

CONVENTION SERMON

Lifting Life's Limitations

By Ralph A. Herring, Pastor,
First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, N. C.

Lest you be lulled by what is intended to be a pleasing alliteration in this statement of my subject, I warn you that "limitations" is not so innocuous as it sounds. The situation described by it more often than not is the father of frustration which in turn has sired a wretched brood of emotional disorders to scourge our civilization.

The story in our text reveals a veritable patchwork of limitations. Notice some for there are instructive parallels with which we as a Convention may readily identify ourselves.

In that Syro-Phoenician home a mother's love had run its limit. There was a condition with which she could not cope. Scripture says the disorder was demoniac. The girl lay "grievously vexed with a demon."

Another limitation disturbed this mother's heart. She was born a Gentile; Jesus was a Jew. The race issue is not new in history. The problem it poses is the product neither of time nor place but arises from that mysterious thing called human nature. Yet we Southern Baptists find ourselves amid circumstances where we are challenged before the world to show how this limitation may be lifted by the grace of Jesus.

Our text names yet a third limitation—unexpected and utterly incongruous. I refer to the apparent unconcern among those about Jesus, not to say of our Lord Himself.

Life's limitations! I have called your attention to them to show that we have a bona fide case. For if the limitations described in the text are real and relevant to our day, we may hope that the way by which they were lifted is valid and instructive also.

Note further that our story comes to focus not upon the limitations of man but of God. That is the important point. Quietly this Syro-Phoenician woman took her stand in faith and thus lifted the limitations under which our Lord was laboring. In the liberty which she gave to Him she found her own. This is the message of the text.

If the idea of God's limitations seems strange, remember that God is love and love's great longing is to be loved. For God this means that He must not only assume the limitations of Creation but of redemption as well. The God whom Jesus reveals is One who willingly ac-

cepts limitations and works under them. The text requires us to consider only two facets of this tremendous truth.

Expression of this truth is sobering, indeed. For the Syro-Phoenician mother it meant the misery of utter frustration, while her daughter lay grievously vexed with a demon. It meant repeated cries to deaf ears, the chill of unconcern, and the sting of racial discrimination.

Under this heading may be listed all the miseries of mankind. Accidents, disease, crime with its untold heart-break and oppression—all of these terrible things we can account for only by saying that God permits them. He does not will them. He would do differently about them except for the limits He has assumed. Sobering, indeed, are the emotions which steal over us as we reflect upon this mystery.

The other facet of this baffling truth which the story emphasizes is the limitation imposed by position. Quite clearly Jesus could not at first respond to the woman's cry because of the restrictions of His position. He wanted to help her but He was not in a position to do so.

The limits of God's position are not readily understood, but when they are pointed out to us they are both natural and reasonable. It stands to reason that the Creator is limited by the presence of others who bear His likeness and, also, by the position He occupies among them.

We find this clearly illustrated in the family relationship. A husband and wife who have children are not so "free" as another couple who have no children. Then, again in the family, the father is limited by his position. He cannot do for one child what he might were it not for his responsibilities to others in the family circle.

Although this seems reasonable enough in the larger picture, like the Syro-Phoenician woman we have diffi-

Scripture Texts

Matthew 15:21-28

Ephesians 3:8-11

culty in applying it to specific instances. For example, she was unaware of the way God had chosen to get to the Gentiles. To her His successive ages or administrations meant nothing and the distinction He drew between Jew and Gentile was only a nuisance.

I think of this entire incident in terms understood by any golfer. Our Lord here is simply recognizing the fact that He was out of bounds. Any golfer knows he is free to walk out of bounds but not to play the ball. In some such way the limits which the Master had assumed forbade the play, however much He wanted to make it!

But before we look in condescending pity upon her ignorance, what about our own? What do we know or care about God's position and His over-all purpose? The book of Ephesians gives the answer to these questions. That loftiest of all epistles runs a striking parallel to the story before us and most clearly defines God's position in relation to our entire missionary task.

I refer particularly to "God's open secret" found in Ephesians 3:8. With Paul's first point we are familiar enough: "to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." All well and good—a glorious task! Let's get to it! But wait! This, indeed, is our assignment but the purpose which gives that assignment its meaning in God's scheme of things follows.

There is a second point: "And to make all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which for ages hath been hid in God who created all things; to the intent that now unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:9-11 ASV).

What bearing has all of this upon us and our missionary task? The scientist has all but flattened the universe into one dimension of physical cause and effect. There are some who plead in the name of religion for another dimension.

