

The danger of blessing

(1 Corinthians 10:1-33)

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At the end of 1 Corinthians 9, Paul wrote about surrendering one's rights and disciplining the body, lest after sharing Christ they be disqualified by falling into sin. Paul was not referring to losing their salvation, but to losing their ability to be used by God in any meaningful way. The Corinthians had been blessed by God, but they still were living in the midst of a spiritual battlefield. This was not a time to relax and grow spiritually complacent. If they were not fully dependent on and devoted to Christ, sin would surely overtake them, and their ability to point others towards Christ would be lost.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul sought to explain their predicament by using the nation of Israel as an example. In the Old Testament, God set His people free from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites had witnessed miraculous plagues that God brought against the Egyptians. The Israelites had been brought through the Red Sea on dry ground (Exodus 14:19-31). They had been guided in the wilderness by a column of smoke during the day and a column of fire by night (Exodus 13:21; Exodus 14:19). God had provided daily manna for bread and birds for meat (Exodus 16). God even brought water out of a rock so they would not die of thirst (Numbers 20:1-11). All throughout this journey the divine presence of God was with them. Paul declares that it was the eternal, pre-incarnational Christ who was with them. Yet, they hardened their hearts and turned against their God, the Giver of all good gifts.

Instead of being driven towards Christ by these blessings, they became spiritually lazy and discontented, and entitled. They took for granted God's blessings, they drifted from His presence and in that found themselves face-to-face with temptation, without God's strength to remain holy.

This was the condition of the Corinthian church as well. In Christ they had forgiveness, new life, hope, and freedom to worship. They had been saved from sin and selfishness. God had blessed this

new church by many people coming to Christ and many evidences of the power of God being displayed in their midst. Amid their blessings, they had grown complacent and had spiritually let their guard down. Now sin was making its way into the church.

In verses 6-12 Paul then continued using the Israelites as an example. Paul reminded the Corinthians of the sins of the Israelites to help them avoid making the same mistakes that the Israelites had. In these verses we see specific sins of which the Israelites were guilty. Do not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters. We must not indulge in sexual immorality. We must not put Christ to the test. We must not grumble.

In verse 6 Paul instructs the Corinthians to not desire evil. It reminds us of the teaching that we find in James 1:14: ***“Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own (evil) desire.”*** Our sin starts out with sinful desires. We are then lured and drawn into a trap that would never have enticed us if our desires had not been sinful.

It would be similar to that of an animal that is lured into a trap that has been set with meat that it desires. Another example would be an unsuspecting fish that is lured to a hook that is hidden by a type of bait that the fish seeks.

The power of the temptation is based on the power that the sinful desire has over us. In Psalm 37:4, we are instructed to, ***“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”*** As we neglect to delight ourselves in the Lord our desires will betray us and be led to seek the sinful things of this world. Sinful desires lead us to sin, but sinful desires only flourish when a believer ceases to delight in God. This was the foundational sin of the Israelites. They had ceased to delight in God. They desired the sins of the world more than they desired God. This leads us into the next sin that Paul listed.

“Do not be idolaters.” This is referring to when the Israelites built a golden calf and worshipped it, while Moses was up on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments. When we see the word “idolater”, many only think of people bowing to some sort of pagan statue or serving some sort of false god. While this does fall into the category of idolatry, the true definition is more likely to threaten the daily lives of a Christian. Idolatry is when we worship or desire anything more than Christ. If we are not careful, we grow to desire pleasure, money, reputation, control, or even good things such as love, security or freedom, more than we desire Christ. We then begin to pursue a selfish direction of life, forsaking Christ and His will for our lives. We are then enticed by our evil desires and led into sin. We never bowed to a statue, but we have become guilty of idolatry, worshipping something or someone more than Christ. At this point multiple types of sin stand at that door of our lives, ready to enter in.

Paul then reminded the Corinthians of the Israelites who indulged in sexual immorality (Numbers 25:1-9). Scripture tells how their sinfulness resulted in a plague of judgment that killed 23,000 people. In our promiscuous and tolerant society God’s judgment sounds extreme, but it gives us a clear picture of the gravity of sin against a holy God. Remember even our sin was of such severity that it took the death of Christ to redeem us from its penalty. All sin is first and foremost against God. Also, remember that sexual immorality is not only found in the sinful act. As Jesus said, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful***

intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Paul warns the Corinthians, ***“We must not indulge in sexual immorality.”*** Be warned of the threat and the consequence. If we neglect to delight in God, many will be drawn into some form of sexual immorality.

