

D E V O T I O N A L

BOUNDARIES FOR YOUR SOUL



How to Turn Your Overwhelming
Thoughts and Feelings into
Your Greatest Allies

DAY 1

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR SOUL

*O Lord, you have examined my heart
and know everything about me. . . .*

You go before me and follow me.

You place your hand of blessing on my head.

PSALM 139:1,5



If you are a Christ follower, you've probably heard a lot about your soul. But what exactly is it? Your soul is the inner you, the nonphysical you—the sum of all your thoughts and feelings and needs and desires. It's where you live inside your body, connected to but separate from your physical self. Most important, it's the place where the Holy Spirit dwells.

Sounds simple enough, right? Challenging experiences in life teach us that it's not that simple. Living as a human soul can be a baffling and frustrating thing. To help you understand it a little better, authors Kimberly Miller and Alison Cook suggest a helpful paradigm—an imaginative picture that helps explain how various aspects of your soul interact. (They explain it more thoroughly in their book, *Boundaries for Your Soul*.)

First of all, in the center of your soul is your essential self—the real you, the part that is guided and led by the Spirit. This **Spirit-led self** is intended to lead all the other parts in turn. When it functions as it should, all the other parts—thoughts and feelings and needs and desires—take their proper places within appropriate boundaries, freeing and empowering you to live peacefully and purposefully in the world.

Over the years, though, as you accumulate experiences, various parts or aspects of your soul may get out of hand. Powerful **Protectors**, for instance, work hard (maybe too hard) to guard you from discomfort. Some of these are **Managers**, who do their best to *prevent* pain by keeping things under control. Others are **Firefighters**, who use distraction and numbing strategies to *extinguish* the pain you've already felt. And then there are your **Exiles**, the needy, vulnerable, anguished parts of you that the protectors diligently guard—so diligently that the exiles are hidden, overlooked, or even forgotten until they finally cry out (maybe too loudly) for attention and care.

There's a lot more to learn about all these soul parts. But for today, just stop and consider what might be happening within your soul today. What thoughts or feelings or needs or desires are desperate for attention? Does anything feel unbalanced, out of whack, overly needy or overprotective?

Maybe it's time for a little soul exploration—guided by the One who knows you through and through.

Dearest Lord God,

*you know me so well, and you know what needs to happen for me to be the person
you had in mind from the beginning. Today, to the best of my ability,
I open my soul to you. Touch me, heal me, guide me as I try to learn and grow.*

DAY 2

INNER WAR AND THE PRINCE OF PEACE

*I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right,
but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.*

ROMANS 7:15 NLT



Can you relate to what the apostle Paul is saying in this verse? That experience of wanting to do right and doing just the opposite is so familiar—and so frustrating!

“I want to lose weight . . . but what happened to that bag of chips?”

“I want to be a loving friend . . . but I really don't want to talk to *anybody*.”

“I want to be a good example for my kids . . . but one little mess and I'm yelling like a banshee.”

Sometimes it feels like different parts of ourselves—needs, emotions, desires—are at war within us. A desire for health fights with a need for comfort. A need for belonging fights with fear of getting hurt. Deep love fights with a compulsion to keep everything under control.

Conflicts like that can leave us confused and frustrated and guilty, feeling like failures and acting

like jerks (or worse)! But what can we do? It's not so easy to get rid of "bad" or unwanted feelings and desires and needs—they just keep popping up no matter how hard we try to push them down. More to the point, those very emotions and desires and needs are part of us—the persons God loves. The persons Jesus died for. The persons who actually have the Holy Spirit living inside.

And maybe that's the key. Instead of purging those troublesome feelings and needs and desires, perhaps we could ask the Spirit to guide us in understanding them and treating them with compassion. Perhaps we can even befriend the conflicted parts of us and invite them into the presence of Jesus, the Prince of peace, where they can be transformed.

It's something to think about, isn't it?

Or better yet, to pray about.

Lord,

*this idea of treating the conflicted parts of me with compassion and gentle guidance
is different from the way I'm used to thinking. Be with me
as I meditate on this possibility and learn more about this intriguing peace process.*

DAY 3

WHO'S DRIVING THE BUS?