Paul pleads for yet a third dimension, for successive years, for wider scope and greater depth. He insists that God's workings are conditioned by angelic hosts, created intelligencies in serried ranks who people the heavenlies. That

Editor's Note

This is the text of the sermon, with minor deletions, prepared by Dr. Herring for delivery at the opening session of the Southern Baptist Convention in Miami Beach Tuesday night.

which God does is necessarily limited by them, even as in the case of Job. Nor are they simply spectators of this drama of redemption; they are participators, themselves profoundly affected by its outcome. The fulfillment of the divine purpose is to be realized in cosmic circumstances.

As a denomination we seem largely content with "preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ." This has become "our program," and a glorious program it is. But I fear lest we have not kept this assignment in line with God's purpose of the ages. We have, rather, allowed ourselves to be taken over by what I would call the logic of our own procedure at the expense of the administration of God's mystery.

In logic we argue the more preaching of the gospel, the better; enough of it and the world is won! But there are factors deeply disturbing. The population increase is out-distancing us. In the world today there are easily a billion more souls who have never known the gospel than when the Great Commission was first given. And, again, the nations "most Christian" are about to collapse under the weight of their own moral corruption.

It would seem the result of our logic with its multiplied activity has taken a frightful toll in character and spiritual maturity. The church has become increasingly just another organization—less and less the Body of Christ.

We have done wrong to overlook the companion truth which Paul makes in the great passage. The dispensation of the mystery to which he refers is needed ballast to preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. It would serve to inject into our witness a sorely needed emphasis upon depth and quality of Christian living.

The lesson of the Syro-Phoenician woman is imperative for us now. We must learn, as she learned, that God has assumed certain boundaries—voluntarily, wisely, in perfect keeping with His own nature and purpose. We cannot be ignorant of His position among the heavenly hosts and at the same time work intelligently with Him.

The more clearly we understand the limitations under which God has chosen to operate, the more readily can we appreciate the significance of faith in His scheme of things.

The glory of the Syro-Phoenician woman's faith was that it expressed her intelligence, her humility, and her daring. She came to Him as an Israelite would come. She kept calling, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David." Her's was not the right to use

that title; it belonged to the Jew. But she was quick to learn. Refusing to be offended either at the silence of Jesus or at His words about throwing children's bread to the dogs, she was intelligent enough to see her place, humble enough to accept it, and bold enough to press the advantage.

Our trouble is that we do not want to accept the limitations which in His sovereign will God has chosen for us and for Himself. In our pride we do not want to accept them even if by accepting them we could remove them! I think the racial situation is a case in point and inasmuch as the text makes much of it and I alluded to it in the beginning, let me say a further word.

On the one hand in this race issue is the man who apparently refuses to



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recognize the basic fact that the created must share with the Creator the limitations of creatorship. The distinction between races inheres in the natural order. However it came about, the responsibility for it rests ultimately with the Creator.

In Colossians 3:11, God speaks of the new man "where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian and Scythian, bondman and freeman, but Christ is all and in all." This verse has been quoted as though God were working toward the goal of a raceless, sexless, classless, sameness in humanity. But such an interpretation is contrary to all that God has revealed of Himself.

Grace does not erase the distinctions God has made. Rather it enhances them. For example, art is an appreciation of things that differ, their subtle-

ties and harmonies within the whole. The humble heart knows this and rejoices to see God's artistry become evident in the variegated wisdom of His redemptive purpose.

On the other hand is the man who apparently refuses to accept the fact that he has a brother with a dark skin, that the same Creator made them both in His own image and likeness. The penalty of his pride is blindness—blindness not to the Negro at his side but to the image of God in him. That is the pitiful part for God's image is unmistakably there and the vision of it makes all the difference.

To see the face of God is the important thing no matter whether it appears enthroned in "the high and lofty place" or shining from the countenance of a fellow pilgrim along life's way. No man can afford by any act or attitude to let his pride eclipse the transforming vision of that Face. Here again the humble heart, instead of being frustrated by racial differences, with insight and initiative boldly seizes the opportunity they afford to bear a worldwide witness for Christ.

The Syro-Phoenician woman insistently calls to a humility which understands and accepts with courage the challenge of God's limitation.

Let us go a step further and inquire what is there in faith that makes it possible for the Lord to do in one moment what He could not do in another? How were the "ground rules" changed so that the play was no longer "out of bounds"? Or were they changed? In short, how does man's faith remove God's limitations?

The answer lies in the fact that in the larger picture faith was the basis on which God assumed the limitations in the first place—faith in Himself since there was none other. "And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold; therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me" (Isa. 63:5). When this faith, inspired in men, returns again full blown and mature to God in the presence of the heavenly hosts, limitations are off. They have served their purpose.

It is the nature and province of faith to cast off limitations. The basis on which they were assumed becomes, when fully vindicated, the basis also on which they are set aside. Is not that the reason Jesus said, "All things are possible to him that believeth"?

