

Part 4: Good Limits

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One 20th Century philosopher once said: "Welcome to your life. There's no turning back. Even while we sleep we find you acting on your best behavior. Turn your back on mother nature. Everybody wants to rule the world...All for freedom and for pleasure, nothing ever lasts forever. Everybody wants to rule the world."

If you know that song--I'm sorry it's now stuck in your heard. There's nothing I can do about that. But it's not an awareness of this idea in our heads that's the problem—it's how unaware we are of the places where this idea is in our hearts. And to help with that we have God's word.

That song, titled "Everybody Wants to Rule the World," embodies a common problem and solution. If we want to be free—we've got to break our natural limits. The only thing that holds us back is the limits we choose to accept whether those are the limits of nature—or the limits imposed by someone else's rule.

The life of freedom we want is a fight for what or whose rule matters. If we can't exert our own rule and power—then at least we hope that some politician or influential figure can represent our interests in our place.

In other words, we are fine with rules as long as those rules seem to be for us—but we are always against rules when those rules seem to be limiting us. Today we are more aware of limits than ever—and we seem to be breaking them faster than ever: unlimited data, unlimited media, unlimited relationships, unlimited same day shipping, cards with no spending limit, all for freedom, all for pleasure.

We realize that there's a connection between the rules we hate and the world we want. The question is, how do we find the life we want when despite our language—we all find ourselves limited.

Sleep, hunger, death—all forces which we try to avoid—but which seem inevitable. And maybe, the passage we just read was the record scratch that reminded us of the burden of this. While the fall doesn't happen till chapter 3, I wonder how many of us see the real problem introduced in Genesis 2 when we read the words, "And God commanded the man."

Maybe, in that moment, the battle was lost and paradise ruined by rules and limits. I wonder if this is true even for those inside of Christianity. We want God, we want glory, we want grace—but we don't want his rules. Maybe they're necessary, but if we were honest, we wish we could live without them.

Growing up in the church—I obeyed God's rules well. I didn't do the bad stuff. And I did the good things a good Christian boy was supposed to do. However, while I knew such obedience might get me into heaven—it seemed like my life was hell. An endless series of rules, limits and "no's" held me back from the life I could have had. I remember thinking that it was an uphill battle for my gravestone to at least read: "Tyler managed to have a joyful life despite being a Christian."

But here's where we must remember that Genesis 2 is paradise. God's command and our limits didn't spoil paradise—they protected it. They didn't limit us—they freed us. Humanity's joy isn't outside of our limits—but inside of them. And that's what we will focus on this morning.

The title of our sermon this morning is "Good Limits." And our main idea is this: **"Our limits are the grace of an unlimited God."** We will see this in three ways: limited man and an **Unlimited God**, the **Unlimited Blessing**, and the promise of **Unlimited Life**.

To begin let's read **Genesis 2:15-16**, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,"

I'm sure at some point all of us have said in anger or frustration, "You're not the boss of me!" That makes sense because at any time, who is in charge might be different. But notice how the Bible doesn't present God with limited authority. There's not a boss at work, a boss at home and a boss at school.

When God gives a command to his creation it is because this God who existed in eternity and who brings creation to light in a word—is the boss.

This is our first point: **Limited Man and an Unlimited God**.

What we shouldn't miss here is that all of creation has been obeying the word of God. But it is not until the creation of man that God speaks a command to his creation.

Birds do what they do by nature. The skies do what they do by nature. And all of that is according to God's command. But God didn't create man to passively and unconsciously live life by proper action—but also with proper affection.

God wants us to know that we are created by him, created to enjoy him, and created to obey him. We were made not merely to work inside of this reality—but to know it. Our relationship to this command giving God is the baseline for everything we encounter in this world.

Whether we are aware of it or not—our hearts were made to align themselves to this God. That's why you can travel the world and study history and you'll find civilizations without running water, without natural resources, and without outside influence—but no one has yet discovered a culture without some idea or practice of worship.

