

# The Gracious Gift of Limitations

## Psalm 131

Pastor Russ Ramsey

Well. Good morning. It is really a joy for me to be with you all today. As we look at the passage of Scripture that is short and filled with a lot of wonder I'm going to read the text Psalm 131, and then I'm going to talk about another text for a minute, and then we'll walk through this one.

This is Psalm 131. The word of the Lord.

*Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised to high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. Oh, Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.*

This is the word of the Lord.

Heavenly father, we bow in your presence. May your Word be our rule. May your spirit be our teacher. May your greater glory be our supreme concern. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In Matthew 19, we're given this vignette, this story, an encounter between Jesus and a young man that we commonly referred to as the rich young ruler. And one of the things that I love about this passage of Scripture is what it teaches us about living in a world of limits. You have limits, I have limits. We live within them. And this passage of Scripture is Jesus interacting with somebody that Jesus himself said is the kind of person for whom it is the most difficult to enter the kingdom of heaven, and that is a wealthy person. He said, it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter into the kingdom of heaven. And we may wonder why. What is this particular poverty of spirit that Jesus is talking about here? And the rich young ruler shows us in the way that he talks to Jesus. And basically what he shows us is that he lives a life that is predicated on this idea that he can eliminate need, that he can eliminate his need for anything. And if you can eliminate your need for anything, then the kingdom of heaven itself, you will never see through the lens of something. You need or something you need help to arrive at, but instead you will see as something that you can obtain by way of achievement. So here's what happens in the passage. I'm just going to read part of it from Matthew chapter 19:16 and on he says,

*...behold, a man came up to him, to Jesus, saying, teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life? And Jesus said to him, why do you ask me about what is good? There's only one who is good. If you would enter eternal life, keep the commandments. And the rich young man said to him, which ones? And Jesus said, you shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And the young man said to him, all these I have kept. I've kept these since I was young. What do I still lack? And Jesus said to him, if you would be perfect, go sell what you possess and give to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me. And the young man heard this, and he went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions.*

What I love about this story, there's a couple things. One is that this rich young man comes to Jesus with a certain measure of confidence, and the confidence that he brings to Jesus is that if he can have information, then he has the rest of what he needs to be able to obtain the goal that he's after. And that is inheritance in the kingdom of heaven. And so, he asks Jesus what to do. And he asks it from a place where he's positioning himself as somebody who says, I will be able to afford whatever it is you tell me, based on my track record of obedience, based on the successes that I've seen in my life, I will be able to afford what it is that you tell me, except for what Jesus tells him is just empty yourself of all of the things of this world that you possess. Jesus loved this young man. He looked at him and he loved him. We're told. Because this young man has been moving through the world in a way where he's thought even the life to come is something that I have the capability to obtain if I just have access to information and resources. And Jesus says, no, what you actually need is to recognize that you are a person of limit, and you live in a world of limits. And what you're trying to do is you're trying to eliminate limitation. And what I'm telling you is, what you need to do is you need to give yourself away.

Have you ever taken a personality assessment like the Myers-Briggs or the Disc test, or the Enneagram, or there's even one where you can figure out which Winnie the Pooh character you most represent. I like to think of myself as a reasonable person. Over the years, I've taken a number of these in different contexts. I don't regard them as magic or superstitious or horoscopes or anything like that, but I do marvel at how accurate some of the descriptions can be for the different personality types. Kind of astonishing, really, sometimes. I'm going to tell you some of the words that are written about the test results that would apply to me. So we're going to get to know each other a little bit. So the disc test calls me an advocate. That's my personality on the disc test. And here's how it describes me. You are inspiring and sort out. You're a great encourager. And you stand beside your friends. Your optimism and loyalty and relationships make you loved by many. That's good. I mean, on the Myers-Briggs 1% of the population. This is called the protector and it says this about my personality type. You have great depth of personality and you are complicated. And can understand and deal with complex people and issues. All right. I like that one. Enneagram number nine, which is the peacemaker, or, if you will, the Saint. And it says this about nines. You are emotionally stable. You're open, trusting, patient with others. You're good natured and refreshingly unpretentious. And I just I feel really fortunate for you all right.

Now. Because I'm refreshingly unpretentious. And I read those words and I just think, oh, oh, that's just great. I like my results. But then you read on. You read on and it starts to say things like this. Your greatest fears are criticism and a loss of security. And if you are subject to criticism you tend to lose confidence, become unhappy and immobilized and may finally become physically ill. Wait... what? And then there's more. You tend to not show your upsets too much, except indirectly, perhaps by eating too much, or drinking too much, or watching too much television in order to escape into a more comforting world where you can just hear the air leaking out of my refreshingly unpretentious balloon. e nobody wants to be told that they have weakness, much less. What those weaknesses specifically are. Right. How are you with knowing that you are a person of limits?

