

**Title: Souls with Boundaries: Limits and Liberties**

**Biblical Text: Song of Songs 7**

**Teaching Series: Whom My Soul Loves**

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## **Song of Songs 7**

*How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses. How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine. / It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth. I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields and lodge in the villages; let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love. The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and beside our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.*

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One of the most fundamental beliefs of our cultural moment is: *I am my own and I belong to myself*. That's what Professor Alan Noble has observed. I think he's right. How we determine our identity, meaning, and value primarily comes down to our desires. Noble explains that "*in the modern world, meaning cannot be imposed upon us from an outside source. Instead, our experience of life is something we impose meaning upon*" (*You Are Not Your Own*, 27). While we might submit to most civil laws, observe national holidays, and comply with many social norms, determining what is most important is a matter of personal autonomy and even human liberty.

Yet, there's something hazardous about this ethic of *radical autonomy*. And I think we all know it. At Dartmouth's 2015 commencement, author David Brooks played on this instinct. He said commencement speakers are "*supposed to give you a few minutes of completely garbage advice: Listen to your inner voice. Be true to yourself. Follow your passion. Your future is limitless.*" In his fifties, Brooks quipped, "*my generation gives you a mountain of debt; then we give you career-derailing guidelines that will prevent you from ever paying it off.*" *What's Brooks getting at?* Our modern ethic is unlivable in the real world. Our idealism and humanistic take fall flat against the cold hard facts of student loans, friendship, social morality, and death.

We thrive in a shared story and social interconnectedness.

*We're not our own.*

*We belong together.*

However, many in positions of power have exploited our dependency to control and manipulate. This is especially true within the Church. Historically, we've capitalized on the importance of rules and regulations to scare members into *radical religious compliance*. We've disregarded human autonomy and dignity. For instance, since the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church has preached indulgences. Though it's gone through many iterations, indulgences are financial payments to elicit divine favors of charity, healing, and even for the easement of punishment of dead relatives. The modern evangelical Church uses similar fear tactics—compelling people to behave a certain way around sex, alcohol, education, and authority figures.

*What should we do with all this? Radical autonomy seems just as unsatisfying as radical religious compliance. Am I my own? Do I belong to others? If so, to what degree? One way the Bible speaks of this tension is through the gift and theme of marriage. Today, as we continue through the Song of Songs, we'll see the culmination of the liberties and limits of their relationship. While they're coming and going, there's belonging. There are liberating boundaries. Boundaries create meaning, identity, and value. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about boundaries. I want to talk about how the limits and liberties of boundaries are God's gracious design for our flourishing.*

- The *design* of boundaries.
- The *distortion* of boundaries.
- The *healing* of boundaries.

[Pray]

## **Movement 1: The Design of Boundaries (vv.1-9a,9b-10, Genesis 1:27,29-30; 2:8,16-17)**

Song of Songs is a poem. We should continue to keep this in mind. While poems don't deliver principles in doctrinal form, they do reveal truth. Sometimes, we must zoom out and see the whole picture. As we arrive at Chapter 7 ... it's good to do just that.

There's been seeking and finding. There's been shame and fear. There's been limits and waiting. But now ... the search is over. The shame is gone. There's liberty and joy. In his most descriptive sonnet, the man speaks again about his wife's body and how she makes him feel. *Read Song of Songs 7:1-9a ... **How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your***

*flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses. How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine. It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth.*

The woman is dancing (see 6:13). That's why the man describes her from her feet upward. He lists at least thirteen features that bring him delight. As before, this isn't objectification. This isn't, as we've explored, detaching her body from her soul. It's enjoyment.

We know this because the woman reciprocates with delight. *Read Song of Songs 7:9b-10 ... It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth. I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me.* For the third time, the woman speaks about belonging at the soul level. They've not just given their bodies to one another; they've given themselves. Limits have given way to liberties. Abiding by certain boundaries has welcomed them into a new set of boundaries. While there have been limits and waiting, it's been for their good.

That's the *design* of boundaries. Boundaries are designed for our good.