The Bible would say this is no coincidence. It is a sign of the relationship into each and everyone of us were bound by creation. He is a God—we are not—and our life lay in how we understand that relationship.

My guess is that if you were to create the world—you would be king. But Adam's perfect world was wrapped up in the joy of God being King.

Adam didn't fear the God who spoke to him, he wasn't confused as to why God was in charge, he didn't pout at the command—Adam understood reality and perfection: Adam was limited, God was not. Therefore, he *needed* God.

It is Adam's limits and God's provision that is in the forefront. God's first command deals with Adam's need for hunger: "You may surely eat of every tree." Some pagan creation accounts record gods creating the world so that humanity would be their slaves and provide food for them because the gods were wearied.

But this God doesn't rule man to meet his own hunger—God's rules to man are to care for man's hunger. God's commands are not for his benefit—but for ours. He doesn't get hungry, he doesn't need sleep, he has no need.

Every rumbling tummy is a theology lesson. So too is every yawn, every weight you lift, and every time you drink. God made us with limits—and here we see he tells us of those limits: "Adam, you need to eat."

Now, there's a difference between something having limits, and limiting something. For instance, I have an impact driver at home. That impact driver, when working to the fullest of its capacity has limits. For instance, I tried to drill deep into concrete the other day—it was limited. I tried different bits, I tried pushing harder—but it didn't work. Frustrated I went to the Hardware store and he said that my impact drill worked fine. But if I wanted to drive it deeper, I would need a hammer drill or a concrete drill. That's the limit of my drill. It's not failing—but even its perfect and suitable operation has an end.

Now, there are times where I'll take that same impact driver and I'll put together a premade piece of furniture with screws. Very often, the bag of screws they provide often says, "Hand tighten only." What those words mean to every man is, "Use your impact driver carefully."

And there, knowing the harm it would otherwise cause my cheaply made piece of furniture, I use my begin to limit my drill. I hold it back from what it is capable of.

When we view this cosmic, perfect, all powerful, all sufficient God in creation we need to be reminded he's not limiting us. It's not that Adam could have gone forever without eating but now God has limited him to needing food. No, God made Adam with the limits of needing food—but it's no problem for Adam because the unlimited God who made him is able to provide for him what he needs for life.

God's rules aren't holding us back from humanity's fullness—they reflect humanity's fullness. We are dependent creatures. Dependent upon the world around us—but ultimately dependent upon the God who created us.

Most of our anxiety and frustration today isn't because we are tired, or busy, or hungry, or limited—most of our anxiety is because we have the expectation that we should never be tired, or busy, or hungry or limited. I speak as someone who is predisposed to anxiety—but I've realized that much of my sinful anxiety is due simply to the fact that I wish I was God. I wish my knowledge was unlimited, like my power never ending, my care eternal. But we have limits and those limits are meant to lead us back to the God who has none. God reveals Adam's limits so that Adam might see God's unlimited provision: "you may eat of every tree of the garden."

When you experience the limits of life—do they lead you to turn inward to your own capacity—or do they lead you to understand your limits, and your capacity, in light of the God who calls you to see his care for you in all things.

This leads us to our second point, **Limited Man and Unlimited Blessing.**

Look again at the specific nature of God's command to Adam, **Genesis 2:16-17**, "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "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."

Now, we need a little bit of a refresher here. We've learned about three specific kinds of trees in Genesis. Flip back to **Genesis 2:9**, and you'll see that the first kind of trees are every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the second kind of tree is the tree of life which was in the middle of the garden, and alongside that tree was the third kind of tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The very life that man needed, was located in the center of the garden in the tree of life. And from that center point were all sorts of other trees, that had fruit that would energize and satisfy him in life.

The very geography of Genesis 2 expresses a unique center point that we need for life. In the middle of the garden was the tree of life. In the middle of a barren waste land was the Garden of Eden.

We live in a world that seeks to press our limits out as far as we can go--but the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well when he said, "humanity's limitation as a creature is in the center of his existence not the edge."