Today's Psalm extolls the virtue of limitation, the virtue of limitation. And it does it by making three points about it, three verses. Each verse has a point in those points are this are limits. First, give us the freedom to be humble. Second, our limits give us dependance upon God. And third, our limits give us a message of hope for a lost and hurting world.

So our limits give us freedom from humility, dependance on God, and a message of hope for a lost and hurting world. Let's just take them one at a time, a verse at a time. Our limits give us the freedom of humility. Verse one says, O Lord, my heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised to high. I do not occupy myself with things to great and to marvelous for me. What does the psalmist saying here he is saying, I have limits, and it is honest to humbly acknowledge that I have limits. And in saying that, I also saying, I have a place in this world and my place is not everywhere. I am not an expert in everything. There are matters that are above my ability to comprehend, and there are things I just simply don't know. And so I don't need to have an opinion on everything. Nor should I assume that just because I do have an opinion on something, that that opinion is reasonable or informed. And so out of the gate, the Psalm is going against so much of what we hear growing up in the culture that we're in, this idea that we can be anything we want to be and we can do anything that we want to do, that just simply isn't true. Now there is a measure of truth in that. I will certainly, and you will certainly have more opportunities opened up if we apply ourselves and if we strive for excellence, of course, I'm not saying that's not the case, but what I am saying is working hard does not mean that you will have limitless possibilities or I will either. And this is very good news. But for example, you're looking at a man who could not play in the NBA. It will never happen. I could devote the rest of my life to trying to earn a spot on a roster, or whatever they call it in the NBA, but it will never happen, and I would be a fool to think that if I just worked hard enough one day, I'd be out there.

Our lives are not open to limitless possibility. And this, my friends, is good news. Why is it good news? Because if our lives were open to limitless possibilities, think about what that would mean. It means that there would be this enormous pressure that would have on its face this false assumption that I must give my life value if it is to have any, that the value of my life rests in what I am able to knock out of the park and achieve, and that is a proud and miserable place to stand, to have to invent our significance, to manufacture our significance by way of achievement.

I would imagine that this is a room with a whole lot of people who have striven at times in our lives, to try to manufacture significance by way of achievement. This Psalm tells us, don't live under that pressure because you actually do have a place. Eugene Peterson in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which is his meditation on the Psalms of Ascent. Psalm 131 is one of the Psalms of Ascent. He says this about this verse. This is how he kind of paraphrases what it's saying. He's saying, I will not try to run my own life or the lives of others. That is God's business. I will not pretend to invent the meaning of the universe. I will accept what God has shown its meaning to be.

I will not demand that I be treated as the center of my universe, but seek to discover where I fit and what I'm good at. This kind of humility is incredibly freeing. Why is it important for us to embrace this kind of humility where we say to God, I do not occupy myself with things that are too great and to marvelous for me.

One of the reasons that's so important is because it feeds into the second gift of limitations, which is our limits. Give us then, dependance upon the Lord. The rich young ruler, ironically, is trying to free himself from dependance on anybody or anything, including God, by just asking. What's the what's the fee? What's it cost? What do I need to do? What's the good deed? Here's what the second verse says. Our limits give us dependance upon the Lord. He says, I have, but I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child is my soul within me. This Hebrew expression I have calmed and quieted, my soul calmed and quieted. There comes from an image of plowing a field level. So

that's what he's saying. He's saying I have leveled out my soul. Or another way to say it is I have stopped chasing after disturbance.

Are you somebody who chases after disturbance? You need to be perpetually upset. Are you somebody who chases drama that is really outside of your control? This psalm teaches us to pray like this. God, sculpt me into what you will. Run your spirit over me and level me out. Sculpt and refine my rough edges. Steady this turbulent heart that's inside of me. Calm me down to a place where I am trusting in you with my dependance. And here the Psalm is addressing our anxiety. I'm a person that struggles with anxiety. Many of you struggle with anxiety. The psalmist describes himself as a weaned child at his mother's breast. Now, what is this about? Well, let's look at it from the perspective of what's the alternative?

The alternative is to be an unwind child, which is an anxious child. How so? An unwind child doesn't yet trust that he will be given what he needs. So an unwilling child doesn't yet trust his mother to provide. And so he cries. He cries when he's hungry. Because really, the only comfort that he experiences. Maybe you can relate to this, I know I can.

The only comfort that he relate that that he experiences is the actual gratification of the meeting of a felt need. So the comfort is the need being met right now. Okay. I know I'm not going to be hungry any more because I am in the act of eating. It's getting the thing that we want. And so the unwilling child is afraid that he might be neglected.

