

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Let Anyone Who Thinks He Stands Take Heed Lest He Fall”
By Eric Howell
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
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We come now to the third Sunday of Lent. We are right in the middle of the season, right in the thick of the journey. We are about halfway on our way through the 40 days of preparation, introspection, and spiritual reflection on the journey with Jesus to the cross—both His and ours.

For many of us Lent is a new kind of thing. We still aren't sure we have it figured out. We try to give some thing up for Lent—now, remind me, is that to suffer with Christ? Or is that out of thankfulness to God for God's grace? Is that to train myself in discipline—remind me why I'm doing that again? We have lots of questions.

And Lent is hard. It's hard for each person in different ways. For some people, they aren't quite sure of it at all so it all seems a little strange and quite foreign. For others, they try to 'do a Lenten discipline' like you hear about—maybe give up cokes or chocolates or something like that. And then they forget or give into a temptation. And then what? What do you do on day three with a half-eaten Hershey bar in one hand and a commitment to not eat chocolate in the other? What do you do for the last 37 days? Do you shrug it off and say oh well, maybe next year? Do you beat yourself up for 'failing?' Or do you say—that's me in a nutshell—I'm well intentioned, but don't have it all together all the time. But I'll rely on God's grace, trust in Christ, and try again. Lent is hard on you when you fall. Lent is hard when you don't fall, too. There are people, many people, who set out with a particular spiritual discipline at the beginning of the 40 days and now, halfway through, are still faithful to that discipline. In some ways the faithfulness gets easier. It's kind of renewing to feel good about doing something (for a change), to feel like you are doing something for God or with God or because of God or whatever the reason. It's a good thing. It makes you pray better. Sometimes, though, these prayers jump in and you don't know where they came from, "O Lord, thank you that I'm not like those other people who can't be disciplined. Thank you that I have an inner strength, a deeper spirituality that keeps me on the right track. Thank you so much Lord that I don't go to one of those churches that doesn't even know what Lent is and sings icky praise songs and that I'm a disciplined person. Thank you Lord that I'm not like one of those unreflective people." You know those prayers, right? They really aren't directed to God. They are directed to the person in the mirror, a false idol fashioned of our own doing—an idol not of a golden calf, but made of reflecting glass and in the shape of a certain type of donkey that Jesus rode on one time.

Today's reading from 1 Corinthians recounts the same story we have heard now for two weeks—it's the story of the people of God, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob set free from captivity in Egypt to follow, worship, and give glory to God. We heard the story on the banks of the Jordan River with Moses as he gave instructions on

how to celebrate the journey as a humble reminder of where they came from, “My father was a wandering Aramean.” Then we went back in time and heard the story from Abraham’s perspective, as a promise of what was yet to come. What will you do for me God since I am childless? Don’t be afraid Abram, look at the stars in the sky. You will have children just as numerous. So we have heard the story, the great story of God’s rescue, provision, protection, and deliverance—as a story of identity and of promise and we have been invited to hear the same story for ourselves in the same way—as our identity as people whose ancestors were wanderers in the desert and slaves in a foreign land—and as promise, that this is God’s character toward His people—a God who provides and makes a way when there seems to be no way. We’ve heard the story in these ways. Today, through the eyes and ears of the church at Corinth, we hear the story again, this time as warning.

Recalling the stories in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy of the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites through the desert, the parting of the red sea, the manna from heaven that fed the people, and the rock that produced miraculous water, Paul recalls the major provisions of God in the wilderness journey.

“I want you to know, brothers and sisters that your fathers were ALL under the cloud; All passed through the sea. ALL were baptized into Moses in the cloud and sea; All ate the same spiritual food; ALL drank the same spiritual drink” (1 Corinthians 10:1-4a).

The drink is said to come from a spiritual rock that followed them around—did you hear that line—it’s kind of strange. The Spiritual Rock wasn’t a genre of music A legend developed among the rabbis that the water source that sustained the Israelites in the wilderness was one single rock that followed the people throughout their journey, a consistent, miraculous water source. You won’t find this in the Old Testament, but Paul is drawing on this well-known story and then relating the role of such a rock to the sustaining, consistent, life-giving Water of Life, Rock of our Salvation that is Jesus Christ.

All of our fathers experienced all of this: God’s provision and protection, God’s sacrament-like blessing by a baptismal sea-passage and a Eucharistic-like gift of food and drink. They had all of this going for them.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. They had all their spirituality going for them on the outside, but things still were not good within them. God’s protection and provision does not equal God’s pleasure.

