

Pastors and the Gift of Limits

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I spent a large part of my years as a senior pastor trying to be someone I was not. I attended conferences and read books about growing a larger, healthier, more powerful church. If only I would be and do as their leaders, then our church would be equally large and prosperous.

The problem was that God has not given me the abilities and capacities He had given those other leaders. I brought other strengths to the task of leading a local church. My unwillingness to accept the reality of my God-given limits led me down paths that were never intended by God.

As a result, pastoring slowly grew into a weight that I longed to shed. For years, I attempted to live out a script for my life that was not mine. While the script needed a character, I was the wrong person auditioning for the part.

God has given me two or three, perhaps five talents. He did not give me eight or ten. My parents told me I could be anything I wanted in life—a doctor, musician, professor, writer, a professional athlete. I tried to play basketball like Michael Jordan in high school. It didn't work. We lost most of our games.

Yet I didn't get the message.

I could not do anything I wanted. Yes, I had gifts and potentials. But I also had limits given to me by God as a gift.

Jesus, Limits and Spiritual Warfare

As far as we know, Jesus did not any miracles the first thirty years of his life. He was a faithful son, employee, and participant in his community and synagogue. He apparently joyfully embraced the limits give him by his Father in heaven.

He was affirmed by God the Father, "You are my Son whom I love. I am deeply pleased with you," before He began his public ministry that would lead him to his apparent defeat at the cross.

Immediately he was thrust into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The essence of the temptation was to transgress or cross over the limits God had placed around him.

This continues to be a central spiritual warfare issue for most of us who are actively seeking to do God's work with our lives.

He was to learn obedience though what He suffered (Heb. 5:7). That included setting limits and watching needs remain unmet.

The devil begins, “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread” (Matt. 4:3). He has not eaten for forty days. It was as if Satan said, “Do something. If you don’t eat you will die and nobody will experience salvation. You have needs and wants not being met by God. How can you be the Son of God and have so many problems? You’re a loser.”

Jesus accepts the gift of limits and the rocks remain rocks. No manna from heaven appears although it was in his power to do so.

In the second temptation, Satan takes Jesus to highest point in the city and invites Him to jump off, demonstrating to the multitudes that God is really with Him. “Let the people see you. Let them see you have something. They think you’re nothing, a nobody.” He must make a decision to wait on God for his timing.

Jesus accepts God’s limits and walks down the temple steps and there is no miracle. He doesn’t do anything sensational to prove himself to anyone.

The third temptation, I believe, is very close to home for us serving in leadership. Jesus is taken to a high mountain and shown all the earth, the crowds and brilliance of Athens, the glory of Rome, the treasures of Egypt, all Jerusalem, and magnificent Corinth, along with all the kingdoms of this world. If Jesus would simply cross this limit and bow to Satan for only a moment (then he can repent), the world would be saved, and millions of people would be helped *now*.

If Jesus would simply skip over the God given limit of suffering and the cross, the work of God would happen so much more quickly! The frightening truth is we can sometimes pass through our God-given limits and end up doing God’s work without God!

I know.

Jesus accepts God’s limits and walks back down to the wilderness and the cross.

I believe it is possible to build a church or ministry to thousands of people and find out to your surprise that God never asked YOU to do that.

I can remember the day when I pictured myself, after years of exhausting labor, saying to God on the day of judgment: “Lord. Here is my gift back to you for your great salvation – a large, thriving church of thousands”. The only problem was his clear response: “Pete I never asked YOU to do that. That belonged to Pastor Joe in the next town. You were to build a smaller, church focused on the quality issues I had placed on your heart, not compete with other family members!”

Jesus’ Limits Amidst Enormous Needs

Jesus did not heal every sick and demonized person in the hospital. He did not build a great church in Capernaum when he was begged to remain in that city (Mark 1:29-45). He refused to let certain people follow him such as the Gadarene demonic who had been delivered. He prayed all night and chose only twelve to be closest to him (Luke 6:12-18).

Jesus did not go in person to meet the needs of everyone in Europe, Africa, Asia or the Americas. Yet he prayed at the end of his life, “I have completed the work you have given me to do.” (John 17:4).

Why then do I always feel like there is too little time and too much to do? Why does my life have so little margin or flexibility? Why do I never feel “finished” meeting needs? I was spending time in prayer and the Word. I worked on my priorities and time management. I attended countless seminars to help me manage and delegate more effectively. What was the problem?

I did not understand the powerful principle of limits as a gift from the hand of God.

My lack of understanding how boundaries and limits applied to serving Christ almost caused us to leave the pastorate. I know many others who started out enthusiastically serving others, but later quit because they didn't discern the centrality of limits to spiritual leadership.

Limits as Our Friend

While our culture resists the idea of limits, it is critical we embrace them. They are like a fenced in yard that protects young children. They are the hands of a friend, keeping us grounded so that we don't hurt others, God's work, or ourselves.

Parker Palmer tells the story about when he was asked to be president of a college. Initially he was very excited and gathered a group of trusted friends together to help him discern if it was God's will. About halfway through the evening, someone asked, “What would you like about being president?” He answered, “Well, I wouldn't like having to give up my writing and teaching.... I would not like the politics of the presidency, never knowing who your real friends are... I would not like....”

