

Question: I have a friend who was very active in Christian service in his church and community until an accident left him handicapped. He still wants to help others and feels bad about his limitations. How can I encourage him?

It can be very difficult for people who have been active in Christian service to adjust to a more limited role. However, the person who is facing such a challenge can be encouraged by considering the example of the apostle Paul. I am reminded of a statement that he wrote, “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains” (Colossians 4:18). After years of active service, Paul was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar. Being chained to a Roman soldier placed limitations upon this once energetic man who had been traveling and preaching the good news of Jesus. His request that they remember his chains was not only a request for prayers, but also an appeal for understanding. He could not come to them or even write to them as freely as he wanted.

Like Paul, we all have limitations of some kind. Some people, like your friend, have physical handicaps or illnesses that place limitations upon what they can do. Others are limited by being too young or too old to do some things they would like to do. The list of things that can limit us is endless. Examples would include lacking skills, the training or financial resources, as well as either being single or having family and job responsibilities. People react in different ways to these realities. Some feel guilty. Others are unhappy or angry. Still others acknowledge their limitations and live as faithful Christians who serve even through their handicaps.

By mentioning his chains, Paul demonstrated that he saw no disgrace in his limitations. He was not in prison because he did something wrong but because he did something right. He preached the good news of Jesus Christ. It would be wonderful if each of us could be more active in Christian service, but there are always limiting factors.

In addition, Paul’s chains did not prevent him from being useful in Christian service. In another letter from prison, Paul wrote: “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to

advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (Philippians 1:12-14). Paul was not where he wanted to be, but God had a plan that used him right where he was. Your friend may not be able to do what he formerly did; but by faith in the goodness and wisdom of God, he can still serve to the glory of God.

Neither did Paul allow his chains to mar his happiness. He sang hymns in prison (Acts 16:25) and wrote his most positive letter from prison, saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). This kind of joy is found in a relationship with the Lord—a relationship that can never be limited by any handicap this world may bring.

Finally, Paul knew that his eternal hope was not limited by his chains. Success in the eyes of God is not measured in the way we humans measure success. All our Lord God has ever asked of us is that we serve the best we can no matter the circumstances (Mark 14:9; Luke 12:48; 1 Corinthians 8:12). Tell your friend that the Lord knows his handicaps and understands his limitations. He also knows his heart. That is what is important to our God of grace and mercy.

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