

1. Love God “without limits” (vv. 4-5)
2. Love God’s “limits” (vv. 1-3)
3. Talk of God “unlimited” (vv. 6-9)

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*
Ephesians 1:3

Please permit a few statements about parenting in 1900 versus parenting in 2008. I did not write these...to my credit or my shame:

You may argue that parents of 1900 did not have it nearly as good as parents of today; but they did have a few advantages:

- In 1900, parents prayed their children would learn English.
Today, parents pray their children will speak English.
- In 1900, if a father put a roof over his family's head, he was a success.
Today, it takes a roof, deck, pool, and 4-car garage. And that's just the vacation home.
- In 1900, a father waited for the doctor to tell him when the baby arrived.
Today, a father must wear a smock, know how to breathe, and make sure film is in the video camera.
- In 1900, parents could count on children to join the family business.
Today, parents pray their kids will soon come home from college long enough to teach them how to work the computer and set the VCR.
- In 1900, parents shook their children gently and whispered, "Wake up, it's time for school."
Today, kids shake their parents violently at 4 a.m., shouting: "Wake up, it's time for hockey practice."
- In 1900, a father came home from work to find his wife and children at the supper table.
Today, a father comes home to a note: "Jimmy's at baseball, Cindy's at gymnastics, I'm at adult-Ed, Pizza in fridge."
- In 1900, fathers and sons would have heart-to-heart conversations while fishing in a stream.
Today, fathers pluck the headphones off their sons' ears and shout, "WHEN YOU HAVE A MINUTE..."
- In 1900, if a father had breakfast in bed, it was eggs and bacon and ham and potatoes.
Today, it's Special K, soy milk, dry toast and a lecture on cholesterol.
- In 1900, a father was involved if he spanked the kid now and then.
Today, a father's involved only if he coaches Little League and organizes Boy Scouts and car pools.
- In 1900, when fathers entered the room, children often rose to attention.
Today, kids glance up and grunt, "Dad, you're invading my space."
- In 1900, "a good day at the market" meant Father brought home feed for the horses.
Today, "a good day at the market" means Dad got in early on an IPO.
- In 1900, a happy meal was when families shared funny stories around the table.
Today, a happy meal is what parents buy at McDonald's.¹

Parenting certainly has changed over the years. You can argue whether it's gotten easier or harder. But some things about parenting haven't changed, whether you're talking about 2008, 1900 or 2100 B.C. during the time of Moses. Parenting is tough. You pour your

¹ <http://www.ahajokes.com/par003.html>

heart and soul into your children and hope it pays off. For Moses, the children of Israel were very much like his own children. He had led them and loved them, disciplined them and taught them. He poured his heart and soul into them. They were about to cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Moses knew he wasn't going with them. So he was essentially sending them off by preaching to them a series of farewell sermons. Those farewell sermons are what make up the book of Deuteronomy. In them he recaps not just all the history they've been through with him, but also all the commands God gave them. Like the advice a father gives his child before taking his last breath, Moses knew these were his last chances to set his children of Israel on the right path in a new land. So after retelling the Ten Commandments, he shares with them God's secrets of success and some of God's secrets to successful parenting.

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ² so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. ³ Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Notice the three synonyms Moses uses here: commands, decrees and laws. Wrapped up these words is the idea of *limiting* or restricting. That's what God's commands, decrees and laws do—they limit and restrict. Sounds like a bad thing, at least initially. But God knew his children needed to be limited, they needed to be restricted. And, of course, Moses had learned to agree.

The children of Israel were finally leaving the great in-between. They were finally leaving the limbo of wandering in the desert. They had been in Egypt where the Egyptians worshiped all kinds of false gods. They had a god for everything: a god for war, a god for the harvest, and god for the weather and so on. And now God's children were headed into the land of Canaan, where...they had a god for everything. So Moses reminded them with a beautiful statement whom it was they worshipped—the LORD, in all caps, the only true God. There was no other god besides him. Over time Moses' statement has become the most famous prayer for Jews, ancient and modern, "**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one**" (6:4). Devout Jews say this statement twice a day, with their morning and evening prayers. If you're curious it sounds like this: *Shema, Israel, Adonai Elohenu Adonai echad*. (We're required to memorize it at the Seminary.) In any case, the children of Israel would have to resist giving in to all that idol worship when they entered the land of Canaan. God's commands, decrees and laws—his limits and restrictions, would help them do just that.