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

ROMANS 12:2 NLT



Imagine you're a school bus driver—but something has gone really wrong on your route.

For some reason, instead of driving, you're sitting in the back row, hoping for the best. Little kids take turns at the steering wheel as the bus zigzags down the road. The kids are scared, but they don't know what else to do except wrestle for the wheel.

Sounds like a crazy bad dream, doesn't it? But it's actually a pretty good picture of what happens in your soul when various parts of your personality wrestle for control and you haven't stepped up to lead them. Your life is anything but clear and calm. You lost your sense of perspective. Chaos ensues, and you feel overwhelmed by your conflicting thoughts and emotions. For many of us, that's all too familiar.

Think of your inner self—the real you—as the bus driver. The children are various other aspects of your inner being—thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, impulses. They’re all good kids at heart, but when there’s not a wise adult in charge they tend to run amuck—pushing one another around, hiding in the craziest places, competing for attention, trying to do stuff they have no business doing.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. You have the ability and the authority to take the wheel of your own life, to set firm but compassionate limits for your out-of-control “kids.” If you’ve been taking the backseat for awhile, the process may take a while. But the change starts when you realize, “I’m letting the kids drive the bus!” and decide that it’s time—with God’s help—to take the wheel.

Dear Father,

I confess that too often I’ve let the kids drive the bus in my life. Forgive me my lack of courage and my lack of trust in you. And give me the strength and confidence to step up and take the wheel of my own life, trusting that you live in me and will never steer me wrong.

DAY 4

A PICTURE OF HEALTH

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things.

GALATIANS 5:22-23 NLT



Most of us spend a lot of time thinking about what is wrong with our lives. But have you ever stopped to consider how we can know when we're doing right—when we're on the right track?

It's tempting to measure rightness in terms of whether we feel happy or successful, but most of us know better than that. Happiness and unhappiness are fleeting emotions, subject to all sorts of variables. Living in a state where all is well with our souls comes from a deeper, more lasting place.

In *Boundaries for Your Soul*, authors Alison Cook and Kimberly Miller suggest a checklist of “C-words” that indicate our Spirit-led self is in control and the other parts of us are within their proper boundaries. The more consistently these qualities appear in our lives, the more likely it is that our souls are in balance and our hearts are in the right place.

- Calmness
- Clarity
- Curiosity
- Compassion
- Confidence
- Courage
- Creativity
- Connectedness

Galatians 5 gives us another list of signs that all is well, and they are something to watch out for too. The apostle Paul calls these qualities “fruit of the Spirit” because they grow naturally out of a Spirit-led soul: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

What if these qualities are lacking in our lives? What if we are anxious instead of calm, muddled instead of clear-minded, closed off instead of curious, hostile instead of compassionate, fearful instead of confident and courageous, stifled instead of creative, isolated instead of connected to others? What if our lives display a distinct lack of spiritual fruit?

The thing to remember is that God doesn’t expect us to focus on making these qualities appear in our lives. They are signposts, not goals. When they show themselves, that’s a sign that something’s going right. When they’re missing, that’s when we need to pay closer attention to what’s going on inside and make some changes.

Dear Father,

thank you that you don’t just point out what is wrong with us. You give us a picture of what it looks like to be well. Help me continue leaning on you so that my life will bear good fruit.

DAY 5

HOLY CURIOSITY

I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.

MARK 10:15 NLT



A lot of us have been warned since we were very small that curiosity can get us in trouble. We're told to stop asking so many questions and to be content with what we're told. And it's true that an unbridled curiosity can get us into trouble. One click on the wrong Internet link can drop us into dark places we don't need to visit. Ignoring God's instructions to satisfy our thirst for knowledge brings predictable pain.

And yet curiosity is an important part of the way God made us. Jesus himself stated that we have to be like children to come into his kingdom, and who is more curious than a child? We were created to engage our world, to look up in wonder, to ask questions and wonder why, to keep on seeking understanding. The fact that our built-in curiosity can be corrupted by sin is no reason to turn off this gift of God. Instead, we need to cultivate what Albert Einstein once called "holy curiosity." When we do that, amazing things can happen:

- *Holy curiosity nurtures wonder.* It leads us to drop our jaws at the miracle of life and creation.

