

BONUS RESOURCE

Can you Have Firm Boundaries and Still be Kind?

LESLIE VERNICK



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I'm often asked, where is the line between understanding and having compassion for your emotionally abusive spouse and protecting your own healthy emotional boundaries and beginning the healing process?

I think this topic is crucial because compassion for someone else, does not negate compassion for one's own self, or having appropriate boundaries.

Let's take a few examples. Let's say that your husband was sick with the flu and had fever and body aches. You would have compassion for his illness, but hopefully also have some boundaries for yourself so that you don't get what he has.

That may mean that you check in on him, bring him a cup of soup, or run to the pharmacy to pick up some medication. But it also may mean that you don't sleep in the same bed while he is sick, or you wash your hands frequently, or even wear gloves if you are tending to his physical needs.

Let's take it up a notch. Let's say your husband was home sick with the flu and you just got home from the hospital, recovering from major surgery. Now what? Who helps who?

Can you have compassion on his illness without feeling like you have to compromise your healing in order to take care of him? What might you have to do? Ask a neighbor to check in on him? Hire someone to care for both of you? Have an adult child help out with some extra care of errands? Do you need to go elsewhere for your own healing and recovery so that you don't add to your problem by catching the flu from him?

Having compassion toward someone who is immature, weak in character, and/or blind to his or her own sin or even mentally ill or disabled, is crucial if we are to protect ourselves from hating the sinner, not just their sin. However having compassion doesn't mean we allow, endure, or excuse without consequence someone's continued ill treatment of us at our own detriment or peril.

So let's again look at some examples. Let's say your husband didn't have the flu but was raised by uncaring parents who were abusive and neglectful. You clearly see he didn't get the love and proper discipline as a child to mature into a healthy adult. And from this place, he does not make a very good husband. In fact, he's emotionally, verbally, and spiritually abusive towards you and your children.

Does your compassion for his upbringing mean that he can continue to treat you and your children cruelly without consequence because you understand he didn't get all he needed as a child? What about his own responsibility as a man to get healthy so that he has a better handle on his hurt and his anger?

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Or what if your husband had a brain tumor that was causing him to become violent? Of course you would have compassion, but would you also have good boundaries so that you and your children would be safe from his angry/violent outbursts. Even when those angry and violent outbursts were caused by a medical condition? I hope so.

This dilemma often reminds me of our tendency towards either/or thinking. We tell ourselves, “I can either be compassionate OR I can have boundaries but I can’t do both”. If I have boundaries, that means I’m not compassionate, and if I’m compassionate, that means no boundaries and anything goes.

But in most situations the truth is more of a both/and mindset. You can be both compassionate towards someone and their problem and have good boundaries for yourself and your children.

We do this all the time when seeing a homeless mom and her kids on the street, or giving our money to help vets who need homes or children who need to be supported overseas for their basic needs.

We have compassion on their plight and we give of our resources but with boundaries. We don’t just give them our ATM card and say help yourself to whatever you need for however long you need.

We decide (boundary) how much we can help, how often we can help, and how much sacrifice we can make to help someone else. We also know that if we had no boundaries and only compassion, it would very likely put us in a situation that we weren’t able to pay our own bills and take care of our own needs. That’s not good stewardship of our resources, nor of our own life.

Proverbs 6 is a good reminder that we are to have boundaries, especially around irresponsible people. In that passage it reminds us not to sacrifice ourselves by co-signing on a loan. Why not? Because that only enables the person who was unable to get sufficient credit on his or her own, to continue to be irresponsible.

Saying “No to a co-sign” is not only smart, it’s Biblical. And, if the Bible says we are to have a good boundary around someone who is financially irresponsible so that we don’t put ourselves in financial peril out of our misplaced compassion, don’t you think the same would apply to someone who was morally irresponsible as well?