The person who asked the question repeated one more time the question what he would like most about being president. Palmer fumbled, “I would not like giving up my summer vacations. I would not like having to wear a suit and tie all the time.... I would not like....”

Finally he “gave the only honest answer he possessed,” “I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word *president* under it”¹. He finally realized for him to take that position would be a

disaster for himself and for the college. He withdrew his name from consideration.

Palmer quotes the old Hasidic tale that points out our tendency to want to live out someone else's life that is not our own, and the "ultimate importance of becoming one's self." Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"ⁱⁱ The true vocation for every human being is, as Kierkegaard said, "the will be oneself"ⁱⁱⁱ

It is a myth that I can be anything I desire. There are some roles where I do well and flourish. In others, I wither and die. For example, I would not be a good CEO. Tough poise is needed in the fast-paced, rough and tumble of that position. I need a lot of time for reflection and contemplation. I would not be a good lawyer or CPA. Both those kinds of work require a keen mind and attention to detail. I am more of an artist, enjoying creating and envisioning new possibilities.

How Do I Discern My Limitations?

Look at your personality. Do you get more energy from being with people (extrovert) or from doing tasks (introvert)? Are you more spontaneous and creative, or controlled and orderly.

Your season of life is also a God-given limit. Ecclesiastes teaches us there is a time or season for everything under heaven: There is a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to be silent and a time to speak (Eccl. 3:1-8). It is critical we do prayerfully discern God's season for your church and journey with Christ.

Your life situation is also a limit. When we age physically, we find our bodies cannot do what they used to. When we are young and without much life experience, certain doors may remain closed to us. If we have a physical or emotional disability or sickness, we may find this keeps us from going down a path we may have planned.

Your emotional, physical and intellectual capacities are also a God-given gift. I have a large capacity for people and complexity in my work. At the same time, if I work all day with people for more than two days consecutively, I find myself lethargic and depressed. I need time to read, pray and reflect. I have a pastor friend who is able to work six days a week with ease. God bless him, but I can't do likewise physically, emotionally and spiritually.

It is so freeing as a leader for me to utter the words, "I can't." When we don't respect God's limits in our lives, we will often find ourselves overextended, stressed and exhausted.

Scars and wounds from our families we grew up in are also God given limits and gifts. The limits I inherit from my family turn out to be gifts once I embrace them. I find myself more dependent on God, more sensitive and less judgmental of others. I love others better as I encourage them to joyfully live within their God-given limits.

Faithful to Your True Self

I want to ask this question, “Is how I am living my life fit my God-given nature?” “Does it fit my true self (to use Thomas Merton’s terminology in *Seeds of Contemplation*^{iv})? Am I being faithful to my God-given talents, my unique story, my weaknesses? Maturity in life is when someone is living joyfully within his or her God-given limits.

I find most of us resent limits- in ourselves and in others. We expect far too much from each other and ourselves, and often live frustrated and angry. Much of burnout is a result of giving what we do not possess.

Henri Nouwen summarizes our challenge well:

No two lives are the same. We often compare our lives with those of others, trying to decide whether we are better or worse off, but such comparisons do not help us much. We have to live our life, not someone else’s. We have to hold our own cup. We have to dare to say: “this is my life, the life that is given to me, and it is this life that I have to live, as well as I can. My life is unique. Nobody else will ever live it. I have my own history, my own family, my own body, my own character, my own friends, my own way of thinking, speaking, and acting – yes, I have my own life to live. No one else has the same challenge. I am alone, because I am unique. Many people can help me live my life, but after all is said and done, I have to make my own choices about how to live.”^v

Understanding the gift of limits enables us to affirm self-care. It is one of the great challenges for those who serve others. As Parker Palmer says, “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”

God Working Through Our Limitations

God, at times, will take us beyond our limitations in supernatural ways:

- Sarah was ninety and Abraham “as good as dead” (Rom. 4:19). Yet God made them a mother and father to nations.
- Elijah and Jeremiah were prone to bouts of depression and yet were mightily used by God.

- Moses was retired and eighty years old when God set him on a task that required the physical and emotional stamina of a forty-year old. He also had a major speech impediment that, in his opinion, disqualified him. God saw it differently.

A Central Spiritual Warfare Struggle for Pastors

Nonetheless, I am convinced that the issue of embracing our God-sent limits is at the core our calling to be and to serve as spiritual leaders in a frantic evangelical culture that expects everything “more, bigger and faster”.

Perhaps the core is the issue for us as pastors and leaders is a quiet trust in God’s goodness and sovereignty. King David accepted God’s “no” to build a great temple with a humility and brokenness (2 Sam. 7). I can’t say I have always responded in like fashion.

Yet I am slowly learning. So are many other emerging leaders in God’s church. My prayer is that we create a leadership culture where we remind each other of the biblical teachings on leadership and limits.

And who knows? We may find a new swelling of workers desiring to serve in spiritual leadership in God’s church (1 Tim.3:1) who, up to now, have avoided our ranks.

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ⁱ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 44-46.

ⁱⁱ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 251.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Ave Maria Press, 1996), 28.

^{iv} Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New Directions, 1987).

^v Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Ave Maria Press, 1996), 28.