These limits or commands were to be passed on generation after generation so the fear and love of God would not be lost. Moses writes, "**so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands**" (2). And then later Moses says, "**These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up**" (6-7). We've all seen the warnings in our medicine cabinets on the side of the medicine tube: *For external use only*. Well Moses warns the Israelites that God intends his

commands to be for *internal* use. They are to be upon our hearts. Then they're to be passed on to the hearts of our children. How? Moses says, by talking about them while at home or away, while resting or working—in other words, in all aspects of life. Our talk of living for God and his commands is to be *unlimited*. So, it was these commands from God that would serve as boundaries—limits to protect the Israelites and their children not just from a pagan Canaanite culture, but also from the sinful natures inside of them.

Because, we all know, it's easy to lose sight of God's commands. So that's why Moses summed them all up in one statement for them. Jesus would use the same summary, as we heard in today's Gospel, "**Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength**" (6:5). It's the greatest commandment to love God with all of your being, because, in fact, this commandment includes all the others, especially the first commandment: *You shall have no other gods*. Think about it: if you are loving God with all of your being, or perhaps we'll say, loving God *without limits*, then you will be obeying all of the Ten Commandments. To love God with all your heart and soul and strength will mean to *limit* your worship to the one true God; it will mean to honor only his name and only his Word; it will mean to respect the authorities he's established and to respect your neighbor. That is what God demanded of the children of Israel: to love God *without limits*. That's what he demanded of us too.

Notice that loving God without limits really also means loving what he commands, or to put it another way, it means loving God's *limits*. I don't know about you, but the more I hear of God's commands, restrictions and limits, sometimes the more frustrated I get. It's overwhelming. How can I love God without limits—with all my heart, soul and strength? How can I love the ways he limits me? How is it that the psalm writer can say to God, "**I long for your precepts!**" and "**I delight in your commands because I love them.**"⁴⁸ **I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love**"? (119:40, 47, 48). If God's commands only point out my failures, then the command to love God and love his commands is a big fat finger in my face saying, "failed." And I don't even want to begin to think of how I've failed to show the children around me my love for God; how I've failed to talk and teach children about God and his "delightful" commands. But perhaps it is a beneficial thing to consider.

Moses fell into two different traps as he went about being a father to the children of Israel. Though I have little experience to speak about parenting, it seems as if we grown-ups can slip into those two same traps in our own parenting.

The first is that sometimes we're too easy on our kids. We don't "limit" them enough. We want them to love us, but don't necessarily care if they fear us. Perhaps we don't always instill in them the seriousness of *God's* limits, his commandments. But God and parents are to be not just loved but also respectfully feared. Remember Luther's explanations to the commandments which always begin, "*We should fear and love God...*" Maybe the reason we are too easy on our kids is that we ourselves don't always have God's commandments resting firmly enough on our own hearts. If *we* don't value God's limits, neither will our children. So the one extreme, that Moses fell into, and sometimes we as adult role models do, is when we are too easy on children in regard to how God would have us live.

But the other extreme can also come about from a failure to have God's Word resting firmly on our hearts. Sometimes we are good and tough on our kids and make sure they know their limits. But maybe we don't always couple that toughness with teaching. You might say we're guilty of using God's commands *for external use only*, rather than instilling them into the hearts of our children. We tell them the limits, but not always the reason behind them. We instill in them a healthy fear of God and parents, but don't always instill the greater reason why we want to "limit" the way we live. That reason: love—love for God and love for parents. And

if you've made the same mistakes I have, we haven't always made sure our children remember that forgiveness is theirs for the times they have transgressed God's limits. But isn't that what we need to be reminded of too? Parenting can be a sore subject for many of us. Many people feel inadequate and irresponsible when it comes to parenting. But maybe sometimes we should. We have not always created that perfect balance of fear and love in our children. We have failed just as Moses did. In our own hearts, we have not perfectly loved God without limits. We have not perfectly loved God's limits and instilled them in all aspects of our family's life—unlimited!

