

TERM LIMITS

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Hebrews 7:23-28

In February of this year, the Communist Party of China announced that they were abolishing the two-term limit on the presidency of China. This change will allow the current president, Xi Jinping, and those who follow him, to rule for life. Xi Jinping will remain president until he is voted out of office or until he dies. For us democratically-minded Americans, removing the term limits on the presidency seems suspicious, even dangerous. We ask, won't that place too much power in the hands of a single person? It removes a check and a balance. We know how difficult it is to unseat an incumbent. How is a president-for-life different than a king?

The president of the United States, as we know, can only serve two terms in office. But it has not always been that way. Originally, the constitution left the matter open. It was our first president, George Washington, who declined to run for a third term. The people would have elected him but he was afraid of creating anything resembling the monarchy they had just fought so hard to free themselves from. The second president, Thomas Jefferson, also voluntarily served just two terms. Following this action, a precedent was established and a two term presidency was the norm until Franklin Delano Roosevelt won four consecutive terms. Roosevelt died in office shortly after his fourth inauguration. After Roosevelt, in response to the concern that anyone should serve too long, the nation, in 1951, ratified the 22nd Amendment which limits anyone serving as president to a maximum of two terms.

The presidency is the only term-limited federal office. The vice-president, senators, and congress-people all serve as long as they are re-elected. The members of the Supreme Court, on the other hand, once appointed, serve for life. Some have argued that the meaning of life tenure on the court has changed since, thanks to medical advances, people can now live so much longer than they did in the late 1700s when the Constitution was written. There is a movement to change the Constitution. In 1978, the General Assembly of the state of Tennessee adopted House Joint Resolution No. 21 which officially expressed to Congress the desire to create a constitutional amendment to impose term limits on justices. Obviously, it didn't gain traction.

Term limits exist in various other elected offices across the U.S. For example, the governorships of 36 states are subject to term limits in one form or another. In some states, a person may only serve two terms. In others, they can only serve two consecutive terms. Then, after sitting out a term, they are eligible to be re-elected for two more terms. In my home state of Alabama, term-limited governor George

Wallace famously sought to circumvent his term limit by having his wife elected governor in 1966. She won and then her husband was re-elected in 1970.

In the election this week, in Nashville—Davidson County—there is an amendment on the ballot that seeks to extend the term limits of the members of the Metro Council from two to three terms. It will be interesting to see how that turns out.

There are good arguments to make on both sides of term limits. Those who favor term limits argue that they prevent any person from accumulating too much power and they allow more people to participate in governing. Those who oppose term limits argue that governing is difficult and that experience gained through years of service is best for the people. Some argue that the ultimate term limit is just to have an election. Anyone can be voted out.

Our reading today from the book of Hebrews is about term limits. The book of Hebrews is a sermon or an essay written in the first century AD for a struggling congregation in Rome. The members of this congregation are mostly Jewish converts to Christianity. As of late, their zeal for the faith has been deteriorating. Some have left the faith and others are considering doing so. The writer of Hebrews is making a valiant attempt to help the people better grasp the cosmic importance of Jesus the Christ. He is arguing that Jesus is not just some holy man, he is, in fact, the Son of God. He is the key to their salvation. And to help them comprehend Jesus' role in their lives, Hebrews does something that is unique in scripture. It associates Jesus with the office of the high priest. The high priest serves over all priests. The high priest makes the sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. The high priest is earth's conduit to heaven. The first high priest was Aaron, the brother of Moses. Jesus, as high priest, is different. He is not a high priest in the order of Aaron like all the other priests of Israel; he is high priest in the order of the ancient king and priest Melchizedek. We covered Melchizedek last week.

In our reading, the writer points out that high priests come and go. Their appointment is for life and they are term limited by death. High priests die. But Jesus is different. As high priest, he is eternal; he serves *permanently*. Jesus is someone that can be counted on always. As Hebrews puts it, *He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them*. Hebrews is telling the people that Jesus is always present to intercede with God on their behalf. As we read in chapter 4, Jesus invites us to approach God with *boldness so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*. The high priest in the temple may not always be available to each person. Jesus, on the other hand, is always present and available.

Human high priests are mortal like the rest of us. They are also sinners like the rest of us. This does not mean they are terrible people, just sinners, imperfect. But Christ is different. He is the high priest who is without sin. He is *holy, blameless*,

undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. This is a savior worth following. This is a savior to whom you can dedicate your life, in whom you can put your trust, who will not abandon you or forget you. The writer of Hebrews is telling these people that what they have is better than anything they will find anywhere in the world.

But what really sets Jesus apart as a high priest is his sacrifice for us. He gave his life for our sins. The regular high priests make daily offerings of lambs, goats, and birds. Jesus' sacrifice was his life. Jesus made his sacrifice once and for all. It is over. It is done with. Our debt has been paid.

Finally, our reading wraps up with these words—the mortal high priests are subject to their own sins and weaknesses, but God appoints a Son as high priest who is without sin, who is *perfect forever*.

As Martin Luther put it, “This, then, is the Christian religion. One has sinned. Another has made satisfaction. The sinner does not make satisfaction; the Satisfier does not sin. This is an astonishing doctrine.”¹ Luther is right. This is our faith. The one who is without sin gave himself for the sinners of the world.

This is the argument of Hebrews, that Jesus is the ultimate high priest who is always willing and able to go to bat for us with God. Because of Christ, we are always represented; we are never alone, never forgotten, we are never separated from our God. He is our great elected official who serves without term limit, who will always answer our calls, who never dies.

Today is the first Sunday in November, a day we recognize as All Saints Sunday. In a few moments, we are going to recall the names of those associated with our church who died in the past year. But we are also free to remember all of those persons of faith we have known—as well as those we have not known—who have gone before us. These are the saints of our faith. They are the saints; they are the priests; they have served their terms and cleared a path and set the example for us to follow. They are the ones who have known Jesus Christ, the great high priest.

Amen.

¹ From Luther's lectures on Isaiah.