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HOW TO SAY NO  
TO TAKE CONTROL  
OF YOUR LIFE



# BOUNDARIES

## WORKBOOK

UPDATED  
AND EXPANDED  
WITH BOUNDARIES  
FOR THE  
DIGITAL AGE

DR. HENRY CLOUD & DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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ZONDERVAN

*Boundaries Workbook*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-35277-8 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-35290-7 (ebook)

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Published in association with Yates & Yates, [www.yates2.com](http://www.yates2.com).

*Art direction: Curt Diepenhorst*

*Interior design: Denise Froeblich*

First printing December 2017 / Printed in the United States of America

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# Introduction

One of the most serious problems facing Christians today is confusion about boundaries. Many sincere, dedicated believers struggle with tremendous confusion about when it is biblically appropriate to set limits. When confronted with their lack of boundaries, they raise good questions:

*Can I set limits and still be a loving person?*

*What are legitimate boundaries?*

*What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries?*

*How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?*

*Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?*

*How do boundaries relate to submission?*

*Aren't boundaries selfish?*

*Why is it difficult for me to hear no from other people?*

*Why do I tend to want to control other people when I don't get what I want?*

Just as homeowners set physical property lines around their land, we need to set mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for our lives to help us distinguish what is our responsibility and what is not. The inability to set appropriate boundaries at appropriate times with the appropriate people can be very destructive.

Misinformation about what the Bible says about boundaries can also be destructive. To counter such wrong thinking, this study guide and the accompanying text present a biblical view of boundaries: what they are, what they protect, how they are developed, how they are injured, how to repair them, and how to use them. As you read the book and work through this guide, you will find answers to the questions listed above—and more. In fact, our goal is to help you use biblical boundaries appropriately to achieve the relationships and purposes that God intends for you as you grow in him.

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*Part One*

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# **What Are Boundaries?**

# What Does a Boundary Look Like?

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## Give Me Something to Hope For

*It's sometimes easier to see in other people the very thing we would do well to change in ourselves. Look again at Sherrie's day. Read through the entries from 6:00 a.m. to 11:50 p.m. and see how closely your life resembles her boundaryless day (pp. 15–26).<sup>1</sup>*

- Where do you see yourself in Sherrie's actions and thoughts? Be as specific as possible.
  
- Who in your life could be cast in the role of Sherrie's mother (p. 16); her husband, Walt (pp. 17, 22–25); her "friend," Lois (p. 18); her demanding boss, Jeff (p. 19); the encouraging teacher, Mrs. Russell (pp. 19–20); her unreachable daughter, Amy (p. 21); and the ministry leader, Phyllis, with yet another request (p. 22)? Who treats you the way these people treated Sherrie? Whose words and actions elicit the same kind of response (emotional and otherwise) from you that these people elicited from Sherrie?

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<sup>1</sup> All page numbers in this workbook refer to the page numbers of the 2017 edition of *Boundaries*. When no page references are given for italicized text, it usually means that these sections are additional thoughts of the author on that particular topic.

## What Are Boundaries?

- How did you respond to the way Sherrie used Scripture as she made decisions that violated her—at best—shaky boundaries?
- If Sherrie came to you for advice, what would you say to her? How would you diagnose her problem? Which of your own words of advice would you do well to heed?

*We can probably all identify with Sherrie's dilemma—her isolation, her helplessness, her confusion, her guilt. And, above all, her sense that her life is out of control. Trying harder isn't working for her. Being nice out of fear isn't working for her. Taking responsibility for others isn't working for her. Sherrie still suffers severely from her inability to take ownership of her life. She has great difficulty knowing what things are her responsibility and what things are not. In her desire to do the right thing or to avoid conflict, she ends up taking on problems that God never intended her to take on (pp. 26–27).*

- Look at your life through this lens. What problems have you taken on that God may never have intended you to take on?
- What motivated you to take on those problems you just listed—your desire to do the right thing, your efforts to avoid conflict, your fear of disappointing someone or not being liked, a sense of guilt, an inner “should,” or something else?

