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God's Love Restrains Us

Philippians 1

We live in a country where we cherish our freedoms.

We can live and travel where and when we want, financially support or publicly criticize whomever we want; eat, drink and even smoke what we want.

No civilization in the world at any time in history has experienced as much freedom as we enjoy here in America. People from other parts of the world only dream of the freedoms we experience every day.

No wonder so many people want to come and live here.

And yet, some might say that all this freedom has gone to our heads, and can lead to serious problems. They believe that too much freedom leads to chaos, maybe even anarchy.

Look at the current debates surrounding gun control, open borders, and abortion.

The remedy, some believe, is in the formation of new laws.

People need to be regulated and restricted so that they won't do harm to one another or to the innocent. Take for example abortion bills that have passed in some states and the backlash that has ensued.

Many are applauding the passing of these news laws. Many others are protesting.

How can there be such a wide disparity in peoples' viewpoints?

What's the answer to these ongoing debates?

Should more laws be created to curb people's freedom, thereby helping people protect themselves from themselves...

Or should the citizens of this country be free to make decisions without any government interference?

Perhaps more laws help guard the freedoms people have already gained.

Others would argue that more laws are an infringement on our freedom.

Unsurprisingly, the answer is not an easy one, and I'm not sure I have a solution.

But what might surprise you is finding that the book of Philippians has something to say on the subject.

The more I've read Philippians, the more I'm convinced that this short letter of only four chapters written around AD 55 – 60 by the Apostle Paul to a small church on the other side of the world speaks to our current dilemma.

What's better for society: more regulations or less?

In the past, when I've read Philippians, I've typically come away with the idea that joy and thankfulness are the main themes of the letter, and this may well be true.

Listen to Paul's opening: *"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy..."* This is how he greets the saints, overseers, and deacons of the fledgling Philippian church.

Now this single statement alone is practically worth the value of the whole book, because it's good medicine for every pastor's soul – a reminder and exhortation to be joyful and thankful for those who are in the trenches with me.

Paul's words challenge me to know and embrace the truth that my parishioners are partners with me seeking to achieve the same goal: to engage our culture and community with the Gospel of Christ in such a way that others may believe and live for Christ.

But even more important is the fact that my fellow church - goers are brothers and sisters in Christ who share with me the wonderful gifts bestowed upon us by God, namely His grace, which is the source of our joy, hope, purpose, and an eternal future with God:

"All of you share in God's grace with me."

This fact alone should cause me to treat my neighbor with love and respect.

God loves us so fervently, so unreservedly that grace - something we in no way deserve - is ours simply for the asking and by believing in God's Son.

Being Christ's follower, I should likewise try to extend grace to my fellowman – and especially to those who claim Jesus as Lord.

But how does all this relate to my original question?

More regulation or less?

Simply this: The Apostle Paul makes the profound statement to the Philippian church leaders and to us that restraints are actually good for the saints – or at least good for the advancement of the Gospel.

(This is my 21st century take on what Paul means when he writes in verse 12, *"What has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel."*)

Let me say this principle again, because I believe it's extremely important: Restraints are good for the saints because they can serve to advance the gospel.

To be honest, this principle is a relatively foreign concept to the western mindset which typically views restraint as a negative condition.

We savor and bask in the glory of knowing that we can do what we want when we want without anyone looking over our shoulder to see who's watching.

We like knowing that we can go to the grocery store and buy up a year's supply of toilet paper just because we can.

We enjoy the fact that we can eat at the buffet knowing that a single price allows us to return over and over again to the pizza or dessert bar.

We take comfort in knowing that if we don't like our current doctor or pastor, we can find another one who has better bedside manners or better connects with us.

We even go to church and sing with gusto "My chains fell off" because, well, chains are bad.

Chains inhibit and restrict our freedom. Chains limit my movements and ultimately my choices.

I like choices.

It seems that way for Paul. He says he's in chains, and I get the feeling he's not too happy about it. He's not living the dream. In fact, I get the sneaky suspicion that if he had his way, he'd be heading to Philippi to see all his close friends. He writes in verse 8 of chapter 1, *"God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."*

But he can't go see them right now.

He may never get to see them again because he's under house arrest. His movements have been hindered, He's under the watchful eye of the Roman government – detained. More than that, restrained, and a prisoner of the civil authorities. This cannot be good, can it?

Well, Paul actually says yes!

Maybe not for him personally, but for the advancement of the gospel, Yes, chains can be a good thing.

Paul writes, as a result of my imprisonment and persecution – this circumstance that has been my lot – *“it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.”*

In other words, anyone who has had any connection whatsoever to the civil government in Rome has certainly heard of Paul’s imprisonment and more importantly, the reason for his incarceration. He is a prisoner because he preached Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection.

Now that’s one awesome testimony!

When any Roman citizen saw or heard about Paul, what was the first thing that popped into their heads? Oh, he’s the one who speaks for Christ – he testifies to the One who died and came back to life.

What do you think people say about you when you come to their mind?

Not that what people think of you is totally accurate or relevant, but it may give us some idea of the message we’re sending to the world.

