

22C HUMAN LIMITS

Humans have continually pushed against limits, whether physical boundaries or limitations on our physical bodies.

Categories of limits-

1. Limits of nature- gravity, thermodynamics
2. Limits of space- distance to the moon and Mars
3. Moral limits- God's commandments (not up for negotiation)
4. Human limits-maximum vision ability, maximum hearing ability
5. Mental limits –finite ability to remember and to compute
6. Limits of the body- the fastest a human can run, the highest a human can jump
7. Human disability limits- sensory, paralysis, amputation
8. Psychological limits- (“I can't do math.”)
9. Limits of language and logic.
10. Mortality limits –strength, ageing, death
11. Limits set by governments- speed limits, zoning laws, trespassing laws

Limits already transcended-

1. Gravity- lift and thrust -balloons, planes, rockets
2. Space- rockets, capsules, shuttles
3. Undersea environment- air tanks, compression suits, submarines
4. Seeing into space- optical telescopes, radio telescopes
5. Seeing into cells- light microscopy, electron microscopy
6. Computational limits- computers, microcontrollers
7. Some human disabilities- cochlear implants, prosthetics

Limitations that Necessitate Faith: [1]

1. Human brains are physically constrained.
2. Human beings are chronologically constrained.
3. Human brains are logically suspect.
4. Answers to many significant questions are limited to approximations.
5. Certain types of measurements are always approximations.
6. Theories are just approximations.
7. Even the most precise formalisms have built-in limitations.
8. The more you know, the more you must accept on faith.

Are limits always a negative thing?

Gen. 3- God restricted Adam and Eve's access to Eden and life without death.

Gen. 11- God limited the Babel project.

Acts 17- God limited human expansion.

2 Cor. 12- Paul's limitations caused him to find strength in the Lord.

Book of Ecclesiastes- Limits on human fulfillment and, finally, the looming specter of death.

Bottom line: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." (Eccl. 12:1)

As humans, we are clearly bound by limits. We are

- Finite
- Vulnerable
- Limited in Knowledge
- Mortal

Scripture is clear concerning our limits and mortality:

Genesis 3:19: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Psalms 103:14 - "For He remembers our frame, and remembers that we are dust."

Isa. 40:6-7, 1 Pet. 1:24 - "All flesh is grass..."

Psalms 127:2 - "It is in vain you go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for He gives to His beloved sleep." (Juxtaposed with Psalms 121:4: "Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.")

2 Cor. 4:7 - We are "earthen vessels" (that can contain the glory of God).

Psalms 90: 9-10, 12 - "...We spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore years and ten [70]; and if by reason of strength, fourscore years [80], yet their strength is but labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away...So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

Some would argue that human flourishing involves transcending all limits, but most existing limits don't impede true shalom.

Overcoming human disabilities is basically a good endeavor, to the extent that we can restore lost function through technology.

Incremental increases in health and lifespan are basically a good thing, and, hopefully, available to all in society.

The transhumanist goal, on the other hand, involves a sudden, explosive, transition to a new species of human, without normal limits, beyond anything that currently exists.

This is not the earthly goal of Christ's followers. At the least, it is a distraction. At worst it's idolatry.

Jonathan Lett offers these considerations: [2]

- Humans don't like limits, dependence, or vulnerability.
- Suffering applies vulnerability, and technology promises to deliver us from suffering.
- We seek freedom from all constraints, the power to choose whatever we can do.
- We become more and more artificial as we seek a humanity where nothing is fixed.
- We want to be more than a creature, rejecting what it means to be created.

Biblically, however-

- Everything God made depends on God for existence.
- We are dependent upon God and others, and God called this "good."
- After the resurrection Jesus was present in a body and ate with disciples (both signs of dependence to us).
- In the New Creation, even with resurrected bodies, we might actually expect a deepening of dependence and vulnerability.
- Limits become an opportunity for flourishing through fellowship.

Regarding the pursuit of technology to alter us, Jonathan Lett writes: [3]

"Wisdom says that life is about conforming the soul to the reality of nature, to the limits of time, body, and place. Technology offers not wisdom, but a technique—a way to bend the reality of the world to conform to the order of the human will. This technique is a substitute for wisdom, a shortcut to virtue. Wisdom is cultivated by the study of the Bible in a Christian community that helps students think critically and analytically about their discipline from a theological perspective. Wisdom requires that students integrate their field of study with Christian reflection on the nature and order of the world and on the reality of the human person as created, that is, as being designed for fellowship with God and neighbor."