In other words the world points to our limits as belonging out there, but the Bible says our limits begin at our core. We need God and his care for everything. The initial part of God's command points Adam to God's diverse and plentiful care.

Imagine if you took a kid to an ice cream store and I said, "Now listen here, kid, you're going to pick as many of these 31 flavors as you like, and you're going to add as many toppings as you like, and I'm going to pay for all of it and I don't want to hear any complaining do you hear me!?"

This is exactly what God is doing when he says, "you may surely eat of any and every tree that is good for food." He held nothing back, but opened the pantry of joy to Adam's palette.

The unfortunate reality of living on the other side of Genesis 2 is that God's commands don't always sound as clearly wonderful as this. But let us be corrected here. Let's not make a new reality that isn't real—but let's examine reality as it was intended to work: God's command left nothing out. If there was a tree good for Adam—it was given to him. There was no tree good for food that was withheld.

When Adam's reality was limited to God's revelation of it—what was in front of him was unlimited joy. For there was no joy apart from God's command. Do you view God's word in the same way?

While we aren't in the garden anymore, notice how the rest of the Bible still testifies to God's gracious word: **Psalms 119:129-131**, "Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments."

Or consider the words of Jeremiah who despite the suffering he encountered from the world on account of God's commands said this, **Jeremiah 15:16**, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart."

Or consider what Moses said other nations would say about Israel after he laid out before them the law of God, **Deuteronomy 4:6-8**, "Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?"

If we want to live life without limits--run in the path of God's obedience for there are treasures forever more. If you want a good life, then run to obey the unlimited God.

But God did say no. Let's not forget that. Adam was limited, God's command limited him. He told him what he should not eat. But once more the command of God didn't restrict Adam's life—but lead him to life.

This is our final point this morning: **Limited Man and Unlimited Life.**

Here we see the negative command that God gives: **Genesis 2:17**, "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."

So here, we need to finally talk about these trees. What were they? The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about them. The rest of the Bible speaks some of the tree of life, but Genesis 2 and 3 is really all we know about both trees.

We know they were both real trees. We know they both produced fruit. We know the tree of life was considered to be good for food. We know the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not good for food.

So what do we make of this? I'm going to let you in on a theological secret that not many people know. The tree of life, yielded life. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil yielded the knowledge of good and evil.

While that might sound like an overly simplistic answer--it's the answer we need. That's what the text makes clear.

Both trees are part of God's good creation. Both trees, when used properly added joy. Yet if abused, one of those trees would lead to death.

One tree was good for food, the other was pleasing only to the sight. Why did God make it this way? Well, in the same way one might plant an apple tree, and why one might plant a rose. One tree provided them with the daily needs for life itself. The other stood as a beautiful reminder that physical provision is not man's only need. There are some things that belong only to God.

There is material provision which God is gracious to give us in and through foods and rains. But there is another sort of wisdom, and provision, that we can find in nothing except God. If we want those—we trust him and him alone—not anything else.

God will give us knowledge, he will help us discern what is good and what is evil, but he will do it as he pleases, and we are not to try and find it anywhere else. We aren't made to know all things—but we are called to trust the God who does.

This is a limit, but it is also the love of a father. For example, I've fed my five-year-old every day since she was born. In that time, I've at times explained to her how to use the bathroom, and take a bath, and throw a ball. But I've yet to explain to her the nature of sexual assault or genocide. While much of my parenting is aimed in forming a worldview that can support those things—I am the one who knows when best to introduce her to those. My daily provision of food and safety and counsel is meant to model to her that she doesn't need to go out into the world to experience the wisdom of what I've wisely withheld. She will need to know more of those things one day—but until then I want her to trust that I am keeping her safe and teaching her wisdom. Daily life and daily wisdom for life are found only in and from God.

This tree of wisdom is the embodiment of what we read in **Proverbs 3:5-8**, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones."