- *Holy curiosity is humble.* It knows that nobody has all the answers and there's always something to correct and more to learn.
- *Holy curiosity pays attention.* It tries to stay awake and alert to what God might be telling us in any moment. And yet . . .
- *Holy curiosity is patient.* It's willing to live with tension and doesn't demand that point of confusion be cleared up immediately.
- *Holy curiosity dares to ask questions.* And yes, asking can be daring, especially for grownups who have had the "why" squished out of them. But Jesus encouraged questions from those who asked them sincerely and without agenda.
- *Holy curiosity respects boundaries.* It understands that there are limits to what we really need to know and that other people aren't on earth to satisfy our idle questions.
- *Holy curiosity works in a context of trust*—believing that God will give us the answers we need and will be with us in the middle of our unanswered questions.
- *Holy curiosity is always teamed up with love and compassion.* That's what keeps it from being toxic, invasive, and generally unwise.

Heavenly Father,

thank you that you created me with the capacity for curiosity. Keep me awake, alert, and seeking but also patient, excited about your possibilities, and trusting always in your love and care as I try to learn more about your creation (including myself).

DAY 6

THE CASE FOR COMPASSION

*But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious,
Longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth.*

PSALM 86:15 NKJV



Our culture seems to be deeply conflicted about compassion. Many give lip service to this virtue but also distrust it, assuming that compassion is “soft” or weak or just impractical. Don’t we need to get tough in the face of problems, to whip them into shape? Don’t we have to stop coddling those who struggle? Doesn’t compassion get in the way of real change and improvement?

Even if we don’t consciously believe that, it’s hard to escape the message. And our distrust of compassion translates into how we treat ourselves too. When we encounter something we don’t like about ourselves—an emotional, attitude, behavior, or desire—we assume we need to get tough with it. Whip that puppy into shape. No more coddling. Time to get *serious*.

But that’s a serious misunderstanding of how people really change for the better. The boot-camp approach to self-improvement may yield short-term results, but what happens in the long run may be the very opposite of what is intended. So many undesirable aspects of our souls develop

out of painful wounds, humiliating experiences, and fearful trauma. How can adding *more* trauma to the mix be helpful?

We need to get it through our heads (and our hearts) that compassion is not the same as weakness. In fact, compassion is one of God's most powerful attributes. Throughout the Bible, in verse after verse, we read that God is full of compassion and gracious and patient and merciful. Why would we think that it's weak to be like God?

More important, if we are Christians, we have that compassionate and gracious and patient and merciful God living inside of us, in the center of our souls—in the form of the Holy Spirit. When we follow his lead, we are empowered to treat ourselves with deep compassion and mercy. That's not to say we abandon self-discipline or let problems go unaddressed. No one is getting away with anything! Instead, we are following God's lead, opening space for real healing to take place. The more that happens, the more our compassion muscles will develop—and we'll grow more and more into the image of our compassionate, merciful God.

Dear Lord,

you are the source of all compassion. Help me get it through my head that compassion grows from strength, not weakness. Thank you for your graciousness toward me. And empower me, through your Spirit, to extend that grace to myself as well so that I can be healed and show your grace and compassion to others.

DAY 7

A BAPTIZED IMAGINATION

*Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power
at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.*

EPHESIANS 3:20 NLT



Do you think of yourself as an imaginative person? Do you revel in imaginative possibilities and enjoy thinking of word pictures, stories, analogies, and even fantasy? Or do you find yourself a little suspicious of such thinking? A lot will depend on how you were raised and also on your unique personality and gifts. Everyone is different, and God has given each of us different tools with which to comprehend him, ourselves, and our world. Imagination is one of those. It's not the only path to understanding, but it can be very useful when used in a context of prayer and obedience. C.S. Lewis describe this faculty as the 'baptized' imagination.

Baptized imagination is not just spinning tales—although it could include that. It is using our God-given creativity to enrich our understanding or to make new connections to spiritual reality. God is bigger and more wonderful than we can possibly understand, and baptized imagination can help us draw nearer to him and know him better.