Specifically, boundaries bring us definition, safety, and flourishing. We've seen this since the very beginning.

The poetry of the creation narrative crystallizes this reality. When God makes everything, he makes everything with restrictions and freedoms. The story is

organized within the boundaries of six days, and God creates the contexts of the heavens, the sky, the waters, and the earth on days 2 and 3 (see Genesis 1:6-10). Then, on days 3, 4, and 5, he fills those environments with life. All the life that fills these forms finds definition, safety, and flourishing in those boundaries (see Genesis 1:11-23). Birds thrive in the sky but die in the water. Fish thrive in the water but die outside of it. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that when God created Adam and Eve, he gave them liberties and limits, too. He places them within certain boundaries for their own good.

We'll hang out in Genesis a bit this morning, so please meet me there. Genesis 1:27.

- God gives physical boundaries. God creates people with bodies (a defining boundary). He also made us male and female (giving further definition to our nature). *Read Genesis 1:27 ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.* Adam is made from the dust. Eve is made from Adam's rib. They're created, we're created ... physical creatures. Our flesh gives us a definition, knowing where we end and someone else begins.
- God sets environmental boundaries. He put them in a garden. *Read Genesis 2:8 ... And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.* The Garden was Adam and Eve's home. It had four rivers and plentiful vegetation. *Read Genesis 1:29-30 ...*

*And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.* They had everything they needed in their home to be safe and flourish. To this day, where we're born and raised and wherever we call home gives us significant meaning.

- God gives relational boundaries. While the couple shared what's called "the creation mandate" *to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and have dominion ...* they're also tasked with distinct relational limits and liberties with each other and with God (see Genesis 1:28). As we looked at a couple weeks ago, Eve was Adam's *helper* (or *ezer* in Hebrew). Author Kathy Keller explains that *"To 'help' someone ... is to make up what is lacking in him with your strength"* (*Meaning of Marriage*, 173). She says that male and female *"are like two pieces of a puzzle that fit together because they are not exactly alike nor randomly different, but they are differentiated such that together they can create a complete whole"* (174). Their restrictions, when embraced in concert, bring freedom and flourishing.
- God gives moral boundaries. While the Garden of Eden was their home, that didn't mean they could do with it whatever they pleased. They were cultivators, not creators, stewards, not owners. God told them, ***Read Genesis***

2:16-17 ... ***“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*** This is a moral boundary. Submitting to God’s Word brings life. They wouldn't die.

Some of us may object to this notion of boundaries. Particular boundaries around gender and morality. *Why give any restrictions at all? What makes the boundaries laid out in the Christian Scriptures any more noble than those of another culture or religion? Well, restrictions aren’t in themselves virtuous. Only the right ones are.* In his book *The Reason for God*, pastor Tim Keller addresses this idea in a chapter that responds to the claim that Christianity is like a straitjacket. He writes, ***“constraints ... liberate us only when they fit with the reality of our nature and capacities. ... freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions”*** (46). Like the fish of the sea and the birds of the air that God made to live exclusively in the sea and air, respectively, we’ll be crushed if we don't surrender to our own liberating boundaries.

One way to determine their goodness is by observing what happens when these boundaries are broken or distorted. That's where we turn next.



## **Movement 2: The Distortion of Boundaries (2:7, Ecclesiastes 8:5, Genesis 3:1,3, Matthew 23:23, Galatians 5:1)**

Remember, the bride in the Song continues to warn her girlfriends to, *Read Song of Songs 2:7 ... not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.* (She does so in 3:5 and 8:4, too). She's inviting them to find the goodness of the right boundary. In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon says, *Read Ecclesiastes 8:5 ... Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.* The Proverbs constantly warn us about doing what is "*wise in your own eyes*" (see Proverbs 3:7, 12:15, 26:5,12, 28:11). Appropriate boundaries are *designed* for our good.