*Any confusion of responsibility and ownership in our lives is a problem of boundaries (p. 27).*



### *What Does a Boundary Look Like?*

- Why are you confused about boundaries—about when and how to draw them for yourself or even whether drawing boundaries is okay? What has happened to foster that confusion?
- Why are Christians especially susceptible to confusion about boundaries?

*The questions listed in the introduction and below reflect some of the confusion we Christians may have about boundaries.*

*Can I set limits and still be a loving person?*

*What are legitimate boundaries?*

*What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries?*

*How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?*

*Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?*

*How do boundaries relate to mutual submission in marriage?*

*Aren't boundaries selfish?*

*Is it difficult for me to hear no from other people?*

*Do I tend to want to control other people when I don't get what I want?*

- 
- Which of these questions have you wondered about? Which questions do you especially want answers for?
  - What do you want to gain from this study besides answers to those questions? What hopes and goals do you have for yourself?

## What Are Boundaries?

*As you proceed through this study and work toward the goals you have set for yourself, remember that this book aims to help you see the deeply biblical nature of boundaries as they operate in the character of God, his universe, and his people. Remember, too, that our goal is to help you use biblical boundaries appropriately so that you can experience the relationships and achieve the purposes that God intends for you as his child.*

### **A Little Boundary Clarification**

*Remember the story of Joshua (pp. 29–31)? His parents paid his bills, fretted over his circumstances, worried about his future, and exerted much energy to keep him going. Joshua didn't study, plan, or work, yet he had a nice place to live, plenty of money, and all the rights of a family member who was doing his part. He was irresponsible and happy—and they were responsible and miserable.*

*And remember how we helped his parents see that? We compared Joshua to a man who never watered his lawn. Whenever his neighbors turned on their sprinkler system, the water fell on Joshua's lawn. Their grass was turning brown and dying, but Joshua saw his green grass and thought his yard was doing fine. We suggested that they define the property lines a little better and fix the sprinkler system so that water would fall on their own lawn. Perhaps then, when Joshua didn't water his lawn and found himself living in dirt, he would recognize that he had a problem and would do something about it (p. 30).*

- Where are you watering someone else's yard while your own grass withers and dies?
  
- Where are you letting someone else water your yard?
  
- Is it cruel to stop watering someone else's yard? Would it be cruel for the person who is watering your yard to stop? Why or why not?

## What Does a Boundary Look Like?

### ***Invisible Property Lines and Responsibility***

*In the physical world, boundaries are easy to see. In the spiritual world, boundaries are just as real, but often harder to see (p. 31).*

- What boundaries in the physical world do you deal with every day?
  
- What kind of boundaries do you think need to exist in the spiritual world?
  
- Why are spiritual boundaries as important as physical boundaries?

*The goal of this lesson is to help you define your intangible boundaries and to recognize them as an everpresent reality that can increase your love and save your life. These boundaries define your soul and help you guard and maintain it (Proverbs 4:23) (p. 31).*

### **Me and Not Me**

*Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows where you end and someone else begins, leading to a sense of ownership. We have to deal with what is in our soul (Proverbs 14:10), and boundaries help us define what that is. The Bible tells us clearly what our parameters are and how to protect them, but often our family or other past relationships have confused us about our parameters (pp. 31–32).*

- Explain how knowing what you are to own and take responsibility for gives you freedom.

## What Are Boundaries?

- Why does pain result when we are not shown the parameters of our soul or are taught wrong parameters?

### **To and For**

*We are responsible to others and for ourselves.*

- What does Galatians 6:2 teach about responsibility to others?
- When has someone in your life followed Christ's example of sacrificial love and denied himself or herself in order to do for you what you could not do for yourself?
- When have you followed Christ's example of sacrificial love and denied yourself in order to do for others what they could not do for themselves?