Paul then warned the Corinthians not to put Christ to the test as some of the Israelites had done. In Numbers 21:4-9 we find the story. God, the One who had miraculously freed them from slavery in Egypt, the One who had already proven His existence and His faithfulness, was guiding the Israelites towards the land to which He had promised them. God had worked all the wonders that Paul alluded to in his previous paragraph, but already they had forgotten His blessings. In the midst of the journey the people grew impatient and began to question God’s purpose, provision and his timing. They began to speak against God and Moses. In response God sent fiery serpents among the people. Many were bitten and died. They were only delivered once they looked upon the bronze serpent that God instructed Moses set up on a pole. They had tested God and God brought judgment.

Paul taught the Corinthians that these events have been recorded so that the Corinthians and those of us who have come later could learn from the mistakes of the Israelites. The Israelites were blessed immensely by God, but instead of being humbled and more dependent on Him, they became rebellious and sought the gifts more than the gift-Giver.

The Corinthians were vulnerable to the same danger of blessing. Because of past blessing, they could be easily drawn into spiritual complacency and away from diligent devotion. With this in mind, Paul warned them to beware because those who do not guard against sin will likely befall to it.

Imagine that you are one of the people in the Corinthian church. You have heard Paul’s letter. You have taken to heart its message about evil desires, idolatry, sinful desires, sexual immorality, testing God and grumbling. You want to be holy, but sin has already overtaken you. Paul then offers verse 13 to bring hope to your desperate need:

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

Within this verse there are several key truths that we must understand. Our struggle with sin is not new or hopelessly unique. God can deliver us from sin, just like He has so many others. God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability. This “ability” is not found in our strength or will power. Our “ability” is the strength that is found in Christ in us. He is our promise of holiness. He is our hope when we face temptation.

As mentioned earlier, all temptation that one faces begins from the evil desires that are within him. Yes, Satan tempts us where we are most vulnerable, but each person will always be responsible for his own desires and choices. It is as if we are walking through a crowded market with many vendors vying for our business. While none can touch us or force their will upon us, they all do their best to entice us. Those who are selling products that we do not care about are no challenge to ignore, but those offering products that promise to fulfill our longings are more difficult to refuse. This is even more difficult when

Satan is the salesman. He is the tempter who knows our weaknesses. He knows our past failures. He also knows the lies that we believe (about ourselves and about God). In some ways he knows us better than we know ourselves.

Satan tempts us where we are most vulnerable. 1 Peter 5:8 describes Satan with these words, *“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”* In John 10:10, Jesus tells how Satan has come *“to kill and steal and destroy”*. Satan also uses other people to entice us (Proverbs 1:10) and twists scripture to hide the truths of God (Gen. 3). We must remember that even in his treachery all Satan can do is tempt in the areas of our desires, hoping that we will give in to them.

We all have evil desires of one kind or another that originate in our hearts. Even with sincere efforts we do not have the power to change our own hearts. Only God can bring conviction of sin, distaste for the things of the world, and a new nature in us. Heart change can only be done by God. It is in Christ that one finds his Defender against temptation.

In the words of Madame Guyon (1648-1717), *“The surest and safest method for conquest is simply to turn away from the evil and draw yet nearer and closer to our God.”*¹ She likened it to a child who clings to her mother in total confidence of safety, after seeing a monster. *“The Lord will defend us from temptation; therefore our greatest responsibility is to run to him. Our energies are not to be spent fighting the temptation. Within ourselves we do not have the resources to win. Our energies are to be spent running to the Father. He will win the battle for us.”*

It is in turning with our whole heart towards Jesus Christ that we find safety and refuge. As this becomes our custom and our way of life, every encounter with temptation will propel us closer and closer to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

This was the problem with the Corinthians. They had become self-righteous and believed themselves to be spiritually self-sufficient. They had neglected intimacy with Christ. This was their downfall. It was much like the story of Samson, who raised up to fight in his most desperate time of need and found that the supernatural power of God had departed (Judges 13-16).

A great desire for God is the only thing that can dethrone one’s idolatrous evil desires. John Piper expresses this biblical principle in these words, *“I know of no other way to triumph over sin long-term, than to gain a distaste for it, because of a superior satisfaction in God.”*²

This satisfaction in God is only found as His children delight in Him. This promise of escape from temptation is available to all who draw near to God and allow Him to fight the battles for them.

