



Summary: *You're Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why That's Good News*

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1 Have I Done Enough?

Facing Our Finitude The result of busyness is that an individual is very seldom permitted to form a heart. Søren Kierkegaard, journal entry

Many of us fail to understand that our limitations are a gift from God, and therefore good. This produces in us the burden of trying to be something we are not and cannot be.

...

So how can we proceed? I want us to take time to carefully think about our creatureliness. This will reveal limits, dependence, love, reliance on the grace of God, and worship. We will examine the joy of being a creature and the freedom of resting on the promises of the Creator. We will question harmful and unrealistic ideals and begin to appreciate the messiness of our complex lives. As we do this, the following central concepts will guide my reflections:

1. We are not under any requirement to be infinite—infinity is reserved for God alone. Rather, in and through our creaturely limits we are called to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love

our neighbor as ourselves. In other words, loving both God and neighbor falls completely within the range of creaturely finitude. This takes us to my second guiding observation.

2. We need to stop asking (or feeling that we should ask) for God's forgiveness when we can't do everything, and we need to ask forgiveness for ever imagining we could!

These and other reflections throughout the book are built on some basic theological assertions:

- God is the good Creator who designed us as good creatures.
- Part of the good of being a creature is having limits.
- The incarnation is God's great yes to his creation, including human limits.
- God designed the person for the community and the community for the person.
- The Creator is also the Sustainer and Redeemer.
- We are never asked to relate to God in any way other than as human creatures.
- God's goal for humanity is for us to become lovers of God, neighbor, and the rest of creation.

Once we see ourselves within this framework, where our creaturely finitude plays a good and essential part, the pressures to fulfill endless expectations take on a different appearance. We begin to relate to God and others in a more fruitful way: no longer do we aspire to have infinite

capacity—that is God’s job! We worship him as he made us: dignified, purposeful, vulnerable, finite creatures. We do not apologize for our creaturely needs and dependence on others, for we discover this is how God made us, and it is good.

Part 1 - Particularity and Limits: This book aims to help us discover the theological and pastoral significance of embracing the gift of being limited: it is just part of being human.

Each chapter will explore a different question that allows us to look at our creaturely limits from a slightly different perspective. We have already observed that we often feel we have not done enough, which raises a nagging concern: Am I enough?

If we are ever to answer that well, we must ask the central question (which we will look at in chap. 2): What does God think of me? Not generic humanity, but me, in my singularity, my particularity, my smallness? How do I relate to Christ without ceasing to be me?

We then consider the particular humanity of Mary’s son, including his physicality: this gives us a deeper and more realistic appreciation of our own humanity (chap. 3).

From there we explore why our bodies are necessarily tied to our self-perception, relationships, and even worship: one aspect of our original makeup is that we worship in and through our bodies, so ignoring or abusing a person’s body has significant consequences (chap. 4).

God made each of us with distinct particularity, with different bodies and personalities, but not to be isolated individuals who generate our identities on our own: our identity is necessarily linked to our families, cultures, and historical contexts (chap. 5).

Since sin has also affected every aspect of our lives, including our limited self-understanding, we must carefully navigate the daily challenge of being a saint who sins.

Part 2 - Healthy Dependence: Having laid the groundwork for the value of our particularity and limits, we spend the rest of the book exploring what healthy interdependence looks like.

We examine humility: concerned about the problematic results that come from too often grounding it in sin, we show humility’s true basis in the good of our creaturely limits (chap. 6).

Next we explore some of the problematic ways we relate to time. Cultivating awareness of God’s presence can liberate us from the despotism of the clock and recenter us in truly human pursuits (chap. 7).

On a related theme, our sense that we lack time often leads us to want immediate and radical improvement in ourselves. We discover, to the contrary, that God has purposes in taking his time and that, since process itself is also a good aspect of the created world, we should learn to honor rather than belittle it (chap. 8).

We also look at the apparently endless legitimate demands we face in the church, from proclaiming the gospel to caring for the materially poor. Our finitude drives us back together, to depend on each other in the church and on our God. What is impossible for the particular Christian becomes possible for the church as Christ’s body (chap. 9).

Finally, I offer practical reflections on four patterns of life that can help us have a healthier experience of our human limits: **rhythm, vulnerability, gratitude, and rest** (chap. 10). Examining some of our false assumptions (outside and inside the church) will show us why we struggle with our human limits and how to celebrate the goodness of being a creature of the God who loves what he made. God delights in our finitude: he is not embarrassed or shocked by our creatureliness. Since he is not apologetic about it, we should stop apologizing for it ourselves.

2 Does God Love . . . Me? Crucified . . . but I Still Live

The indwelling Christ enables each person to be more himself than he was ever able to be before. Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Praying the Jesus Prayer*

God loves his children; therefore, by his Son and Spirit he is liberating us from the entanglements of sin that distort our true selves, which were made for communion with the Creator and our fellow creatures.

