became the "listener" who spent so much time on the phone that there were many days when my children's lunches were fixed from things I could reach from the phone and my housework was untouched due to serving others. And on and on it went until I finally cracked, put my foot down and learned to say "no" (From ACTS Ministries archives, source unknown).

In *Ordering Your Private World* Gordon McDonald describes a phone call he received one Saturday morning. The woman's voice at the other end, he says, sounded very upset.

"I've got to see you right away," she said. When I learned her name, I quickly realized that I had never met this person before and that she had rarely ever visited our church. "What is the reason that we have to visit right now?" I asked. I was an important question, one of several I've learned through experience to ask. Had this been many years ago when I was young, I would have responded immediately to her sense of emergency and arranged to meet her in ten minutes at my office, even if I had previously hoped to be with my family or involved in study. "My marriage is breaking up," she responded. I then asked, "When did you become aware that it was going to break up?" She answered, "Last Tuesday." I asked another question, "How long do you think the process of breaking up has been going on?" Her next comment was unforgettable. "Oh, it's been coming for five years". I managed to muffle my reaction and said, "Since you've seen this coming for five years, and since you knew it was going to happen since last Tuesday, why is it important to visit me at this moment? I need to know that." She answered, "Oh, I had some free time this afternoon and just thought it might be a good time to get together with you." By this time in my life most of my time was accounted for; so I said, "I can understand why you think you have a serious problem. Now I'm going to be very candid with you, I have to preach three times tomorrow and frankly my mind is preoccupied with that responsibility. Since you've been living with this situation for several years now, and since you've had several days to think about your situation, I'm going to propose that you call me Monday morning when we can arrange a time where my mind is in better shape. I want to be able to give you the utmost in

concentration. But that's not possible this afternoon. How does that sound?" She thought it was a terrific idea and could see why I suggested this sort of plan (p.78).

McDowell said that they both hung up reasonably happy. The caller would get to speak with him and he would protect his time from the "tyranny of the urgent." The principle here is that not everything that cries the loudest is the most urgent thing.

Do Not be Taken in by the Con Artist

Many people come to me for help in my capacity as ACTS Ministries Director. Ninety-five percent of these men and women I have never seen before (and I have had contact with thousands of homeless and addicted men and women). The word "on the street" is that Tenth Presbyterian Church is an easy mark. Most requests are tyranny of the urgent cries which sound like, "You are my last hope. If you don't help me I'm going to die." Some people use "shock" value to turn us to helping them (one person dropped his pants to show me an area which needed medical attention). My job is to discern which needs are legitimate and which are "con jobs."

Over the fifteen years I have served at Tenth Presbyterian Church's mercy ministry—and years prior to that—I have been "taken" and "conned" by some very good actors and manipulative persons. Because of that I have developed, with the help of others, a list of do's and don'ts:

1. **Do not give money.**
2. **Do not give money.**

3. **Do not enter into a conversation with anyone smelling of beer or alcohol or whose eyes are bloodshot or who smells like crack cocaine.**

No list of precautions is ever going to replace the element of compassion and judgment which must enter into every decision. I offer these precautions with the hope that my experience might be helpful to you. Be wary of people whose “stories” exhibit the following:

1. **Be wary of people who volunteer irrelevant information** (e.g., hotel receipts, bus ticket stubs, applications, etc.) in order to bolster a story and create an aura of credibility. *One man’s story was that he came to Philly for a job, was mugged and everything stolen—wallet, money, backpack, Nikon camera. He needed to get home in Pittsburgh. Yet that was the exact story of several people.*
2. **In the same way, be wary of people who offering an abundance of specific details.** *One person needed a Kerosene heater and wick and had memorized the serial numbers, prices and where they were on sale.*
3. **Be wary of people who name drop.** Seeming familiarity with highly regarded persons, or with persons remotely known to you. *One person gave me a song and dance about being referral by one in the church. When I asked who referred him he said, “David Apple.”*
4. **Be wary of people who forget** or being otherwise unable to produce a “key” fact, the missing link necessary to corroborate their story. *Someone might*