What are some uses for your baptized imagination? In the context of *Boundaries for Your Soul*, Cook and Miller recommend visualizing the various parts of the soul. (This was done effectively, though not in a Christian context, in the Pixar movie, *Inside Out*.) But there are many other possibilities for using imagination to draw closer to truth.

Try following in Jesus' imaginative footsteps and devising alternative metaphors for spiritual realities. Jesus spoke of sheep, vineyards, bridegrooms, lamps, and more. What images might convey the same realities to a different culture? Try writing a parable or creating a painting. Put one of the psalms to music. Even if you don't think of yourself as creative, try reading a biblical paraphrase or a biblical novel as a way of stimulating your imagination. Do it prayerfully, listening for the Spirit's guidance and correction. But don't be afraid or hesitant. Your imagination is a gift of God. He put it in you to be used.

Dear Lord,

*thank you for the magnificent gift of imagination. Show me how to use mine for your glory.
Broaden my awareness of all the rich possibilities that can grow inside and around your truth.*

DAY 8

ENEMIES WITHIN

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor” and hate your enemy.

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

MATTHEW 5:43-45 NLT



Is there something about yourself that you dislike—or even hate? It might be external—short legs, a big nose, slow metabolism, a physical illness or limitation. Or it might be internal—a quick temper, a controlling temperament, or feelings of shame because of something that happened to you in the past. Whatever it is, it may well feel like an enemy, and you wish it would just go away!

But what did Jesus say about our enemies? He told us to love them. To do good to them. To pray for them. Could that possibly apply not only to external enemies, but also to the parts of us that cause us pain and embarrassment and frustration? And if it does, *how* can we show these “enemies” love and compassion and hospitality?

- *We can step back a little and try to understand them*—to look beyond the trouble they’re causing us and consider why they bother us so much and what purpose they may have in our lives.
- *We can treat them with compassion*, resisting our urge to reflexively hide them or rip them out by the roots. (Doing that usually causes more problems in the long run.)

- We can remind ourselves that the God who loves us loves all of us, including the parts of ourselves that we can't stand.
- *We can set appropriate boundaries when necessary.* Loving doesn't mean saying yes to everything and letting our enemies do whatever they want.
- *We can resist using our "enemies" as excuses* for disobeying God or treating other people badly.
- *We can rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit* to help us change what we need to about ourselves.
- *We can make peace when possible* with what we can't or should not change. We might even be able to turn our internal enemies into friends and allies.
- *But we can also remember that our loving Shepherd "spreads a table before us" in the presence of our enemies*—which means we can have a full, rich, blessed life even before we get it all sorted out.

Dear Jesus,

you are the Prince of Peace. Help me take that seriously, even when it comes to the aspects of myself that I hate. Teach me to love all my enemies, even those that are part of me.

DAY 9

BLAME GAME

The Lord God asked, “Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?” The man replied, “It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.” Then the LORD God asked the woman, “What have you done?” “The serpent deceived me,” she replied. “That’s why I ate it.”

GENESIS 3:11-13



The story is as old as time.

God says, “Don’t eat from the tree.” The man and the woman eat from the tree. God asks, “What did you do?” And then the blaming starts. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the snake. And before they know it, they’re out in the cold, cruel world.

And it’s still like that today. When conflicts arise, the natural human response is to become reactive and blame someone else for the problem. Then, of course, the other person becomes reactive . . . and nothing gets settled. The blame game almost never results in anyone winning!

Jesus addressed this tendency to blame others directly. In his Sermon on the Mount, he challenged the crowd to work on their own personal growth instead of playing the blame game. “First take the plank out of your own eye,” he counseled, “and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:5).

Jesus wanted his listener's to learn to look into their own souls. That's good advice for us today when conflict arises with other people or within ourselves. Instead of lashing out when we feel angry or hurt, we can take a minute to consider what else is going on inside us and consider ways of offering the wounded part the care and attention it needs. We can practice noticing the cues and listening to our pain—even if the other person really is partially at fault.

Conflict doesn't always have to trigger the blame game. Instead, it can offer opportunities for personal and relational growth—if we choose. As Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt write, "Conflict is growth trying to happen."

