

*He went out from there. He came into his own country, and his disciples followed him. When the Sabbath had come, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many hearing him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things?" and, "What is the wisdom that is given to this man, that such mighty works come about by his hands? Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" They were offended at him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own relatives, and in his own house." He could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people, and healed them. He marveled because of their unbelief. He went around the villages teaching.*

*A leper came to him, begging him, kneeling down to him, and saying to him, "If you want to, you can make me clean." Being moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand, and touched him, and said to him, "I want to. Be made clean." When he had said this, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was made clean. He strictly warned him, and immediately sent him out, and said to him, "See you say nothing to anybody, but go show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing the things which Moses commanded, for a testimony to them." But he went out, and began to proclaim it much, and to spread about the matter, so that Jesus could no more openly enter into a city, but was outside in desert places: and they came to him from everywhere.*

Andrea has always loved dogs and horses. When we were at Smyrna, one of our church members had horses and I have pictures of her when she was really small riding JR. JR was a pony and they just fit, size-wise.

When she was still a young teenager, and a tiny little thing at that, she used to ride at Patty Carter's stable. As I remember, someone went on an extended vacation or something and boarded a Percheron there for quite a while. The way to describe a Percheron, I guess you would say that this one looked like one of those Budweiser Clydesdales without the furry hooves.

Anyway, she was a saddle horse and rode English and it was Andrea's job to ride her and keep her exercised and keep her sharp. I can tell you that it really looked funny for such a little girl to be riding and jumping such a big horse. Andrea did a great job and kept good control of her.

How COULD she manage to keep control of something so big and powerful? [The bit] Even the Bible talks about how a horse is controlled by the tiny bit.

How would it work to ride a horse without a bridle and bit or other way to control it? You COULD go somewhere but you would be going to the best grass or the best water instead of going to town or where ever YOU wanted to go.

Cars are similar—they are huge and powerful, but we control them with small controls, much like a horse and bit. What if you could only control PART of the car? What if you could make it go but not stop it? What if you could steer but not control how fast it was going?

I can tell you from experience that that doesn't work very well.

Back in the olden days, a long time after the six days of creation, but not too long after the Dark Ages—and not long after Vonna and I got married—we moved across from two of my craziest childhood friends.

These are the friends I can't even tell stories about, because they sound like they are made up. For instance, I woke up one Saturday to a “BOOOOMM!” and shaking of the ground and ultimately discovered that Dale had found some dynamite and caps and fuses. They were standing on the pond levy and Dale was holding a stick of dynamite while David lit it—then he would hold it long enough that it would blow up before it hit the pond.

THOSE friends.

ANYWAY, the three of us and Terry were going riding in my 57 Chevy pickup one night—down through the fields and woods. I'm sure we were looking for deer. A 57 Chevy pickup is so narrow that the four of us didn't fit very well. When we got in, I was on the left, but was not really behind the steering wheel— Terry was. BUT—my feet were on the pedals. David was next to Terry and he had the shifter between HIS knees. I said that since Terry was behind the wheel he could steer. So off we went.

We were going down a narrow and crooked field road and I got an idea. I looked over at David and winked and clutched it—he downshifted and I hit the gas.

Wide open.

Then we shifted up and then we shifted up again.

Wide open.

I must admit that Terry did a great job given that all he could do was steer, but we wound up hitting a big hump in the middle of a curve and we jumped about 20 feet off the road into a bean field. No tracks, just like we fell out of the sky. If we could have gotten out without making ruts, it would have looked like one of those crop circles—only it would have been a rectangle.

Terry was mad and he refused to be the steerer any more. I think he rode back home in the back of the truck.

It is good to be able to steer your horse or your truck. There are other things that cannot be controlled—and some that should not be controlled. For instance, we can't control the weather—and I think that is a good thing. Someone would use it for their own benefit, or maybe even as a weapon.

Another thing we cannot control is God.

Or can we?

All through the New Testament, Jesus had trouble with those who wanted to control him. His family (his mom at the wedding at Cana, for one). The Pharisees. Even his Disciples tried to re-make him in the image THEY had of the Messiah.

But he wouldn't allow it. The LORD of all, the King of Kings. The Messiah has no bit and he has no steering wheel.

You can't steer the Lord of All. Or can you?

Maybe not in the positive sense, but I can think of some ways we can NEGATIVELY affect the work of God and, in a sense, control what God does or doesn't do.

We have the power to, in some things, limit God's capacity through our own actions (our free will) effectively keeping the Lord of All from his own desires and intent. Remember the passages I read earlier.