- say that he is really stressed out because of his circumstances and can't remember something vitally important. But will say, "You've got to believe me." Why do I?*
5. **Be wary of people who partially answer questions.** Attempts to shift the subject. Seems not to hear key questions. Or mumbles/pretends to have a speech and hearing problem.
 6. **Be wary of people who place blocks** inhibiting the verification of their story. *You may hear the phrases, "This is really embarrassing to me," or "This must be dealt with in absolute confidentiality," or "Don't say anything about this to anyone."*
 7. **Be wary of people who stress the urgency** of the request. *Someone might say she has to have help now or by 4:00 today or she will suffer in some way." Others use children as bait.*
 8. **Be wary of people who always manipulate** suggested solutions back to their terms. Usually this means that they must have immediate cash and no other solution will do. *Once while I was walking to work a man fell in step by step with me and asked for money to buy food. When I offered him my lunch he was quick to tell me of his food allergies. When I offered to go to the neighborhood grocer and buy what he needed he said they didn't stock what he could eat. So I said, "I guess I can't help you."*
 9. **Be wary of people who attempt to produce a sense of guilt** in us for doubting their honesty. *Crying, tears flowing: How could you not believe me I thought you were a Christian. The church is supposed to help people.*
 10. **Be aware that all drug addicts are pathological liars.** They are totally controlled by the god of heroin or cocaine or ice or PCP.

11. **Be wary of people who appeal to our desire to play an important role** in a significant story. *I have been to every church. No one will help me. I know you understand my dilemma and you look like I can trust you to help me.* People-pleasers will generally want to “help” rather than have the con artist not like them.

Usually people whose needs are legitimate will rarely exhibit any of these characteristics, while con artists will show signs of all or most of them. Ministers and other workers can take some precautions from becoming a victim to the con artist by following these principles:

1. **What was rule #1? Don't give money.**
2. **Determine what the need is.** Is it spiritual? Material? *We offer this letter to those who come in off the street:*

Dear Friend,

Thank you for coming to Tenth Presbyterian Church.

We welcome you in the name of Jesus Christ. Whoever you are and whatever your life's experience may be, know that we open our doors to whoever seeks God and the peace he provides through Jesus Christ.

Our ministers gladly serve those who come in need. Often they are involved with the needs of others and may not be free to see you when you walk in, but they will set up a time when they are able to.

Our ministers can share Scripture, pray and give spiritual counsel. Tenth Church has ministries and groups that may be of further help to you, and the ministers may refer you to them.

However, our ministers are not able to provide money, tokens, food, clothing or other physical services. Attached is a list of places which may be able to help with those needs.

3. **Seek to set up appointments with people.** Those with real needs will return.
4. **Don't act impulsively.** Wait. Don't do anything without thinking. Delay your response. Think about the story. Is it plausible? Does it sound manipulative to you? Do you feel that the requester has an ulterior motive—another use for the money? Also determine what resources are already available to help your guest. Make sure public and private agencies are being good stewards of God's resources. Don't duplicate what is out there already. Don't re-invent the wheel. Provide a Christ-centered alternative.
5. **Determine what the person has done to help him/herself** in the last day? Week? Month? What resources has he made use of? Why did this person come to you? At this time?
6. **Don't work harder than the person who has come for help.** You don't want to develop another dependency.
7. **Remember, "No" is not a dirty word.** Most people who come to our church "for help" are drug addicted or need immediate cash for some other illicit purpose. After years of being "soft" we are now up-front with requesters, stating very clearly what we will and will not do.
8. **Don't duplicate services that others provide.** Several neighborhood churches had a food and clothing closet. We found that the same people were hitting all the churches and some were selling our food to a grocer to