*Now look at Galatians 6:5. The Greek words for burden and load give important insight into these two verses. Burden means "excess burdens," boulders that we need help carrying. Load means "cargo" or "the burden of daily toil." These loads are like knapsacks. A knapsack is possible to carry, and we are expected to carry our own. We are expected to deal with our own feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as the responsibilities God has given us, even though it takes effort. In addition, we are not to carry the knapsacks of others (Luke 9:23) (pp. 32–33).*

- When have you acted as if your "boulders" are your daily load and have refused help? Where are you doing this today?

### *What Does a Boundary Look Like?*

- When have you acted as if your “daily load” is a boulder that you shouldn’t have to carry? Where are you doing this today?
  
- What have these two questions helped you see about yourself—and what will you do with what you have learned?

*In order to not stay in pain or become irresponsible, it is important that you determine what “me” is, where your boundary of responsibility lies, and where someone else’s begins. Let’s look more closely now at the nature of boundaries (p. 33).*

### **Good In, Bad Out**

*Boundaries help us distinguish our property so that we can take care of it. We need to keep things that will nurture us inside our fences and keep things that will harm us outside. We need to keep the good in and the bad out, and that’s what boundaries help us do (p. 33).*

- The fences around our property—our boundaries—need gates in them so that we can let out the bad when it is inside. What pain and sin do you need to get out through confession so that it does not continue to poison you on the inside (Mark 7:21–23; James 5:16; 1 John 1:9)?
  
- We also need those gates to let in the good that may be on the outside. We need, for instance, to receive Jesus and his truth (John 1:12; Revelations 3:20). We also need to open up to the good things other people want to give us (2 Corinthians 6:11–13). What good things—from Jesus and his people—would you like to be able to receive?

## What Are Boundaries?

*Clearly, boundaries are not meant to be walls. The Bible does not say that we are to be “walled off” from others; in fact, it says we are to be “one” with them (John 17:11). We are to be in community with one another, but in every community the members have their own space and property (p. 34).*

- As a result of past injury, have you reversed the function of boundaries? Where are you using them to keep the bad in and the good out? What pain are you holding inside rather than expressing it and getting it out of your soul? Where are you not opening up to the love and support from the outside that would bring healing?

## God and Boundaries

*This concept of boundaries comes from the very nature of God. God defines himself as a distinct, separate being, and he is responsible for himself (pp. 34–35).*

- God defines his personality by telling us about himself. What does he tell us in the Bible about what he thinks, feels, plans, allows, doesn't allow, likes, and dislikes? See, for instance, Genesis 12:2; Jeremiah 3:12; Ezekiel 6:9; 36:26.
- God differentiates himself from his creation, from us, and from others. He tells us who he is and who he is not. What does he say about himself in Leviticus 11:44; Isaiah 48:12; 60:16; 1 John 4:16?
- God also limits what he will allow in his yard. What, for example, do Exodus 20:1–17 and Matthew 5:21–6:4 say about those limits?

## What Does a Boundary Look Like?

- What do Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:8, Mark 12:30–31, and 1 John 4:7–12 say about the gates in God’s fences?

*God also has boundaries within the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one, but at the same time they are distinct persons with their own boundaries. Each has his own personhood and responsibilities, as well as a connection and love for one another (John 17:24). We, whom he created in his likeness and whom he gave personal responsibility within limits, need to develop boundaries like God’s if we are to be effective stewards over the life he has given us (p. 35).*

## Examples of Boundaries

*A boundary is anything that helps to differentiate you from someone else or shows where you begin and end (p. 35).*

- Review the discussion of each type of boundary listed below (pp. 35–40). Then, for each one, note some biblical support (what does the Bible say or what example does it give for maintaining these boundaries?). Refer to a time when people honored that particular boundary of yours (what were the circumstances, why were you able to be strong, and what did you learn from this experience?), and consider what hinders you from keeping each boundary strong (look back at a time when people didn’t honor your boundary and try to identify why).
  - Skin
  - Words, especially the word *no*
  - Truth

## What Are Boundaries?

- Geographical distance
- Time
- Emotional distance
- Other people
- Consequences
- Now consider the list of boundaries from another perspective.
  - Which boundaries, when they are set by other people, do you need to do a better job honoring?
  - Why might you have a hard time honoring people's boundaries, especially certain ones?



