

Receive the Gift of Limits

Series: *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

Aug. 16, 2020

John 3:22-30

Phil Vischer had a vision for a children's video series featuring— computer-animated vegetables. But these weren't just any computer-animated vegetables. These were vegetables that loved Jesus and taught Bible lessons to kids. As I'm sure many of you already realize, I'm talking about— *VeggieTales!*

Christianity Today once ran a feature article on Phil Vischer, who, in the early 90's, quit his day job in order to work on his first Bible-themed veggie video.¹ He was broke at the time, but God provided, and around Christmas 1993, the video *Where is God When I'm S-Scared?* was released.

Over the next 10 years, *VeggieTales* sold more than 25 million videos. The stars of the series—Larry the Cucumber and Bob the Tomato—gained millions of adoring fans.

Big Idea Productions—which had begun in a spare bedroom in Phil Vischer's house—grew into a 210-employee animation studio that he hoped would one day rival the Walt Disney company—except *this* would be for *God*.

But in 1999, about 6 years into the venture, things started to go wrong.

Convinced he was going to be the next Walt Disney, Phil kept over-expanding and overextending the company. As a result, it fell into financial and legal trouble. After several tumultuous years, Big Idea Productions finally went bankrupt. Every employee was let go, the company was sold, and Phil Vischer lost it all.

Although he had tried to build an empire like Walt Disney, Phil ultimately would admit:

I was trying to be someone that God didn't call me to be... [or] create me to be.

Phil's wife Lisa explained, that, ironically, the fall of Big Idea Productions was one of the best things that ever happened to them. Even though they had lost so much, life became better. Together they began to enjoy a stronger marriage, improved health, and a newfound sense of peace in Christ.

At one point, Phil even went to Disney World, where he stood before that big statue of Walt Disney. Phil put his hand on that statue, and said to Walt, "I'm done now. You can be you, and I will be me."



¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/may/4.44.html>

We're in the midst of a series called *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. The premise of the series is that you cannot become spiritually mature as a Christian without also becoming emotionally mature. Our emotions are not peripheral to our spirituality as followers of Jesus, but rather central.

In today's message, we're going to talk about what it means to *Receive the Gift of Limits*. As Phil Vischer learned the hard way, emotionally healthy people understand the limits God has given them, and find joy and contentment by learning to live within those limits.

In the Bible, John the Baptist exemplifies this wonderfully. Let's read about it in John chapter 3.

Then Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside. Jesus spent some time with them there, baptizing people. At this time John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; and people kept coming to him for baptism. (This was before John was thrown into prison.)

A debate broke out between John's disciples and a certain Jew over ceremonial cleansing. So John's disciples came to him and said, "Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah [that's Jesus], is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us."

John replied, "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the best man is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less."²

Clearly, John the Baptist was someone who embraced his limits. Because of this, we see in him a restful joy and contentment rarely found among people today, including Christians.

You see, when John the Baptist had started preaching in the wilderness, thousands flocked to him. For a time, John was *the* man. But when Jesus began his ministry, what happened? People started leaving John and going over to Jesus.

In our passage, we find some of John's followers trying to incite John to envy about this situation. "Hey John! Can't you see what's going on here? Your stock is going down, and Jesus' stock is going up. Do something, man!"

² John 3:22-30 (NLT)

It's at this point that John says, guys, you've got it all wrong: "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven." You see, John knows the limits of what God has given him. John knows he's not the Messiah; Jesus is.

John says, "My role is like a best man at a wedding. My job has been to tend to the preparations, and shine the spotlight on the bridegroom—Jesus, and now that he's here, he must increase, and my time in the spotlight is over. I must decrease."

And the remarkable thing is that John embraces this happily, to the point that he says, "I am filled with joy at [Jesus'] success." John's own followers might not be content with his life, but John is. And here's an incredibly important lesson we learn from this passage:

Embracing your limits is a vital step toward contentment and joy in Jesus.

With this in mind, I'd like to use the rest of the message to share three lessons about our limits:

The first lessons has to do with:

1. Why it's hard to embrace your limits.

We're not always so good at embracing our limits, are we? I mean, how many of you can really imagine yourself with a smile on your face and joy in your heart because you, like John the Baptist, have embraced the fact that you must decrease so that somebody else can increase?