Dear Father,

I'm as prone to blaming others as Adam or Eve were. It just comes naturally to point out someone else's speck while ignoring my own plank. Grant me the strength and the wisdom to take that blaming impulse as a sign that it's time to take a look inside and change me.

DAY 10

SUFFER (ONLY) WHAT YOU HAVE TO SUFFER

*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.
In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*

JOHN 16:33



Problems are a given in this world. We will all experience a full range of emotions, including some that make us acutely uncomfortable. We'll get angry. We'll experience fear and envy and shame. We'll be sad and carry a burden of grief. And suffering is a given—there's just no way around it.

There *is* a way, however, to live peacefully, joyfully, and productively. That's one reason God sent Jesus—to show us how to do that. And that's why he gave us the Holy Spirit, to comfort us and guide us minute to minute. Because of God's great mercy, we have within us everything we need to live fully right in the midst of our inevitable suffering.

But not all of our suffering is inevitable! Too often, out of selfishness and sin or simply cluelessness, we make trouble for ourselves. We hide our hurts instead of dealing with them. We pull in on ourselves and play the victim. We hang on to resentment and bitterness that only compound our

suffering. And we insist on carrying our heavy burden of difficulty all by ourselves instead of turning to God for help.

That's why Alison Cook and Kimberly Miller advise, "Suffer what you have to suffer, but don't suffer what you don't need to suffer." It's a bit of a tongue twister, but the wisdom is sound. Instead of borrowing trouble and making life harder than it needs to be, we can take a look inside and make some changes. We can do our best (with help) to resolve past issues and put our overwhelming feelings in their proper place. Most important, we can swap burdens with the One who promises, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Dear Lord,

*sometimes life just hurts. But you know that—you said it would be this way.
But you also promised that you have overcome it all and that you are with me always.
Thank you! Teach me how to live in such a way that I suffer only what is necessary
and learn how to find joy and lightness even in the midst of all the trouble.*

DAY 11

ON BEHALF OF

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

EPHESIANS 4:41-42 NLT



Most of us want to be loving people. We want to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving, just as the Bible tells us to. Does anyone really want to be an angry, greedy, envious, defensive kind of person?

The problem is, we have all these feelings. We get hurt, anger rushes through us. We're threatened, and fear makes us defensive. We feel envy, and kindness doesn't feel like an option. Then we feel guilty, and that just makes things worse. We may not be proud of our negative feelings, but we can't just unfeel them, can we? So what do we do?

One possibility is to ignore the feelings, to push them down and pretend they don't exist. We can act *as if* we're loving and kind and compassionate. And sometimes that works, at least for awhile. We may even *feel* more loving. But all too often, our faking is less successful than we'd hoped. Other people sense our insincerity. And the uncomfortable feelings we've pushed down are likely to emerge in another form—physical symptoms, emotional hang-ups, or destructive behaviors.

So why not just let it out? That's another possibility. Yell and scream, snark and snipe, turn our backs, or even punch and kick. This tactic avoids the discomfort of hiding or faking, but it doesn't do our relationships any favors or help us grow or do much to advance the kingdom of God. And though we may feel better in the moment, we'll probably feel worse later.

There's another alternative. It takes a little practice and a little work, but it offers a better way to be kind but honest, fearful but connected, envious but supportive, respectful yet commanding respect. Instead of hiding our feelings or acting out of them, we can learn to act *on behalf of* our feelings. Instead of yelling at someone or avoiding them or cutting them down, we respectfully communicate what we're feeling and ask for what we need. Nine times out of ten, everyone ends up feeling better—including us.

There's a learning curve attached to this tactic, though. We must learn to back off a little—to focus on uncomfortable feelings, befriend them, and bring them to Jesus. Only then will we find the freedom to advocate on behalf of these powerful parts of ourselves so we can honestly live out the Bible's mandate for kindness and forgiveness.

Lord,

you know I want to be like you. I know you want that too. Give me the courage and the insight to learn new ways of responding to the feelings within me and new ways of relating to others in kindness and love. Give me patience as I work to learn this new way of responding.