## What Does a Boundary Look Like?

- What will you do to be more respectful of the boundaries of the people in your life?

## What's within My Boundaries?

*The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) is a good illustration of when boundaries should be both observed and violated. The imaginary next chapter of the story, however, shows what happens when, moved with compassion to give to someone in need, we find ourselves manipulated into giving more than we want to give and, as a result, become resentful and angry—and sometimes we may be the ones doing the manipulating! That scenario can be avoided when we clearly understand what falls within our boundaries and what we are responsible for (pp. 40–42).*

## Feelings

*Feelings should neither be ignored nor placed in charge. They are signals that alert us to be aware of the condition of our heart. The Bible says to “own” your feelings and be responsible for them. You must see them as your property so you can begin to find an answer to whatever issue they are pointing to. They can often motivate you to do much good (Matthew 9:36; 15:32; Luke 10:33; 15:20) (p. 42).*

- What do you tend to do with your feelings—ignore them or let them be in charge? Why do you think you respond that way?
  
- What do you tend to do with feelings of anger?
  
- If you are nursing any feelings of anger right now, what problem that needs to be addressed are they pointing you toward? What will you do about that problem?

## What Are Boundaries?

### **Attitudes and Beliefs**

*Attitudes have to do with your orientation toward something, the stance you take toward God, others, life, work, and relationships. Beliefs are anything you accept as true. Although you may struggle to set limits and accept appropriate responsibility, know that doing so will save lives (Proverbs 13:18, 24) (pp. 42–43).*

- You are the only one who feels the effects of your attitudes and beliefs, and you are the only one who can change those attitudes and beliefs. Which attitudes and beliefs that you hold are causing you to make poor choices or experience pain? What will you do to get those attitudes and beliefs in line with God's truth?
  
- Do you tend to feel responsible for other people's feelings, choices, and behaviors? In what areas of your life or for which people in your life do you do this? What will you do to gain a better understanding of what you really are responsible for?

### **Behaviors**

*Behaviors have consequences. As Paul says, "A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7–8). As Proverbs warns, "stern discipline awaits anyone who leaves the path" (15:10). To rescue people from the natural consequences of their behavior is to render them powerless (p. 43).*

- When has someone interrupted the law of sowing and reaping in your life and protected you from consequences that could have been good teachers? What happened?

### What Does a Boundary Look Like?

- When have you interrupted the law of sowing and reaping in someone's life and protected that person from consequences that could have been good teachers? What happened?

### Choices

*We need to take responsibility for our choices. Doing so leads to the fruit of self-control (Galatians 5:23). A common boundary problem is disowning our choices and trying to lay the responsibility for them on someone else. Throughout the Scriptures, people are reminded of their choices and asked to take responsibility for them (Joshua 24:15; Matthew 20:13; Romans 8:13; 2 Corinthians 9:7; Philemon 1:14) (pp. 43–44).*

- How often do you use the phrases “I had to” or “He/she made me” when you explain why you did or didn't do something?
- What choices in your life have you failed to take responsibility for? Whom are you blaming for what circumstances of your life?

### Values

*What we value is what we love and assign importance to. Often we do not take responsibility for what we value. Boundaries help us not to deny but to own our old hurtful boundaries so that God can create a new heart in us, a heart that values things that will satisfy and things that will last (pp. 44–45).*

- When have you been caught up in valuing the approval of people rather than the approval of God (John 12:43)? What lesson did you learn from that experience or from seeing someone else caught in that trap?

## What Are Boundaries?

- Where might you be seeking power, riches, or pleasure in an attempt to satisfy your deepest longing, which is really for love? How would taking responsibility for loving the wrong things affect your life?