I wish I could say that's my default setting, but I confess, it is not.

One reason why it's so hard to embrace our limits is that often **our egos are overinflated.**

Because of this, many of us are prone to embrace larger fantasies, wishes and ideals for ourselves than our lives can realistically support. As a result, we may even harm ourselves and others by attempting to do more than we really can or should.

It's like in the Garden of Eden. God gave Adam and Eve just one limit: You may eat from any tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat from that one tree, you will surely die.³

Satan tempts them first to resent the limit, and then to violate it.

"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil."⁴

³ See Genesis 2:16-17.

⁴ Genesis 3:4-5 (NLT)

As it was in the beginning of time, so it is today. To deny our creaturely limits amounts to an attempt to play God.

Another reason why it's so hard for us to embrace our limits is the **fear of what other people think**.

Has someone ever asked you to do something, and you realize you should say no, because you really don't have the time? You already have other priorities and commitments.

But maybe you say yes nonetheless, because you're afraid of what they'll think if you say no. Do this enough, and it will lead to burnout, relational breakdown, discontentment, and joylessness.

You see, the more we fail to embrace our limits because we're people pleasers, the unhealthier we'll become, emotionally and spiritually— even physically.

The Bible says in Proverbs 29:

The fear of human opinion disables; trusting in GOD protects you from that.⁵

So those are a couple of key reasons why it can be hard to embrace our limits. Next, let's talk about:

2. How to discern your limits.

There are several areas of your life to look at when it comes to discerning your limits.

First, **look at your life situation/season**. When you're young, certain doors of opportunity may remain closed to you until you've gained more life experience. That's a limit, and you'd be wise to embrace that limit, and use the time to study, train, and gain experience that will open new horizons for you later in life.

When you're old, your body might not be able to do what it used to. That's a limit. Can you embrace that limit, so that you focus on doing things—meaningful and important things—that you might never have taken the time to do when you were more physically able?

The Bible considers both marriage and singleness to be blessed situations in life. Both come with opportunities. Both also come with God-given limits. There are limits married people have that single people do not, and there are limits single people have that married people do not.

Each child you have, while a great blessing from God, constitutes a limit. Especially when they're young, there will be limits to what you can do precisely because you have children.

⁵ Proverbs 29:25 (MSG)

The Bible says in Ecclesiastes that there is a time or a season for every purpose under heaven.⁶ And every time and season comes with its limits.

Another thing you can do to discern your limits is to **look at your gifts, strengths, and personality.**

The Bible teaches that God gives particular spiritual gifts to every Christian. In Romans 12 it says:

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.⁷

This and other similar passages are basically teaching us to embrace our limits. Because no one gets every gift. So instead of being resentful about the gifts you don't have, or envious of the gifts other people do have, discover and embrace the particular gifts that God has given you. Develop them, put them into practice for the sake of God's mission in this world. In doing so, you will become an instrument of the Lord's blessing to many.

If you're a Christian and aren't sure what your spiritual gifts are, on the screen you'll see a link to an [online gift discovery tool](#) that you can check out.

And if you want to discover your God-given strengths, we're having a 1-hour webinar this coming Tuesday, August 18th called [Introduction to Living Your Strengths](#). There's a link for that on the screen as well if you'd like to learn more or sign up.

If you haven't done so already, you may also find it helpful to complete one or more personality profiles. Helpful ones that should be relatively easy to source online are Myers-Briggs, DISC, and Enneagram.

Each of us has a unique personality, and the dimensions of our personality speak to our limits.

Here's one example of a personality limit: Are you an extrovert or an introvert? It comes down to where you get your energy. Extroverts get energy from being with people, and introverts get energy from being on their own. Each has its limits.

I'm an introvert. It's not that I'm shy. And I enjoy being with people. But if I fail to embrace the limit of my introversion, I become tired, irritable, and ineffective. However, when I

⁶ See Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

⁷ Romans 12:6-8 (NLT)

embrace my introversion—receiving it as a gift from God—I find that I can make contributions to the lives of others and to the church that I never could make otherwise. Embracing this limit actually frees me to become more faithful and fruitful for Christ.

Another thing you can do to discern your limits is to **look at your negative emotions and past wounds**. We've talked about this in the previous weeks of this series. Emotions like anger, resentment, anxiety, depression— to name just a few examples—are limits.