Paul has now talked about the danger of blessing and the temptation that it can bring. With all of this said, Paul warns them to flee from idolatry. Not to consider, deliberate or contemplate its danger, but to flee from idolatry. Paul knew that all other sins flowed out of the initial sin of

¹ Madame Guyon, “Short and Easy Method of Prayer”, Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

² John Piper, *Desiring God*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 11.

worshipping something more than Christ. Idolatry is not to be trifled with, so Paul commanded with all urgency that they flee.

Paul then gives them another illustration. How can a believer who worships at the communion table of the body and the blood of Christ then sit at another table and observe rituals that worship a pagan god? ***“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”***

In the days of Corinth meat was often sacrificed to a pagan god at a temple. Part of the meat was then given back to the worshipper to be served at a feast that he would host. At these feasts it was believed that the pagan god would be present as a guest. It was believed that the presence of this pagan god was now in the meat and he would then enter into the bodies and spirits of all who ate of him at the feast. This sacrificial meal was believed to form a real communion between the god and the worshippers who ate of it.

So Paul challenged those in the Corinthian church to be holy devoted to Jesus Christ. If they were to be holy committed to Christ, they could no longer worship at both tables. Yes, the sacrificed meat may taste great and they may risk offending their host, but they could not love God and love the world. They could not choose Christ, while still clinging to remnants of their past pagan religion. They could not seek the approval of God, while seeking the approval of man.

Many things might have been lawful, and even seemed innocent in their own right, but once they became a spiritual detriment, once they became one's chief desire, they became an idol. There is nothing sinful about freedom, security, peace or even companionship, but once any of those become our chief desire it has become sinful and idolatrous. We then focus on our selfish desires and neglect the good of our neighbor.

Paul then returned to the pressing issue to make his final point. Eat whatever meat you have bought in the meat market without any question of if it was sacrificed to an idol, because we know that false gods are not real and that God has made all things.

If an unbeliever invites you over to eat meat, go ahead and eat it without raising any question, but if they say that it has been offered in sacrifice, then do not eat it. We must not worship at the table of a false god for our own good and for the good of the unbeliever who is watching us. Our allegiance must be clear.

Yes, we are free in Christ, so deny yourself and stand for Christ when it will further the kingdom of God and the salvation of others.

“Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.”

This is our call today. That we would glorify God in all things. That each day as we stand at the crossroads between holiness and sin, that our words, thoughts and deeds would proclaim the ultimate worth of our God.

That we would put away anything in our lives that is drawing us away from God (Hebrews 12:1-2). That we would add to our lives anything that will draw us nearer to Him.

That the blessings of God that we have received would not move us to self-righteousness, spiritual greed, or a sense of complacency, but instead would instill in us an indebted heart that daily returns to the Giver of all good gifts. That we would never forget our desperate need for Him and the spiritual battlefield in which we live. As we find our greatest desire in Him, He will draw near and fight our battles, and we will be able to glorify Him in all that we do.

God has blessed us immensely and He desires to give even more to those who will be holy.

Let me close with this story:

There was an evangelist who used to preach around the world. His name was Sammy Tippit. On one trip he was traveling through Communist Eastern Europe. Somehow he had gained permission to hold evangelistic services that often met in outdoor sports stadiums. He tells how it would often be raining on the day of the meetings. His group would gather and pray that the rain would stop so that people would come to the services, and often times the rain would stop. It was a testimony to the power and love of God for the people of those countries.

On one occasion Mr. Tippit and his group were traveling by bus across the border into another country. The border guard came onto the bus and saw several rugs that Mr. Tippit had bought from different countries to take home as souvenirs. The guard took notice of one of the rugs and where it was from and demanded that a large tax be paid to take it across the border. The guard then left the bus. It was the rug that Mr. Tippit liked the best. The group discussed the problem and one person suggested that Mr. Tippit switch the tags with a less desirable rug and leave that rug there. They would be deceiving the border guard, but he probably did not have any right to charge this tax anyway. It all got quiet and they thought about it for a moment, and then a voice could be heard from the back of the bus, coming from one of the older men in the group: *"Mr. Tippit, you could switch the tags on the rugs if you would like, and deceive the guard, but I bet the next time we pray for the rain to stop, it doesn't."*

That is the dilemma that we each face today. Today may purpose in our hearts to be a holy people and in that may we find great blessing in God.

1. What in this sermon did you find most meaningful?
2. How can blessings be dangerous to one's spiritual life?
3. How would you explain 1 Corinthians 10:13 in your own words?
4. We are to glorify God in all things. What is one way that you can display this truth in your own life?
5. What do you think you need to remember and apply from this sermon?