### **Limits**

*Two aspects of limits are important for creating better boundaries. First, setting limits and separating ourselves protects love because we are taking a stand against things that destroy love. Second, setting limits in order to establish an internal structure is an important component of boundaries and identity, as well as ownership, responsibility, and self-control (pp. 45–46).*

- The first aspect is setting limits with others. That means setting limits on our exposure to people who are behaving poorly, and God is our model for doing so (Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:9–13). We can't change other people or make them behave right, but we can gain some distance from them. Where in your life today would you do well to limit your exposure to someone? Why would that be a wise move? What is keeping you from doing so?
- Like setting limits with others, setting our own internal limits helps us create better boundaries. We need self-control without repression. What destructive desires do you need to learn to say no to? What good desires do you need to learn to say no to because the timing isn't right?

### **Resources and Gifts**

*Although it uses money as an example, Matthew 25:14–30 clearly illustrates our God-ordained responsibility for ownership and stewardship of our resources, talents, and gifts. Our talents are within our boundaries and are our responsibility, yet taking ownership*

## What Does a Boundary Look Like?

*of them is often frightening and always risky. It takes work, practice, learning, prayer, resources, and grace to overcome the fear of failure that can keep us from exercising our talents, but we are accountable—and much happier—when we exercise our God-given gifts and are productive (p. 46).*

- What talents, gifts, and abilities has God given you? If you're not sure, ask someone who knows you well to help you identify them.
  
- What talents, gifts, and abilities are you currently exercising? How do you feel about what you are doing?
  
- What talents, gifts, or abilities are you afraid to exercise? What is the root of those fears? What steps will you take to overcome those fears?

## Thoughts

*Our minds and thoughts are important reflections of the image of God. We are called to love God with all our mind (Mark 12:30), and we are to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We must have our own thoughts, we must keep learning about God, we must clarify any distorted ideas, and if we want others to know what we're thinking, we must tell them (pp. 46–47).*

- We must own our own thoughts. Do you think things through for yourself, or do you tend to accept other people's ideas and let them do your thinking for you? Why? Name one area of your life where you would do well to think through some issues for yourself.

## What Are Boundaries?

- We must grow in knowledge and expand our minds. What are you doing to grow in your knowledge of God and his Word? Of God and his creation? How are you using your brain to glorify God?
- We must clarify distorted thinking, and the easiest distortions to notice are those in personal relationships. Consider past relationships. Where do you see now that you had distorted ideas about the person involved? Where might you now be failing to see people as they really are?
- Finally, we need to make sure that we are communicating our thoughts to others. After all, “For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them?” (1 Corinthians 2:11). Whom are you expecting to be able to read your mind? To whom are you afraid to communicate your thoughts? What do you think keeps you from doing so?

## Desires

*Each of us has different desires and wants, dreams and wishes, goals and plans, hungers and thirsts—but few of us are satisfied. One reason is that we lack the internal structure that boundaries provide to enable us to define and then take the specific steps necessary to reach our goals. Furthermore, we often do not actively seek our desires from God (Ecclesiastes 11:9; Matthew 7:7–11; Philippians 2:12–13; James 4:2–3). Yet God is truly interested in our desires. He made them, and “he fulfills the desires of those who fear him” (Psalm 145:19; see also Psalm 21:2–3; 37:4) (pp. 48–49).*

### *What Does a Boundary Look Like?*

- When have you experienced the fulfillment of a God-given desire? Be specific about the circumstances and your feelings.
- What desires are you currently pursuing that your heavenly Father, wise parent that he is, is probably not interested in giving you?
- Consider the desires, dreams, and goals that you are currently pursuing. Make them the focus of some prayer time, asking God to refine your ideas and redirect you where necessary.