Oh, there goes that crochety coach.

There’s that weird teacher.

The stuffy banker

The rough construction worker.

Oh, there’s that arrogant blowhard of a preacher. Oh, I remember that self-absorbed and self-righteous neighbor that never bothered to say boo to me.

The point is that we send out all sorts of vibes and signals to others that may well be misinterpreted, but the essential question for us Christians is ... “Is Christ exalted in our words and deeds?”

Is this the message we’re sending to the world? This is the message Paul is sending to the world, even while he was restrained – and because he was restrained!

Paul’s restraints are serving to advance the Gospel for one reason: Paul is free on the inside.

His heart is full of joy and love and hope and affection and prayers and most importantly Christ, and this makes all the difference in the world.

Because when trials come, our true nature is exposed.

When things in life are going well, it’s easy to put on a happy face and at least pretend we’re joyful and content on the inside, but when things go south, when adversity becomes our constant companion, the true colors of our soul are revealed.

That’s probably why many of us isolate ourselves when life hands us a bag of lemons. We’re afraid others will witness the blackness of our hearts which we’ve become so adept at hiding.

We’re afraid others won’t accept us if our flaws, shortcomings, and frailties are revealed. How quickly we forget Paul’s words, *“All of you share in God’s grace with me.”*

The point in all this is that if we’ve already confessed to sharing God’s grace, then this means that somewhere in the past we’ve also admitted and confessed to God our brokenness and sinful nature too.

The saints in Philippi and the saints in Almont will not be surprised.

We’re all in this together, that’s why we’re called to dispense to one another the grace God has already freely shared with us.

But let's go back to my original question: Restraints, and limitations: Are they good or bad for us?

Paul has already spoken of one type of restraint and hinderance and proclaimed that it has helped to advance the gospel: Everyone knows why I'm in chains but let us not overlook another one: our physical bodies! The older we get, the more we can relate to this one.

In verse 21 we read what is probably the most radical statement ever written by the Apostle Paul: *"to live is Christ and to die is gain."*

Think about this for a second.

Paul, who at the time of this writing had given twenty or may be thirty years of his life to evangelizing, church planting and teaching, essentially confesses to everyone that his greatest desire now is to leave this world behind and be fully present with Christ:

"I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far."

But Paul is unable to though, because of his restraints, his limitations and more importantly, because of God's continued call on his life.

Paul says, I want to be with God, 24/7 in his presence and bask in his glory and holiness and discover more deeply about who He is and get to know him on such an intimate level that all my worries, cares and concerns would just simply fade away, but I can't!

"It is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."

Paul is restrained from doing what he really wants to do because of love – not so much because of his personal love for the Philippians, which we all know he has, but because of God's love for them and for His desire for them to be made complete:

"I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith."

Do you see this unfolding in your life?

Do you see your life so inextricably linked to others that your absence will cause great harm to those you'd leave behind?

This is a poignant and powerful reminder that each member of the body of Christ is a vital and integral part of the whole, and so we're restrained in our decisions.

Sure, we'd like stay home and watch All Star Wrestling or Dr. Stanley because he preaches such wonderful sermons, but we soberly understand that our absence from the body brings no earthly good to God's family, so we lay aside our own desires –

We restrain ourselves and our Sunday whims so the community of believers are encouraged and edified and the world outside sees and says, "My, how they love one another!

And the Gospel cannot help but be advanced. Yes, restraints can be a good thing.

And the greatest restraint is love.

Put Pastor, I thought love was what makes everyone more free! In a real sense yes, because when love restrains us, God is able to love others through us.

When we show patience and kindness, and are slow to anger, when we do not demonstrate envy and are not boastful, when we forgive and rejoice in the truth and protect and trust and hope - when we do this stuff that Paul lists in the great love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 – when we are restrained by love, love is free to work in us so we can love others.

Are restrictions and restraints good for society?

The answer is a resounding yes, when the source of the restraint is love.

After all, what is society?

Isn't it just an extension of family?

Wasn't all of humanity formed out of one family?

Did not God establish way back in Deuteronomy the principle that the family is the central clearinghouse of God's laws based on love?

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, and when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

I share an analogy to argue that restraint is good a thing for the people of God: Some time ago, some folks shared with me that on vacation, they were given the opportunity to experience the rugged Central America terrain using zip lines and harnesses.

They had never done anything like this before and suffice it to say they we're more than a bit nervous, but believing that this was probably their one and only chance, and because they didn't want to later regret that they passed up the chance, they went for it. And wow, were they glad they did!

One expressed that the most thrilling part of the ride was being able to let their hands and feet go and completely trust in the harness. They described how exhilarating that feeling was.

Perhaps this can be a reminder to us that the restraints God puts on us in love help us to fully experience the freedom that we've all come to yearn for and which God desires for each of us in Christ.

Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he said in John 8:36: *"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

Jesus said this in the context of believers being members of God's forever family, and a family is love's garden, and love that grows in us restrains us so that we can bring freedom to others in the name of Christ. Amen.