And so then we hear of four examples that all had to do with chasing after that which is not truly God. Do not do this like some of them did:

Do not be idolaters as some of them did in Exodus 32—the golden calf (1 Corinthians 10:7).

Do not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did in Numbers 25—when they went after Moabite women and the Moabite idols (1 Corinthians 10:8).

Do not put the Lord to the test as some of them did in Numbers 21—when they challenged God’s plan to bring them through the desert (1 Corinthians 10:9).

Do not grumble like some of them did in Numbers 14,16—all the time (1 Corinthians 10:10).

These are examples to you Corinthians, Paul is saying. Why would he write all of this? This has nothing to do with us, they might have said. These are not our problems.

But these were their problems. These first-century, first-generation gentile Christians were a people who thought they were super-spiritual and so had been fast-tracked past living intentionally and prayerfully to care for their souls. They were a people who thought they were so intelligent that they could think past the issues that Christianity raised.

One particular issue for them was in eating meat sacrificed to idols. Not a problem for us they said—we are smart enough to know that the idols aren’t real so it’s really meat sacrificed to nothing no matter what anyone else thinks. We have the *gnosis*—the inner knowledge. Not a problem for us, our faith is about our spirituality. We have the *pneuma*. They thought that faith was about things that are not connected to the physical life or the relational life so it didn’t matter what you did or how you related to others. Faith was about a higher order of things.

We, sitting here today, would look at them and say, boy, how did they mess that up? They ALL had the apostle Paul to teach and found them. They ALL were in the first generation of Christians, they ALL had letters from the apostles, probably more than we have in the Bible. They ALL had living witnesses to Christ. Nevertheless, God must have been displeased with most of them.

In chapters 1-3 some of them had divisions and arguments in the church about who is the better Christian by who got the better baptism.

In chapter 4 some of them are arrogant and boasting about their goodness.

In chapter 5 some of them are grossly immoral (read that one for yourself).

In chapter 6 some of them are suing one another.

In chapter 7 some of them are messing up marriage by their self-righteousness.

In chapter 8,9,10 some of them are getting too comfortable with idolatry.

In chapter 11 some of them were showing up early for the common meal and eating everything while those at the back of the line had empty plates.

In chapter 12 some of them thought they were more important than others.

In chapter 14 some of them were coming to worship and drawing all the attention to themselves rather than on God.

It makes you wonder what exactly people mean when they say, “I want to be in a New Testament church.” Have you read the New Testament?

Good thing we have it all together. We have the creeds, which teach us about the incarnation and Trinity and all that, and besides we have the New Testament, which they didn’t have. We have 2000 years of theological reflection and practice. We are the smartest, most intelligent, most connected people in the world. We have universities and seminaries and Google and Wikipedia. We know stuff. We have a better *gnosis*. And with the history of spirituality informing us, with great masters of our faith and with a great church, we have a more developed *pneuma*. These are not our problems.

So . . . we look down on the Corinthians . . . the Corinthians look down on the Israelites . . . the Israelites in the Exodus generation look down on Moses and some of the others that kept calling them back to their provincial, jealous, demanding deity. Each of us in each generation has our own challenges and our own issues. Each of us in this generation has the places in our lives where we have strayed from the God who saved us. And this word in 1 Corinthians 10:12 is a word to all of us in every generation, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

Let anyone who thinks he stands on vague spirituality take up a spiritual discipline to ground the existential in the experiential.

Let anyone who takes up a spiritual discipline be comforted in failure and humbled in success.

Let each of us lay down our crown and take up our cross to follow Him.

That in our faithfulness and our failures, our contemplation and our distraction, in the places in our lives when we are consecrated and common, where Lent has a life-giving hold on us and where life has a death-grip on us, let us find our feet on the solid ground of Christ and nothing and nowhere else.

We come to the place on the spiritual journey, maybe here in the middle of Lent, maybe sometime else in the middle of life, where we are laid bare, stripped down, exposed to ourselves and God, if to no one else, as a fraud. At least it feels that way. It’s so easy at that point to turn away from God and from the spiritual path because that is where the pain is coming from—it’s coming from a journey that is refining us by fire. And it’s hard. It’s much easier to turn away and settle into the comfortable alternative of living as one who is already dead. But this is not life. This is not the abundant life. This is not the spiritual life. The spiritual life is about being emptied of our small selves that we might know our True selves, dying to our old selves, that we might truly live.

Let anyone who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall. And, let those who fall be helped back to their feet, and let all of us who stand at all stand on Christ the solid rock, all other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.