### **Love**

*Our ability to give and respond to love is our greatest gift. The heart that God has fashioned in his image is the center of our being. Its abilities to open up to love and to allow love to flow outward are crucial to life. We need to claim our hearts as our property and work on our weaknesses, whether we are weak receiving, or weak giving, love. Doing so will open up life to us (pp. 49–50).*

- Why might you have difficulty giving and/or receiving love?
- Our loving heart, like our physical one, needs an inflow as well as an outflow of lifeblood (Matthew 22:37, 39; 2 Corinthians 6:11–13). How healthy is the inflow in your life? What healthy, godly relationships nurture you?

## What Are Boundaries?

- How healthy is the outflow of love in your life? Where are you giving to others the kind of unconditional love God has given you?
  
- What do your answers to the previous two questions tell you about the condition of your trust muscle? Are you resisting love and/or failing to give love because it's hard for you to trust?

*Feelings, attitudes and beliefs, behaviors, choices, values, limits, talents, thoughts, desires, and love—all of these lie within our boundaries. We therefore need to take responsibility for all of these areas of our souls.*

- In which of these areas are you doing a fairly good job taking responsibility?
  
- In what area will you start working to take more responsibility this week? What will you do? Be specific.

*Taking care of all that lies within our boundaries isn't easy. Neither is allowing other people to take care of what lies within their boundaries. Setting boundaries and maintaining them is hard work. But, as you'll see in the next lesson, boundary problems take on recognizable shapes. Recognizing the shape of your boundary problems can help you establish healthy boundaries for yourself.*



## **Prayer**

*Father God, you have seen where my life resembles Sherrie's—where I have failed to establish boundaries, where I have failed to build “gates” in my “fences,” and where I am keeping out good and keeping in bad. You also know the reasons for these things—the past hurts, the poor models, the misunderstood Christian teachings. And you know, too, the hope I've found in these pages as I've realized that you call me to establish boundaries and that you yourself model them for me. Teach me, as I proceed through this study, to take responsibility for my feelings, attitudes and beliefs, behaviors, choices, values, limits, talents, thoughts, desires, and love. Help me establish appropriate and biblical boundaries so that I may glorify you with my life. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

# Understanding Boundaries

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It's easy to misunderstand boundaries. We readily see, for instance, that people who have difficulty setting limits have a boundary problem, but so do those who don't respect other people's limits. In this lesson we'll categorize the main types of boundary problems to help you identify weaknesses in your own boundaries (p. 51).

## **Compliants: Saying Yes to the Bad**

*Compliant people have fuzzy and indistinct boundaries; they “melt” into the demands and needs of other people. Compliants are chameleons. Their inability to say no to the bad is pervasive, and it keeps them from refusing and even recognizing evil. Their spiritual and emotional “radar” is broken; they have no ability to guard their hearts (Proverbs 4:23) (pp. 51–54).*

- As you were growing up, what did you learn about setting boundaries and saying no? Were those things good or bad? How did you learn that?
  
- When have you noticed that your spiritual and emotional “radar” isn't functioning well in the moment? When, for instance, have you recognized evil only in retrospect?

# ***Boundaries Workbook***

**When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life**  
(Updated and Expanded)

By Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr. John Townsend

*The New York Times* bestselling book *Boundaries* has helped millions understand that being a loving Christian does not mean never saying no. This newly updated and expanded companion workbook provides practical exercises for setting boundaries in marriage, parenting, business, and friendships in a digital age.

Following the newly updated and expanded edition of *Boundaries* chapter-by-chapter, this interactive workbook helps you look at specific relationships in your own life. With those situations in mind, you can ask and answer:

- Why do I feel guilty about setting clear boundaries?
- What if the boundaries I set hurt the other person?
- Is it difficult for me to hear no from others?
- What are examples of legitimate boundaries at work and home?
- How can I have good boundaries online?
- How can I stay connected while still setting boundaries with my phone?
- In what ways do I need to set better boundaries with social media?

The *Boundaries Workbook* gives a biblical foundation and practical tools for helping others respect your boundaries—whether you are not responding to a text message immediately or saying no when someone asks you to volunteer for one more activity.

Discover firsthand how good boundaries give you the freedom to live as the loving, generous, fulfilled person God created you to be.

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