And so he is consumed with making sure that he can get what he wants, when he wants it. And so consider what the question is at stake in this verse. Do we trust God to give us what we need? Do you trust God to give you what you need? Or are we holding on to some fundamental distrust of God and trying to find some other way to know that we've got everything kind of locked down?

Which is the rich young ruler? Well, how would you know? How do you know if you trust God to give you what you need, or if you're holding on to some fundamental distrust of him? Well, ask the question. What satisfies you? What satisfies your soul? Is God enough? Or are there things that you will need God to give to you before you can feel content?

That is the anxiety of the unknowing child. So I won't be content with you, God, until you have already given me the thing that I feel I need so much. The weaned child, on the other hand, takes comfort in just being with the one that he trusts. He trusts that his mother will take care of him. And so her presence is enough.

He trusts who she is to him, and that what he needs, she will give. And so the weaned child learns that in this life he is going to want things. He doesn't have, and he's going to want things that he can't have. And he's also going to learn that he doesn't necessarily need them in order to be okay.

And so to be weaned is to trust that we will be given what we need, when we need it. And that frees us from worry, because we know we're in the process of being actively taking care of. Well, where does this kind of trust take us? This dependance upon the Lord, this recognizing our need. Trusting that God will give us what we need even when we don't have it right now.

Well, what it means is that we recognize when we recognize that it is God who gives us everything that we need. When we recognize it as God who gives us everything that we need. Then we will also

recognize that some of what God gives us is limitation. And so the limitation he gives us are also part of what we need.

In other words, part of what God gives us is lack. He gives us limitation. Limits are part of the way he provides for us. It's one of the ways he cultivates dependence on us, in us. How can we say this? The Apostle Paul didn't just teach this. He lived it. In Second Corinthians 12 he talks about this thorn in his flesh.

And he prayed. He tells us that the Lord would take the thorn from his flesh. He doesn't tell us what it is. He just says that he has this thorn in his flesh. And he asked the Lord to take it. And he said, this thorn was given to me to keep me from conceit. And then he says, I asked the Lord three times to take it. And what was God's reply? When Paul the apostle Paul asked the Lord to take the thorn from his side, it wasn't just no. It wasn't just that the Lord said no. He goes on to say this. He said his eyes. I ask the Lord to take it three times. And his reply was, my grace is sufficient for you. My grace is sufficient for you. And then he went on to say, my power is made perfect in your weakness. So the limit of this thorn in his side, Paul is saying, is a gift that the Lord gave me. And when I asked him to take it, he said, no. And the reason he said no is because he was protecting me from conceit. And he was saying, you already have everything that you need. My grace is sufficient for you. And the power of God in Paul's life was actually perfected because of the limitations that he had in my power.

As made perfect in your weakness. The humbling fruit of our limits is that they require us to depend. They require us to turn to the Lord and say, I am utterly dependent on you, not what must I do to inherit eternal life? We depend on God alone to give us what we need. That's the gracious gift of limitations, is that they cause us to depend. When every fiber of our being wants to be autonomous. And so when we're content to stand and face the reality of our own limitations and accept them as part of his care, it's like we're being handed a compass in a world full of people who are hurting and lost and adrift and without direction and afraid. And that brings us to the third gift of limitations is that our limitations give us a message of hope for a lost and hurting world.

The first two verses the psalmist is praying personally to the Lord. So he starts off with O Lord. But once he is content, then in the limits of God's care, he goes from, O Lord to O Israel. He pivots, he turns. Now he's talking to his own people. He has a message for others. What is that message? The message is hope in God. Hope in God. Because all of us, to a person. Hope in something, we actively put our hope in something and say, this is what I'm going to hope in. And he says, Hope in God. There's nothing easy about this. Embracing our limits is a universal struggle for everybody. And we're all in various stages of the fight. Every single one of us. But because we are, the struggle of embracing our limits gives us a relevant message of hope to a lost and hurting world who is also struggling with limits.

We all want to know what can make us whole. We all want to know what justifies us and establishes our worth. And the world says you want to establish your worth. You want to be justified. Become completely self-sufficient. Need nothing. But that is not how God made us. I'll just take us back to the creation of the first person ever to see it, Adam, before the fall.

When God made Adam, he looked at Adam and he said, it is not good for the man to be alone. He needed a helper. And so what did God do? Well, the answer on the surface is he made Eve, right? As yet. Adam. Adam needed a suitable helper. It wasn't good for him to be alone. So he made a wife?