- support their drug habits. Since our food and clothing closet was redundant we stopped providing that service.
9. **Check with other churches** in your area. Have they received similar or identical requests? Con artists usually “make the rounds” going from church to church until someone says “no.”
 10. **Be wary of people who want to “get out of town.”** Transportation tickets can be exchanged for cash even when we ask that they be stamped “non-refundable.” Travelers Aid is the appropriate agency for legitimate requests of this kind.
 11. **Pursue every means to avoid using cash.** Make prior arrangements with local grocers and other merchants to use pre-paid church “vouchers” or use a check made out to the appropriate vender.
 12. **Learn to say “No.” Practice** saying, “I’m sorry, I am not able to do that.” By doing so, you will save yourself time (and if you are dealing with a con artist, s/he will appreciate their time not being wasted, too). If the requester knows that your answer is an emphatic “no,” that person will leave.
 13. **Experience is a great teacher.** We want to show compassion. We also want to protect our time, the church’s money and resources, and hold people accountable for their actions. We have learned to do what we do best—becoming involved, providing hospitality and offering hope—so we specialize in that.

14. Try not to rescue people. There are natural consequences to people's actions. We can't save people but we can bring people into contact with the savior.

15. Do not take too much responsibility for solving other people's problems.

The Lord has given people a lot of resources to deal with their problem, therefore explore what resources they have and ask the person what they can do to mobilize those resources. Sometimes people get themselves into problem situations because they are acting irresponsibly and want someone to come in and make everything okay. Your job in these cases is to listen graciously and then insist that these people take responsibility for themselves.

16. Remember that you cannot change anyone. That is the business of the

Holy Spirit. The only person you can change is you. If your efforts to aid someone appear to be unsuccessful in that he or she has not changed, remember that God is not done working in that person's life. *Mary was a drug addict who attended our Bible studies for ten years. We never saw her cooperate, never saw any fruit. All she wanted from us was material goods. All we got from her was grief. We finally asked her not to come back. A few years later I met her—clean and sober and a new person in Christ. God hadn't given up.*

Preserving our Time

I cannot direct attention enough to that waster of our time, energy, money, and other resources: the tyranny of the urgent. Resist it. Not every interruption needs

immediate attention. Not every interruption is an opportunity to help. People in need think that their immediate need is the most important thing in the world. It is not. Some things are important but not urgent. We need to keep our own agendas and try to accommodate others when appropriate and possible. Therefore, we need to schedule appointments with requesters for later times. When needs are genuine, people will return for their appointments. Over ninety percent of those who come for help do not return when given an appointment. Their needs are not genuine.

The reason we tend to give in to other people's urgent requests is that we want to please them. The idea that, "Everyone must like me" is a lie we tell ourselves. Our job is to do the Lord's will, not to win popularity contests. If we think that our job is to rescue people, we will be subject to every urgent appeal for help. Our job is to come alongside people in need to encourage them, to pray with them, to point them to the Jesus. To resist the tyranny of the urgent, we need to have a good, prayerful sense of where the Lord wants us to focus our energies and attention at any given time.

Here is a brief summary warning I give my volunteers who are working very closely with people in need:

We don't have to do everything. We do need to set boundaries. A boundary is a limit. Only God is infinite. We are finite and need to function within our built-in limits. When people are in distress, they are often completely absorbed by their problems. Sometimes they will try to absorb us in their problems, too. We cannot be effective helpers if we let ourselves become absorbed. One question to ask ourselves is: "Where does my responsibility end and this person's begin?" (and vice versa!).

Self preservation goes a long way. Saying "no" and setting other limits will protect us. Again, we are not required to deal with everything that comes our way. Some things

are our legitimate responsibility. Other things will just siphon off our energy, use up our time, and leave us too drained to do what we should be doing. Knowing the signs of people consumers—those people who use, manipulate, and drain us—are a means of self-preservation.

Knowing what resources are available is another help. Do not reinvent the wheel. There are often agencies or ministries that exist to solve the problems that people bring to you. Refer people to the appropriate agency that exists to deal with that very problem. And do not work harder than the person coming to you for help! Denying self does not mean destroying self.