Brent Waters notes that we must "take finite bodies seriously since they have been affirmed, vindicated and redeemed by God in Christ, the Word made flesh." [4]

Kelly Kapic in *You're Only Human* urges us to avoid unrealistic expectations of ourselves and to re-think what it means to be finite creatures: [5]

“We must rediscover that being dependent creatures is a constructive gift, not a deficiency.” (p.10)

“We live in a fallen world. . . . Because of this we sometimes wrongly attribute all our problems to sin, when in fact they are often a matter of running up against the limits inherent in being finite creatures instead of being God. We are, by God’s good design, finite.” (p.12)

“So what does it mean that we are creatures and not God? What does it mean that we have these talents and resources and not all talents and resources? What does it mean that we are finite, particular, and rooted, and not infinite, universal, or standing above all local circumstances? Answering these questions honestly will change how we imagine the world, ourselves, and our relationship to God and others” (p.14)

“To start affirming our creaturely finitude as a good quality rather than an evil to be overcome, we must confess that God loves me and not just Christ instead of me.” (p.26)

“The God we worship is not embarrassed by his creation; rather, he loves it, and he acts from that love. . . . Some want the benefits of the cross without the earthiness of the Son’s birth, but you can’t have one without the other.” (p.46)

“God’s concern is not to erase or destroy our humanity, but to renew it. Human flourishing comes not in the absence of our creaturely limits but in the healthy wholeness of them.” (p.48)

“Humility consists in a recognition of (and a rejoicing in) the good limitations that God has given us.” (p.103)

“Beloved, you and I are secure in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit. May this security allow us to celebrate our limits as part of God’s good work... Let us appreciate the goodness of our finitude as we rest in the love and provision of our infinitely good God.” (p.222)

Chris Ralston adds:

[I]t’s always worth pausing to consider: supposing finitude could be eliminated entirely from our lives (which seems extraordinarily doubtful), is it the sort of thing we ought to try to eliminate? Put differently: is there anything good about finitude, such that we ought to embrace it (even if in a qualified way)?

Gilbert Meilaender, a bioethicist and Distinguished Fellow of The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity, suggests that there is something good about finitude. In a reflection on the “created duality” of our human nature—we are simultaneously both “free” and “finite”—Meilaender observes that this “two-sidedness” to our nature both opens up possibilities and imposes certain limits upon us. We are, he observes, created from dust of the ground—finite beings who are limited by biological necessities and historical location. We are also free spirits, moved by the life-giving Spirit of God, created ultimately for communion with God—and therefore soaring beyond any limited understanding of our person in terms of presently “given”

conditions of life.... Made for communion with God, we transcend nature and history—not in order that we may become self-creators, but in order that, acknowledging our Creator, we may recognize the true limit to human freedom. Understanding our nature in this way, we learn something about how we should evaluate medical “progress.” It cannot be acceptable simply to oppose the forward thrust of scientific medicine. That zealous desire to know, to probe the secrets of nature, to combat disease—all that is an expression of our created freedom from the limits of the “given,” the freedom by which we step forth as God’s representatives in the world. But a moral vision shaped by this Christian understanding of the person will also be prepared to say no to some exercises of human freedom. The never-ending project of human self-creation runs up against the limit that is God. It will always be hard to state in advance the precise boundaries that ought to limit our freedom, but we must be prepared to look for them...

(Human limits) do, however, remind us of one very simple, yet all-too-often overlooked fact: finitude is, in many ways, a gift. Let us not neglect it. [6]

Daniel Treier offers a perspective from the book of Ecclesiastes-

Ecclesiastes offers a primary biblical point at which these parameters converge. For that text’s primary metaphors immediately limit human life: The book’s first half (1:1–6:9, with 6:10–12 as transitional) locates us “under the sun”; a repeated refrain has us “chasing after the wind” (and unable to catch it); behind its most famous word, “vanity,” is the metaphor of vapor, an ungraspable entity that is here today and gone before tomorrow. The book’s second half (7:1–12:14) reiterates that human beings usually do not know and can- not find. Overall, Ecclesiastes is saturated with allusions to creation from Genesis 1–3. Like other scriptural texts, Ecclesiastes depicts the limitations that arise from the various relational realms in which God has placed human existence. Ecclesiastes then explores these limiting relational realms in a more courageous and concentrated form...

Ecclesiastes contemplates the reality that human lives unfold “in” (1) the context of the created cosmos. As 1:3–11 ponders, the sheer regularity of creation’s order often seems monotonous. But, as 2:24–26 and other key refrains later remind us, all things are from God’s hand. Wisdom lies in remembering our sovereign Creator (5:1–7; 8:12–13; 9:1–2; 12:1–14) without wrongly pursuing righteousness (7:15–29) by rejecting earthly goods and limits. The order of creation—or, after the fall, God’s preserving grace—involves different types of limits, including kinds and ends. [7]

Human life, suggests Treier, unfolds in the context of life “under the sun,” the body, the family, times and seasons (3:1-8), places, work and rest.

Ecclesiastes opposes the vexation that may stem from trying to think or act above our human station (1:18; 2:23; 5:17; 11:10). The sage collects and presents wisdom to promote remembering the Creator, not seeking a God’s-eye view. In Ecclesiastes, then, fruitful work and rest depend upon embracing our limits—limits upon satisfying bodily desires, controlling family legacies, guaranteeing timely action, transcending particular places, profiting from labor, or

making delight last. We are made for constant dependence upon God as the necessary context for moments of genuine delight. [8]

The goal of the Christian life is not to *become* something but to *be* something: an authentic follower of Christ.

We “seek first the Kingdom.” Our agenda includes: knowing the Lord, becoming like Christ, living as Kingdom people, ministering to human needs, taking the Gospel to the whole world.

Christ’s Incarnation was the exact inverse of the transhumanist goal. He *already* possessed divine power and intelligence but set all of that aside to live as a human (who could suffer and die) in order to rescue us. (Phil.2)

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