

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

The Way Out

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 7, 2010

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1 Corinthians 10:1-13

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. ⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did--and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test the Lord, as some of them did--and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did--and were killed by the destroying angel. ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

The readings and disciplines of Lent give us more opportunity to pay consistent attention to our relationship with God than at other times of the year. Today's reading from 1 Corinthians concerns a subject you don't hear much about in every day life, but it's something that very much affects our relationship with God: temptation. Being tempted to sin isn't something most people, even Christians, seem to think about or talk much about nowadays. But it's clearly a part of every Christian's life. Dealing with temptation is clearly important, because, as we'll see, giving in to temptation can have disastrous eternal consequences.

The word "tempt" or "temptation" has two basic meanings in the New Testament. The first is to "entice to sin". Satan tempted Jesus in this way in the wilderness. James 1:12-15 tells us where this kind of temptation comes from, and its result: **"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."**

The second meaning is to "test" or "try". This should be familiar to us. After all we human beings test and try things all the time: automakers test their cars, GE tests their light bulbs, teachers test their students, and so forth. God doesn't tempt us to sin, but he uses our temptations to test our faith for our own benefit, as James also says: **"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."** (James 1:2-4)

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a congregation of former idol-worshipping gentile pagans who were facing many temptations. They had been raised in a culture where occult practices, sexual immorality, and prayers and sacrifices to idols were part of every day life. Through Paul's preaching, these same folks had come to know Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died on the cross for their salvation and had forever defeated the demonic powers that the Corinthians used to worship. But as time went by, some of the Corinthian Christians were understandably tempted to slip back into the pagan ways they had grown up with, or at least to compromise their faith by participating in pagan practices. They wanted to fit in with their friends and neighbors in ways that might lead them away from Christ forever.

Paul warns the Corinthians that just because they've been baptized and eat the Lord's Supper together as part of the Church, these things alone don't

guarantee their salvation. Baptism into Christ means rescue from the world of darkness, just as passing through the Red Sea meant rescue from Egypt for the Israelites. Dining at the Lord's table means being fed by him, trusting him to provide all we need for this life and the next, just as the Israelites depended on God to provide supernatural food and water in their wanderings in the desert. Paul points out that the Israelites had these supernatural experiences in the Book of Exodus, but that even sharing those experiences wasn't enough for many of them to please God: **“our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. ⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.”**

Why was God **“not pleased with most of”** the Israelites? They practiced the very idolatrous religions of the pagan nations he'd rescued them from. They engaged in the same immoral sexual practices as those same pagan nations. They complained against God, against having to live by faith in him in the desert. Paul says what happened to the Israelites under Moses wasn't just an accident or a random sequence of events. No—**“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings *for us*, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!”**

This is a sobering warning. Does it apply to us? Yes, it does, and to every Christian. If we drift into the idea that being baptized, having our children baptized and confirmed, going to church and taking communion are by themselves guarantees of eternal life, we're deceiving ourselves. It's possible to do those things, which testify to our salvation and our faith in Christ, but at the same time to live every day focused on getting by in this world. That amounts to practical paganism. The paganism the Corinthians grew up in had a myriad of gods for every conceivable aspect of life in this world. The whole focus was on life in this world.

But of course, keeping people focused on this world instead of the world to come is Satan's favorite tactic. That's why evil spirits are so much a part of paganism. What Paul is working hard here to demonstrate is that Almighty God is absolutely Lord of every part of life in this world and in the spiritual world and in the world to come. In Christ, the end of the ages has been revealed. The coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection is God's signal of the new heaven and earth full of righteousness and peace he's intended from the beginning.

Serving God alone in this world is how we get to eternal life in the next. That means giving up idols: worshiping him and not our bank accounts, retirement programs, our families, real estate investments, or whatever. It means giving up sexual immorality: using our bodies and our minds for the purposes he intended—to learn about him and love one another in the ways he has prescribed, to have relationships based on God’s image in one another. It means trusting God for every thing every day instead of complaining: staying in relationship with him through the times of testing as well as the easy times, knowing that he has our best interests at heart, no matter how hard it seems to be obedient.

Every one of us faces temptation to sin. If we don’t, we’re not really living for Jesus Christ. My temptations show me how much I need Jesus Christ to rescue me from my own desires. They show me the greatness of his love, that he was willing to die to forgive me for my sins.

Temptations to sin show us that we are living out our lives on an eternal stage. There is a judgment coming for those who refuse God’s grace and mercy in the gift of his Son. But Paul gives wonderful news to the Corinthians and to us: **“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”**

Temptations will surely come, but with every temptation comes a way out! We don’t have to be overcome by temptation. We only need to recognize the temptation and then look for the way out of it that God has provided. But as C.K. Barrett says, **“the way out is for them that seek it, not for those who . . . are . . . looking for a way in.”**¹

We need to recognize and then soberly and realistically confront temptation. Are we tempted to put our job, our finances, our children, our retirement, our convenience, or anything else first, ahead of God? Then we’re being tempted to idolatry. Are we tempted to think of and look at other people as a means of bringing us pleasure, and not as the image of God that he created them to be? Then we’re tempted to sexual immorality. When we’re asked to give up our ways, our preferences, our plans for the kingdom of God, or even just for other people, do we grumble and complain? Then we’re being tempted to complain against the God who has brought us to himself by his grace without our having deserved it. Temptations are real, but with every one, God supplies a way out.

Let us pray.

¹ C.K. Barrett, A Commentary on The First Epistle to the Corinthians, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1987) p. 229

O Lord our God, grant us, we beseech thee, patience in troubles, humility in comforts, constancy in temptations, and victory over all our spiritual foes. Grant us sorrow for our sins, thankfulness for thy benefits, fear of thy judgment, love of thy mercies, and mindfulness of thy presence; now and for evermore.