In the Mark 1: 40 passage, he went home. The key verse is “he could do no mighty work there...” They were “offended” by him because they thought they knew him and because he grew up there. They negatively controlled him—they limited him. He healed a few sick people but it seems that his power was limited by the unbelief of those around him. Isn't that interesting? Isn't it SAD? What about those poor people who he WOULD have healed and made whole and WOULD have changed their lives? How about those who WOULD have believed in him and become followers? They missed out because Jesus was limited.

In the Mark 6 passage Jesus told the leper not to speak of what happened, but he did—and Jesus was not free to openly enter the city to heal or teach. All the good he would have done there was left undone.

It seems that God often chooses not to take away our freedom of choice—our free will—even when it condemns us or when it keeps him away from the desires of his heart.

That was then and this is now, right? You know, I'm afraid that you and I are also guilty of negatively controlling God's work and his direction. Christians interfere with and limit the work of Christ sometimes because of our own wants or desires or needs or even expectations. There are four main ways we do that very thing.

[1] Sometimes we want to define the experience we have with Christ. Sometimes we are seeking something that he cannot or will not give. Sometimes we are seeking an Eros-based relationship instead of an agape-based relationship. In other words, we may want to be overwhelmed by or attracted by his beauty or desirability. This is not much different from the erotic love we learn from society. In that kind of love we are swept away by the other. We are powerless to resist.

A relationship with God doesn't work that way.

We all do it somewhat, though. In a survey of non-Christians, many reported that they will become Christian when “the Spirit hits them.” Y'all have heard that. They mean that they will come to God and love him when he “overpowers” them with his Spirit and when he dazzles them and leaves them speechless in his presence. Maybe that DOES happen, but it isn't the norm. God seeks us, yes, but not usually in that way.

We Christians have some similar desires. We want to be bowled over by God's will. We want him to ZAP us and overpower us and MAKE us choose the right path. "Close the door you don't want me to go through and open the one you want me to go through..." I can tell you that such HAS happened to me and it is a high of highs and it is a FANTASTIC feeling to be so certain of what God wants and to be overwhelmed by his will for you.

We want that don't we? To have our wills stamped out and have no resistance. God doesn't usually work that way. He gave us a brain. He gave us good counsel in the company we keep (I hope). He gave us his Word. And he gives direction through the Spirit. BUT if we are waiting to act until we have that Eros experience, we may be limiting God—by not ALREADY making the right decision and doing his work and getting on with what he wants us to do.

God doesn't often use his irresistible force to accomplish his will. It is not in his scheme of things. Jesus is not an emotion or an energy or a vibe. We must accept his invitation. He won't force us. If we are waiting on an emotional high before we respond, we are limiting him and limiting ourselves.

[2] We also limit Jesus by seeing him as "the answer." I know you have seen the bumper sticker. "Jesus is the Answer" and I have no problem with that idea as long as we see him as "the answer" to all of our problems.

Jesus and his presence and his will are always much larger than just being the answer to your problems and my problems. Maybe some of the difficulties Christians have come because we want Jesus as a "quick fix" to our needs or our problems.

Jesus doesn't enter into our lives as a handy-man. When we seek him, we are seeking a LORD as well as a Savior.

If we are lonely and we come to Christ, what are the chances that we will be lonely again—that we will experience loneliness? There is a pretty good chance that we will. So, if he didn't meet that need—if he didn't "fix" us we might abandon our relationship because we were looking for the wrong thing. What if we go to therapy and no longer have need in the area of loneliness? Will we go our way and forget Jesus? Maybe. But REALLY we do still need him. Need him to be LORD of that part of our lives.

Jesus isn't just an experience that cheers us up on a bad day (though that relationship might do just that). He is not just the leader of Christian causes and of the Christian world. He is much more than that—and if those are our expectations, we may be limiting him in our lives and the lives of others.

[3] Sometimes we limit Jesus by reducing his claims and his requirements. When we begin to study Scripture in earnest—with our blinders off and our eyes wide open, we begin to see how vast his claims are and how high his standards really are and how uncompromising he really is.. Sometimes, when we recognize the huge gap between his standards and our behavior, we try to narrow the gap by minimizing his requirements instead of moving toward him with effort and in righteousness.

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus says that we are to love our enemies. “Isn't that nice?” “Don't you just LOVE religious phrases and mottoes?” “Doesn't that have a great ring to it?” “Wouldn't that be a good thing to cross-stitch and put on the wall?”