Only one man has done that. But he's done it for us. Let me remind you about the One who perfectly feared and loved God his Father *without limits*—with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. Let me remind you about the One who loved every one of God's *limits*—and obeyed all of them all of the time. Let me remind you of the One who talked about God's commands in every aspect of his life; who wore them in his actions and spoke them perfectly with his words; whose talk of God was *unlimited*. Let me remind you that Jesus' perfect fear and love, his innocent death and resurrection, have filled in every gap in our inadequate love for God. His perfect fear and love, his innocent death and resurrection have removed every parenting mistake, every crossing of God's line, every ounce of irresponsibility. When God demanded perfection from us, those demands were fully met for us in Christ. And let me remind you: he did it all because he loved you and me *without limits*.

What wonderful reasons we have to love him back! He has loved us and forgiven us *without limits*. What wonderful reasons we have to love his *limits*! What wonderful reasons we have to pass our fear and love of God on to generation after generation! What wonderful reasons we have to talk of God *unlimited*. But you know, God even gives us more reasons than just thankfulness for Jesus. He promises blessings whenever we love and keep his commands and when we instill them in our children. Remember, limits and restrictions are a good thing. Don't they have a way of giving security to those who observe them in the same way the railing on a bridge or a balcony gives you sense of security? You wouldn't drive across a bridge or walk out onto a sixth story balcony without that thin ribbon of steel around the perimeter. Even though you know, if you wanted, you could drive through it or jump over it, doesn't simply having it there make you more secure? That's what God's commands—his limits do for us too. They are there to protect us. There is always a good reason when God wants to limit or restrict us in some way. And it has nothing to do with how it affects him. It's always about protecting us. It's the same reason we tell our children they're not allowed to play on the other side of the bushes near the road and why they must prove their maturity to us before we give them unlimited freedom. Like God and the Israelites, our unlimited love for our children compels us put limits on them to protect them from not just from the influence of the world but also from their own sinful natures. So we don't just love God's limits because they are his and because we love him, but also because he gives them to us for our protection. And still not just that, but also because he tells us that he will always bless our obedience. Remember Moses words, **“so that you may enjoy long life ... and ... so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you”** (2-3). In the same way that there are always consequences for sin, so there are always blessings for obedience. St. Augustine learned this lesson and wrote a beautiful concise prayer to ask God to help him better live it. You may have heard it before. *“Teach me to love what you command, that I may obtain what you have promised.”*

Isn't that what we are trying to instill in our children: to learn to love what God commands, so they may obtain the blessings he promises? And so, with God's help and forgiveness, we refuse to keep his Word hidden away on a shelf. With God's help and

forgiveness, we keep his Word firmly rooted in our hearts and ever on our lips. We refuse to restrict our talk and teaching about God to Sunday mornings or even to limit it to just family devotions. Rather, we follow God's secret to parenting as he shared it through Moses. **“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”** (6-9).

Moses' words about where to tie and bind and write God's commandments aren't to be taken literally, even though many Jewish people have done so. But they simply mean that God refuses to be restricted in our lives. He wants his Word to be in our hearts and on our lips in every aspect of our lives—*unlimited*. As one article in the latest Trinity Ties reminds us, God's Word is our instruction manual for parenting. The most effective parenting happens outside the classroom, in the every day situations of life. It happens in the conversations in the car. It happens in the dinner-table discussions. It happens in the attitude we display toward the things of this world and the things not of this world. As someone has put it, with children godly living is *“more frequently caught than taught.”* The most effective parenting happens when we ourselves, with law and gospel, practice balancing the fear and love of God, first in our own hearts and with the children in our lives. Paul speaks of this delicate balance of law and gospel, of fear and love, in his words to Ephesian fathers, **“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord”** (Ephesians 6:4). May each of us effectively strike up that balance.

As he gently leads us to the Promised Land of heaven, God gives us unlimited reasons and unlimited ways to love him. He fully loves and forgives us in Jesus Christ. He protects and blesses us with his commands. What greater reasons could there be: to love God *without limits*; to love God's *limits*; to talk of God—*unlimited*? Amen.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.
Ephesians 3:20-21