3 Are the Limits of My Body Bad? Praise God for Mary

That unreachable power came down and put on limbs that could be touched so that the needy could approach Him and, embracing His humanity, become aware of His divinity. St. Ephrem the Syrian, Homily on our Lord

The Creator God is not embarrassed by the limitations of our bodies and his material world but fully approves of them in and through the Son's incarnation. Only when we appreciate this can we clearly see how human limits should not be confused with sin but, rather, seen as a positive aspect of our humanity.

4 Why Does Physical Touch Matter? Images, Trauma, and Embodied Worship

I am not here, touch me . . . that I may be here. Samuel Taylor Coleridge

We are human creatures made to relate to God, our neighbors, and even the earth in and through our physicality. This is not a consequence of sin but God's good design for us. Space and time are the arena of our physicality, especially enabling us to be present to each other. Consequently, we need to be touched, both physically and spiritually, and this need goes well beyond sexuality to an expression of trust and affirmation.

5 Is Identity Purely Self-Generated? Understanding the Self in Context

Discovering my own identity doesn't mean I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. . . . My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others. Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition

Western culture tends to define personal identity by isolating the person from all context. The Christian faith always understands the person as finite and necessarily in connection: with God, with other persons, with the creation at large, and within the person. Because sin distorts both our internal world and external relations, restoration requires that we understand our connectivity and view ourselves as objects of God's love and delight.

6 Have We Misunderstood Humility? Joyful Realism

Ah, but what a joy it is when the Spirit of God teaches us and gives us understanding. . . . I don't intend to bury my talent, if the Lord gives me grace. Argula von Grumbach, letter dated September 20, 1523

Within a Christian view of the world, humility consists in recognizing that our limitations do not threaten us but liberate us both to worship God and to cherish others. It gratefully participates in communal life, exalting the needs of others over one's own while still honoring one's own finitude.

Christians have often grounded the need for humility in our sin.

If there had been no sin and no fall, would we have needed humility? Is humility, as discussed in the Old and New Testaments, precisely a rejection of sin and no more? As serious as sin is, to treat it as the most important aspect of our existence and then to use it as the starting point for understanding what it means to be human is to build on a foundation that opposes God and all goodness in creation.

Instead of starting with sin, we must ground our theology of humility in the goodness of creation. Humility is a distinctly biblical virtue because it begins with the knowledge that there is a good Creator Lord and we are the finite creatures he made to live in fellowship with him.

7 Do I Have Enough Time? Clocks, Anxiety, and Presence

Stress is a perverted relationship to time. John O'Donohue, To Bless the Space between Us

Appreciating our finitude as a good requires a harmonious relationship to time and an awareness of God's presence. Recognizing how technological advancements have affected the human relationship to time, we must rediscover the importance of presence: sensitive to the triune God's presence, we are liberated to be fully present with others.

8 Why Doesn't God Just Instantly Change Me? Process, Humanity, and the Spirit's Work

The new creature's response to the Spirit's work in and through him or her may be portrayed as a joyful yielding to the hands of the sculpting Spirit. Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., Sculptor

Spirit Time and process are aspects of the creation that God made and called "very good." When we are frustrated by the process that we call "growth," we can learn about our relationship with God by examining the frustration, the nature of the process as good, and the goal toward which we are working—namely, deeper communion with God.

9 Do I Need to Be Part of the Church? Loving the Whole Body

The "isolated individual" is the product of man's fallen imagination. It is a product of sin. It does not exist. It has no reality at all. What does exist are persons in community. Thomas Hopko, *All the Fullness of God*

It takes the whole church to be the one body of Christ. Serving and depending on others constitutes a twofold dynamic that builds up the community in faith, hope, and love. The diversity within the church's unity displays God's presence and action in this world.

Given that we are but part of the whole, what are patterns of life we might practice that can help each of us develop a healthier appreciation of our finitude? What are practical ideas that might help reshape our lives to reflect the good of human limits? To these pastoral questions we devote an extended discussion in the last chapter.

10 How Do We Faithfully Live within Our Finitude? Rhythm, Vulnerability, Gratitude, and Rest

Time is God's gift. Only time given and received as a gift is real time. Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion*

Our lives have a definite shape as well as definite limits. We go through seasons, we are not self-sufficient, we depend on God for relief and provision, and we grow weary. A faithful life embraces its rhythms, recognizes its vulnerability, expresses both lament and gratitude, and rests in confidence in our faithful God.

Conclusion

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. May this security drive us back to our God, to one another, and even to our right dependence on the rest of creation. May this security encourage our work, liberate our rest, and free us to love and serve others. God made us to be limited creatures, able to freely participate in his work, confident in his presence, and grateful for his promises and provision. Let us appreciate the goodness of our finitude as we rest in the love and provision of our infinitely good God. May it be so.

"You are enough." However, as a theologian, I would prefer to put it much less poetically: "You are not enough, and that is exactly why you are enough!" In other words, only when we realize that the world does not depend only on us, but on God and on others, and that we only play a small (but significant!) role—only then can we be truly liberated to see that "I am enough." Why? Because I am God's child, and I am connected to his church and world. I have much to offer, but I don't have everything. And God doesn't expect me to, either.

But know this, you are my beloved son, and I thank God for you. Jonathan, you are enough. We all are enough. Praise God.