But we've *distorted* good boundaries. Specifically, we've broken the boundaries laid out in the creation narrative. Each begins with the distortion of God's voice and character. Every *distortion* starts here. When the serpent slithers along the Garden bed, he questions God's Word. *Read Genesis 3:1 ... "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"* The evil one questions God's Word. And there's a vast difference between asking God a question and questioning God. The first is done out of humility and curiosity, perhaps suffering. The second is hubris and manipulation.

The snake is the modern person who says *I am my own* and *I belong to myself*. No person or higher power can impose physical, moral, or relational restrictions on me. The modern *distortion* is to question limits.

- We hate limits, *don't we?* Limits spoil true freedom. Our story as a nation is grounded in the idea of liberation. We freed ourselves from the British government's tyranny to build a life and define democracy and society for ourselves. That national ethos has traveled into our souls. Brené Brown demonstrates this in her book *Braving the Wilderness*. "***True belonging***," she writes, "***is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world***" (40). Many of us suppose that a life without the tyranny of outside meaning or universal meaning is the only truly free life. *Only when I define myself for myself am I my authentic self*.
- But remember, limits aren't evil. It's the wrong limits we should avoid. The question shouldn't be, *who is giving me these limits, or do I like these boundaries?* Instead, we should ask, *will these restrictions lead to appropriate identity, safety, and flourishing?* You see, the notion of what we're calling *radical autonomy* is a worldview of extreme privilege. Not only does this ***distortion*** put too much pressure on the individual to know and define themselves, but it also puts too much pressure on the poor to liberate themselves. Professor Susan Selner-Wright explains, "***the drive to achieve a utopia populated by radically autonomous individuals whose***

*choices are simply unconstrained is on a collision course with reality, and the first to die in the train wreck ... are the poorest of the poor"* (*Disability Debunks the Late Modern Myth of Radical Autonomy*, November 16, 2017). If *I am my own and belong to myself*, only the powerful are liberated, which is an illusion. In the late 1960s, activist Fannie Lou Hammer challenged some of the core tenets of the women's liberation movement. At the founding meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus in D.C., Hamer famously said, "*Nobody's free until everybody is free*" (July 10, 1971).

That's the first *distortion*. A disregard for appropriate limits places destructive limits on us and others.

Now, if the snake is the modern person, Eve is the moralistic person. Satan's question leads Eve to distort God's voice, too. Eve responds, *Read Genesis 3:3 ... God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'* ” Now, God never said *don't touch it* (see Genesis 2:17). He just said *don't eat it*. In other words, Eve made his words sound more limiting and constricting than they were. She's like a person who says, *yes, God sets boundaries, laws, and rules, and they are really holy. So holy that we don't even touch what he tells us not to eat, just to be safe.* The moral distortion is to question liberty.

- This led the Pharisees, a devout sect of Jewish scholars, to invent extra laws. In the Old Testament, there are 613 laws. However, the Pharisees "built a

fence" around the Torah. They added laws that would prevent breaking the law and keep them from even getting close. Popularly, these are called "fence laws." While at first blush, these might seem super-righteous, upon further consideration, they're legalistic and harmful. Jesus himself condemned this distortion. *Read Matthew 23:23 ... "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others."* Like Eve, the Pharisees added to God's Word. And when we add to God's boundaries, we miss the freedom he intends us to enjoy.

- This shows up in a lot of destructive ways in the Church today. We still build fences. Because of God's heart for sexual morality, some have made fences around the female body. Perhaps most infamously, something called *the Billy Graham Rule*. To avoid even the appearance of sexual impropriety, the world-renowned evangelist said he would not "*travel, meet or eat alone with a woman other than my wife*" (*What's 'the Billy Graham Rule'?*, July 23, 2019). While his motivation may have been pure, it nevertheless has done harm. It casts women as a sexual threat and moral freedom as dangerous. We've enacted the same inflexibility in recent history with spoken and unspoken restrictions about abortion, divorce, sexual attraction, dating, drinking, dancing, music, and much more. We may not think we're adding to God's Word, but we're nevertheless distorting God's gift of freedom. The Apostle Paul said it this way, *Read Galatians 5:1 ... "For*

*freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."* The yoke of slavery he's talking about is unnecessary laws. Like circumcision.