They are like the “check engine” light on the dashboard of our lives. God will use such limits to get you to look under the hood of your life so to speak— to slow down, pay attention, and receive the care and healing from Jesus that your soul needs.

Oddly enough, even the limits I inherit from the wounds and scars of my past can become gifts once I accept and embrace them. God can use them to make me more dependent on him, more sensitive and compassionate, and less judgmental toward others.

Okay. So far we've considered why embracing our limits is hard, as well as how to discern our limits. I'd like to conclude this message by considering:

3. How to embrace your limits.

First, learn to **see limits as your friend**. As Christian philosopher Kierkegaard says, the true vocation for every human being is the will to become oneself. It's counter-cultural, to be sure, but limits are my friend—a God-given gift that enables me to become my truest self in Jesus. Hugging my limits tight is actually more freeing than it is constricting -- as Phil Vischer discovered, and as John the Baptist modelled.

Embracing my limits frees me to be comfortable in my own skin; it frees me to be me; it frees me to fulfill the purposes God has for MY life, and to be a blessing to others in ways that I can't when I deny my limits and try to be someone I'm not.

Second, when it comes to embracing your limits, **recognize that it's a spiritual warfare issue**. The temptation to deny our God-given limits as human beings is the fundamental temptation. As we saw in the Garden of Eden, the serpent tempted Adam and Eve to violate their limits. And in the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus to violate the limits of his humanity, and his God-given mission.⁸ The enemy's strategy against you and me is much the same.

Lastly and most importantly, to embrace your limits, **draw near to Jesus**. This is what it all comes down to.

You and I can embrace our limits because in Jesus—you can be you, and I can be me—because he has loved us and died for us just as we are. In Jesus, the pressure's off! We have

⁸ See Matthew 4:1-11

nothing to earn, nothing to prove. Embracing our limits in Jesus allows us to live into the freeing confines of the particular callings he has for each of us.

The Bible tells us in Hebrews to run the race that's marked out for us— and that's a limit. We aren't to just run everywhere willy-nilly—we aren't to run somebody else's race—we are to run the race marked out for US. How are we able to do so? The text says we do so by fixing our eyes on Jesus who alone is the author and finisher of our faith.⁹

Listen. Jesus saved the world—including you and me—precisely because he embraced his God-given limits. He didn't heal every sick person in Galilee. He only engaged in three years of public ministry, spending the majority of his time focusing on just 12 disciples.

Jesus didn't do everything he could have done, so that he could do everything he was supposed to do, for you and for me. It was because he embraced his limits—including the ultimate limit of being nailed to a cross—that Jesus could pray this prayer to God the Father at the end of his life:

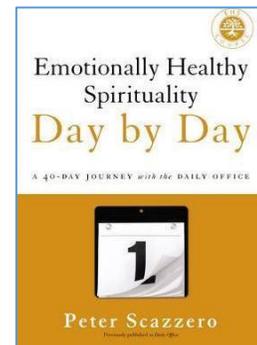
I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.¹⁰

By embracing your limits, you will be able to offer such a prayer at the end of your life.

But you can't do it on your own. It's only when you draw near to Jesus—who perfectly embraced his limits—that you find the grace and strength you need to embrace yours. And one of the most vital means for drawing near to Jesus is prayer.

I'd like to recommend a special prayer resource that will help you draw nearer to Jesus.

It's a prayer book called *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day*, by Peter Scazzero. The book helps you to practice an ancient form of Christian prayer called the Daily Office. It has 40 days of short morning and evening reflections and prayers based on the themes of Emotionally Healthy Spirituality. You can order it at all major online booksellers, and if you want to get started today, it's available for download in various e-book formats.



I'd like to close with a prayer from the book. Let's pray.

Jesus, you know [the] tendency [of many of us] to say yes to more commitments that we can possibly keep. Help us to draw near to you, so that we can receive and embrace the gift of our limits— physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually.

⁹ See Hebrews 12:1-2

¹⁰ John 17:4 (NIV)

As you help us with this, Lord Jesus, may you be glorified in and through us today, and in the weeks and months ahead. In your name we pray, amen.¹¹

¹¹ Adapted from Peter Scazero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day: A 40-Day Journey with the Daily Office*, p. 48.