Sounds like a good idea until you really look at it. Think of “the enemy” for a minute. Saddam. Hitler. Nero. Dahmmer. Manson. ISIS. Maybe you could add some one to that list. Maybe your neighbor—hopefully not your seat-neighbor today or your brother or sister or your son or daughter or someone else.

How can you possibly LOVE someone like that? I can just hear us now: “Surely that wasn't what he meant.” “What he REALLY meant was not to trip them in the street or not to start a fight with them.” “Maybe we should just avoid them so we can keep the peace.”

“SURELY Jesus didn't mean “love” in the sense of, well “love” did he?” “He COULDN'T mean that because it is too hard to do.”

The reality is that he DID mean it. We limit Jesus when we fail to take his commands or his claims seriously and when we fail to take his commands to heart—when we water them down.

Do we love our neighbors as ourselves? Do we REALLY love our enemies? Do we allow him to be LORD of our lives as he desires and as he expects and as he demands? When we refuse to do these things, we thwart God—we limit him in the pursuit of his will.

[4] We sometimes limit Jesus by elevating ourselves. We try to close the gap by glorifying ourselves. If we are not careful, we will over-spiritualize and pretend the gap between what he demands and what we are doesn't exist. We pretend that we never struggle. We pretend to be too spiritual and too close to God to struggle.

I have a “Frank Greene” professor quote for you. Frank Greene and I agreed on a lot of things so, of all my professors, he is the one I tend to quote. “There are no super-spiritual Christians. We all struggle somewhere, somehow.” And he is right. I promise you that if you know a mountain-top-to-mountain-top Christian—someone you envy—that they are either dishonest or they are fooling themselves and you (but not God). Even if they are in denial, they struggle too.

Their lives are not 100% victorious just as yours isn't and as mine isn't. If we are living in the real world, in reality, we will struggle. Faith in Christ is a strength and it is a comfort—but it is NOT a force-field that protects us against spiritual struggle and doubt and troubles. It is healthy and it is freeing and it is STRENGTHENING when we admit that we are weak in the face of his strength.

Admit it—you and I are sinners. Constantly and desperately in need of God's mercy and strength and grace every minute of every day.

In fact if we take number 3 seriously we can never over-spiritualize and never over-estimate our holiness and righteousness. Can we deny that we have trouble loving our fellow Christians sometimes and our neighbors and ESPECIALLY our enemies? Can we deny that we sometimes fall to the temptations that surround us—at least some of them?

Let's not pretend to be something that we are not. It is not helpful to ourselves because we deny ourselves the grace of God. It is not helpful because we begin to think too highly of ourselves. It is not helpful because we will begin to believe our own press and start looking down on others when they are no different (no better or no worse than we are). It is not helpful because those outside these doors have "hypocrite" RADAR and they will know we are phoneyes.

Sounds a lot like the Pharisees, doesn't it? Jesus didn't tell us to PRETEND that we love our enemies. Jesus didn't command us to pretend that we don't have enemies. Jesus says that we acknowledge our feelings and admit that they are our enemies and then love them anyway. He says that we are to acknowledge that baggage and then respond to them in love instead of hate.

There is great freedom in our being able to be real and honest before each other and God. There is power in telling God how hard some of these things are for us.

There is power in sharing our struggles with each other. "Boy, only by the grace of God and will power (and the fact that I tripped and bit my tongue right about that time) was I able to keep silent when she said that and did that..." Maybe you need to know how hard I had to work to keep from slapping her when she said THAT. We can be honest about those struggles without glorifying them.

In Ephesians 4, Paul says not to let the sun go down on your anger. But we sometimes act like he said not to get angry and if we did slip up get angry—the best thing to do is deny it and pretend and fake it so that you will look Godly and spiritual (and better than the other guy). When we deny our struggles we deny God the ability to work through our weaknesses and in our inability.

When we limit God we are limiting ourselves. It is only as we are real in this world and only as we work from who and what we are that we can become all we can be.

When we begin to work through an honest relationship with Christ. When we accept the reality that our relationship to God doesn't remove us from the troubles of the world and its spiritual struggles. When we are willing to accept that Jesus' commands and his requirements are hard—and almost impossible sometimes. When we understand that holding ourselves up and pretending to be more than we are is counter-productive spiritually in the personal sense, relationally before God, and out in our community. When we begin to deal in the real world—we will begin to set Jesus free. We will quit limiting him and his will and his actions.

THAT is when we will shine through his power and through his Spirit—holding up the Kingdom of God through our lives.