Yes. Let's go even a little further with that, though. What he gave Adam was he gave Adam other people. Eve. Later sons and daughters. It wasn't good for the man to be alone. He needed help. So we gave him Eve, and then he gave him others. And the psalmist is raising his eyes to address his people. And he's saying, God didn't make you to be self-sufficient without limit.

He made you to be somebody who needed help. It's part of the relationship. It's part of. Because God could have responded to Adam's loneliness, to Adam's feeling of solitude when he said, it's not good for him to be alone. I'll change how I made him. So it's okay for him to be alone. That's not what he did. He gave him others.

And so the psalmist raises his eyes to address his people. And he says, hope in the Lord, nothing else. You're not meant to be everything. You have needs. And when we grasp that our limits are a gift, and we trust that growing comfortable with our sense of place is part of God's good gift, we become free to not only be at peace with our limitations, but to actually extoll them as virtues.

Because it means we can really treasure the people that the Lord puts in our lives, about which he says, you're one body made up of many parts, and you can't say one part to another. I don't need you because you all need each other. What are some of the virtues of limitation?

One. Limits drive us into community. We need other people. Second, our limitations guard us against having destructive expectations of ourselves and others. If we understand that we're all people with limits, we won't look at other people with the expectation that they be perfect. And we'll learn not to look at ourselves with that same expectation either. Another gift of limitation.

Another virtue of limitation is limitations. Free us to admit that we have blind spots. Even when it comes to our own self-awareness to have people in our lives that we can say to hate. Tell me what you see in me, because I'm limited in what I can see in myself. And what does that do? It fosters in US patients.

It fosters in us mercy. It makes us merciful and patient. People. Another virtue of limitation is that understanding the reality and value of our limits makes us makes our affirmations of others genuine. Like when I affirm something good I see in you, it's not shallow praise. It's a real desire to see our loved ones flourish in giftings that they have, that we benefit from and we love. We believe that we all have a place and we need each other.

Before God, our limits remind us that we have need, which is another thing. It drives us to rest. It drives us to Sabbath rest. We understand I was not made to keep going. Limits cultivate in us things they cultivate in us. Humility. They assault our pride. They remind us that God alone is our only perfect provider. You have only ever had one provider.

It's never been yourself. It's never been an inheritance. It's never been your. It's never been how hard you work. It's never been a lottery ticket. You've only ever had one provider.

And he gives us a place in a world that is full of meaning. And it's full of value. And we get to have a place in it. And so he says, hope in him. We find our contentment in who we are and who we were made to be before God. Not in some impossible standard of perfection.

So there are gifts that you have, and the people in your life need them. There are gifts that you bring into your relationships that other people need. And this Psalm gives us more than a pat on the back for the things where we have limits. It's not just saying it's okay, you're good at other things. That's not it.

It's reminding us we were made to depend on and hope in God as a way of finding and being content with our own place in the world. What limits do you carry? What limits do you live with? How might those limitations that you sometimes look at and despise? How might those limitations be designed actually, for your thriving and your sanctification?

Hope in the Lord. May you hope in him in the face of your own limitations. May they mature you and humble you, and cultivate a deeper sense of dependance upon the Lord in such a way that it lifts your head with a message of hope to the world around you, that you don't have to have everything, and you don't have to be perfect in order to be loved and to be ordered in, in order to have a place in this world. Hope in God because God alone is worthy of your hope.

Let's pray. Lord, I thank you for your word. I thank you for this story of the rich young ruler. I thank you that this story ends not with a period, not with an exclamation point, but with an ellipsis where we don't really know what happened in the end.

We know that he went away sad because he had a great many possessions. But we are left to assume that he went away sad because he had a lot to think about. And we see in your word in Acts chapter two, believers gathered at Pentecost and tongues of fire descending. And those people had to be somebody. And it's reasonable to wonder if among those people on whom the Holy Spirit was descending would include people like Simon the Leper and Zacchaeus, and the rich young ruler and the woman at the well.

People that we meet along the way in the passages of the Gospels who encountered you and learned about what it meant to be a citizen of your kingdom. And so, father, we don't know. But what we do know is that the way that you call people to yourself. Requires us understanding that we have a profound sense of need, and we have this. Limit that. We cannot overcome in terms of saving ourselves. We don't have the ability to make ourselves holy in your sight, but you do. And this is the grace and mercy that you extend to us. And so, Lord, may you cause us to see the places that we're where we have limits as gifts. Would you grow us in competencies where you intend to?

And would you give us a freedom of spirit and dependance upon you and humility of heart in those places where these are just things that we're not? We're not going to be very good at in our lives. And so we need the help of others. Deepen our community and deepen our dependance on you. And by doing so, our love for you.

It's a new name. Jesus. We pray. Amen.