Faith alone knows a God that is infinite. Only to the believer is our Lord really free to work; to others "he could

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there do no mighty work because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:5). Yes, understanding and accepting life's limitations, it is our privilege in the exercise of faith to remove them and to enjoy God's infinite power to save.

The unmistakable conclusion to which the story now brings us is that the woman's interests and those of Jesus were inseparably linked together. The lifting of His limitations meant the lifting of her's also.

The distraught mother got all that she came to Jesus for. Picture her home-coming—her little daughter no longer vexed by the unclean spirit, resting relaxed and responsive to the delights of mother-love and home. But she got more than she asked. In her heart besides was the undreamed of gladness of the Master's praise. No joy on earth can equal that.

And what did it mean to Jesus? His certainly was the joy of redemptive love moving in answer to need. Yes, but vastly more. His was the joy also of vindication. The cruel silence of Jesus and His hard word about dogs under the table were all justified by the woman's triumphant faith and nothing could give Him greater satisfaction.

We are not able to see the reason why God delights in man's faith in Jesus Christ. God's power is not in question. Of course He could cast out a demon! If He is God at all, the power to do so is His. The question centers not upon God but upon man—or in this case the woman. Would she understand the way in which God has chosen to work in such cases? Would she stoop to conquer?

In short, would she offer the kind of faith that God could honor? That was the question—and is. To put it another way, the question is not whether God is able to straighten out the affairs of this rebel planet but will man understand and consent to the way He is pleased to do it? God can make a bad man good, yes; but will a bad man choose to let Him do so? That is the question. Faith answers, Yes!

Faith in Jesus Christ is at one and the same time God's vindication and man's. When God would create man He said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over . . . the earth." (Gen. 1:26). With what consternation do you think such an announcement would be received by the principalities and powers, and all the created intelligencies of the unseen realm!

Remember that in Scripture there are unmistakable overtones of an unsolved tragedy prior to that which befell man

in the Garden of Eden. With eternal issues still in the balance would God now bring into being this frail creature of the dust, endow him with His own capacities and likeness, make him free to choose, and then entrust him with dominion over the earth? What divine madness is this!

Came the day of an even greater wonderment. In utter amazement the angelic hosts must have watched the Man Christ Jesus come to grips in mortal agony with him that hath the power of death. The contest lost in Eden was won at Calvary. There "the hostile princes and rulers he (Christ) shook off from himself and boldly displayed them as His conquests when by the cross he triumphed over them" (Col. 2:15 Weymouth).

But how could this victory so dearly bought by the Man become a continuing one in the life and destinies of men? Paul teaches that now it is the privilege of the church to make answer. His

Sermon Quotes

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meaning, I think, is that through all the stormy course of history until the consummation of the age, the church is to make known unto the principalities and powers in the heavenly places the very thing they had questioned, the wisdom of God.

When it becomes necessary for one to take a position or to adopt a course which from the nature of the case cannot at the time be explained, he subjects himself to great suffering. Through the ages God has been painfully misunder-

stood, maligned—as have all who have stood with Him in faith. For Him and for them to be declared right offers a satisfaction that can be measured only by the price they have paid for the position they have taken. Every stand taken in faith, whether God takes it or man, is a bid for vindication.

We have thought of justification, God's righteousness by faith, in terms restricted too much to the predicament of man. God's predicament is involved. Like the cross, justification is cosmic in scope. Creation itself looks in eager expectation to its glorious realization. Before the assembled hosts of Heaven not only man but God Himself is declared righteous by man's faith in Jesus.

Quietly to take one's stand in faith, therefore, is the greatest service a man can render. Such is the inescapable conclusion to which our text brings us. The Syro-Phoenician woman stood where Jesus put her and while she stood He wrought. That was her unique contribution. In her experience, however, we have been carried beyond the Gospel narrative. We have heard the overtones in Ephesians of God's symphony of the ages.

Our case does not quite parallel that of an obscure woman from heathen surroundings, however eloquently her faith speaks to us individually. We are a Convention, a fellowship of messengers.

We are a responsible body with institutions, agencies, and commissions worldwide in scope. If closer attention is to be given to them in the light of the dispensation of God's mystery, we are the ones to give it. Pressures attendant upon the consummation of an age converge upon us. Slander and hatred on a global scale block our missionary efforts.

Sensuous materialism, demonic in nature and extent, paralyzes the missionary arm of our churches while millions of their members live at ease in Zion. If effective warfare is to be waged against this kind of opposition we are the ones to do battle.

Only Ephesians, wherein God has revealed our task in the light of His purpose for the ages, can yield a fitting conclusion and speak adequately to our situation. Only there do we see how important to God's ultimate victory is our stand in faith.

"Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of the darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Wherefore take up the whole armor of God and having done all . . . stand" (Eph. 6:12-13).