That's the second *distortion*. A disregard for liberty also does damage.

Now, you may wonder which distortion you're susceptible to. It's a good thing to think about. Honestly, I think in some moments and situations, we're more secular and, other times, more religious in our relationship with boundaries. Following Jesus in a city like Chicago means we likely oscillate between extremes. What's more critical for us is to see how each of these distortions brings devastation ...

If you know the story, you know Adam and Even eat (and touch) the forbidden fruit. So they go along with the serpent's hot take on liberty and betray their own made-up moral boundaries. As a result, humanity betrays the *design* of every good boundary God made. Destruction ensues. Their physical boundaries are broken, and they cover their bodies in shame (3:7). Their environmental boundaries are broken, and they leave their home, the Garden (3:23). Their relational boundaries are broken; she is opposed to him, and he is against her (3:16). Their moral boundaries are broken, they're separated from God in spiritual death (3:22).

You see, because of sinful *distortions* of God's good boundaries, humanity is no longer known, safe, and flourishing. We need *healing*.

## **Movement 3: The Healing of Boundaries (vv.11-13, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Matthew 11:28-30)**

Back in the Song of Songs, the couple points us to the one thing that harmonizes the goodness of limits and liberties, highlighting our *healing*. *Read Song of Songs 7:11-13 ... Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields and lodge in the villages; let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love. The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and beside our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.* After his ravishing description of his bride and after she confesses her holistic devotion to her groom, they go back to a garden—a *blossoming* garden. In the Song, the country in general and the garden in particular are the places of lovemaking. She says, literally, "*there I will give you my lovemaking ... which I have laid up for you.*" The fullest expressions of love have been laid up ... restricted for the beloved. For their knowing, safety, and flourishing.

That's the ultimate and *healing* boundary.

It's love.

Her love was reserved for the boundaries of their marriage. And it's those same constrictions that bring them such freedom in their union. Love is the ultimate good boundary. Love, in keeping with our nature, is both freeing and restrictive.

Tim Keller again ... "*We only become ourselves in love, and yet healthy love relationships involve mutual, unselfish service, and a mutual loss of independence*" (48). As with every passage in the Song, the couple's love points us to the love of God. After all, it's not marital love that ultimately liberates and binds us ... it's divine love.

In Matthew's gospel account, Jesus invites those wearied by this world's oppressive freedoms and powerless rules to find a new boundary in his love. *Read Matthew 11:28-30 ... Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" Life with God isn't freedom from restrictions. Nor is it a new set of laws. Notice the tension. Life with God is easy and light, but it's a yoke and burden. We lay down crushing burdens. We take up liberating boundaries, Christ's love.

That's our *healing*. Jesus' love tears down artificial walls of religion. Jesus' love rebuilds good boundaries torn down in pride. Jesus' love frees us and restricts us.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way: *Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 ... For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.* Paul says we're controlled or seized or compelled by Christ's love. We are not our own. We

belong to Christ. But we don't lose our identity in him. We find it. Why? Because Christ bound himself to us in love. He didn't live for himself. He came for us. He died for us. He drew near us. The unlimited God became a limited human being so that we who were bound in death and sin could be freed and bound to him.

You see, God's love is the only boundary fitting for our design because his love *heals* the distortions of our brokenness.

- His love restores our physical boundaries. Jesus' resurrection liberates our bodies from death (see Romans 8:11).
- His love restores our environmental boundaries. In the age to come, Jesus will bring heaven and earth together, and we'll live in a city. In the middle of the city is a garden (see Revelation 22:1-5).
- His love restores our relational boundaries. Jesus tears down the dividing walls of hostility between men and women, between races and political parties, between the religious and the secular (see Ephesians 2:14).
- His love restores our moral boundaries. When humans failed the test of the Garden and ate the forbidden fruit, Christ passed the test in the Garden and said to his Father, not my will but yours be done (see Luke 22:42).



In the liberating boundaries of God's love ...

We're known.

We're safe.

We flourish.