We were made to not grab God's life and run according to our own way of thought, but to rely upon God's wisdom in God's time to help us live as we ought to live. We are to live in daily reliance upon the God who knows what we need and when we need it. He has held nothing back.

God gives this command to Adam because he knows, as one writer put it, while Adam was innocent—he was not ignorant. He needed to know the dangers of this tree. While Adam had the natural ability to eat the fruit of that tree—God wanted him to be wise enough to know he ought not eat from that tree.

Because of that, Adam is fine with this commandment. The very first man heard the very first "No," and he was totally ok. He didn't talk back, he didn't bemoan or grumble. Why?

I bet the kids in here can answer this. Kid's can you tell me why Adam wanted to listen to this command? "For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Kids, why would Adam and Eve want to listen to God? Because it was a good command. God was after their life.

When we are warned of danger and told to avoid it, we typically say, "Thank you."

And if we want unlimited life, then we are to listen to God's good command. Doesn't this reframe our view of God's big "No's" in life? As one character put it, "When I think about doing anything I think, 'Would an idiot do that?' And if he would, then I do not do that thing?"

Well, only an idiot would choose to eat from that tree. It's not the presence of God's true command that frustrated Adam and Eve. In order for them to not see this as good they had to become fools. And because they were not fools it left only one option—they had to become deceived.

The sad part is that they will become deceived. The problem isn't the command—the problem is what we think about the command. Sin deceives us by focusing our eyes with doubt about the character of God distracting us from the deadly character of sin.

And now it's not just what we know that's the problem--but it's what we don't know. We don't see God's commands in the radiant goodness of Genesis 2. Generally, God's commands, God's will, God's advice seems to conflict with our own—and our temptation is to think God is limiting us, that he doesn't know what's best for us. But that's not the God we see here.

In Genesis 1-2, the word "command" shows up once. And it's right here. God's command was to enjoy everything and don't eat the tree that tastes like death. But our first parents were deceived, and so are we.

The rest of the book of Genesis the word, "command" shows up a whopping 25 times. Maybe that's the problem you have with God. This world is hard enough, I don't need another burden. I've already let down my family, I don't need more rules that will lead to disappointment.

But God's first command was for our good, it was to preserve our life. And every other command he gives is for our good--calling us back to the life we lost. It's not the commands of God that complicate our lives--it's the consequence of sin.

Sin limits us, sin holds us back. God's commands don't limit the creation that he made, God's commands call us out of the mess we made.

This God who commands us--doesn't turn his back on us. He's not just the God who commanded, he's the Lord God, "Yahweh Elohim," the personal covenant keeping God. His command is for our good--but despite how well we keep them--it's still not enough. We keep falling, we keep doubting, and we have so little joy.

But this covenant keeping God keeps his covenant--and he will keep our end of it too. Jesus would come and he would model in a broken world the joy Adam forgot in the perfect one. Jesus came not only to pay the penalty for our disobedience—he came to correct our view of obedience. Look at what he says in **John 14:31**, "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father." Jesus obeyed to show us behind our obedience is a love in a trustworthy God. Jesus was going to obey the Father's will, the unlimited son becoming bound on a cross—because we need our sin washed but we also needed our senses to be woken up. The Father's commands show his love, and we enjoy his love by trusting his commands.

We aren't in Genesis 2, obedience is sometimes painful in the world—but our God uses even the pain of obedience to bring about joy. It was for the joy set before him that Jesus took the cross. Through his obedience our death has died, though we still haven't. In him eternal life is promised, though present life is still ongoing.

Instead of singing, "Everybody wants to rule the world," instead say, "All for freedom, all for pleasure, everybody wants to follow this rule."

Or as the old hymn puts it: Whate'er my God ordains is right // here shall my stand be taken // though sorrow, need, or death be mine, // yet am I not forsaken. // My Father's care is round me there; // he holds me that I shall not fall: // and so to him I leave it all.

Let us in obedience leave it all to the God who is all in all. The unlimited God, and the joy of limited man.