

Sermon 32: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13: Warnings for the People of God

OUTLINE

The people of God are disciplined for sin
The people of God are tempted by sin
The people of God are provided against sin

INTRODUCTION

There are two opposite wrong attitudes that we can have to sin as the people of God. On the one hand we can be overconfident in our own strength, not fearful of sin, not mindful of God's hatred to sin in the life of a Christian and develop a callousness towards sin, underestimating it, rationalizing it, inevitably flirting with it and falling into it. The opposite extreme is the sinful exaggerating of sin and fixation upon our own weakness to the point of denying the power of the Spirit and the faithfulness of God to help us walk in victory over sin. This can lead to fixation, hypocritical rigor and despair. These attitudes of underestimating and overestimating sin are found in the Corinthian church among those who claim to have knowledge and flirt with idolatry partaking of meat offered to idols; and the weak who are overtaken by bad examples and fall back into sin. Paul, having addressed the matter of lovelessness and shown how a Christlike service of others in love and not a theological treatise on freedoms and liberties is the better way to make godly choices. Paul now turns to the danger of the sins concerned. Paul has just used his own ministry as an example and warned about how a fear of disqualification from the apostolic ministry is part of what drives him to be self-disciplined. This acts as a segue for Paul to talk about the seriousness of sin, the consequences toying with sin will bring; bringing both warnings and encouragements.

In Chapter 10 Paul moves from how to make loving choices to the problem of having dealings with idolatry. Paul is correcting the so called knowers who claim to have knowledge which justifies them going into temples and eating meat offered to idols. Paul first dealt with the loveless way they made that decision, now he is going to inform those who in fact do not know as they ought to know. It was Winston Churchill who said, 'Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.' Paul pulls out the history of the people of God from the OT to help them learn the lesson they need to learn in relation to idolatry and its connecting sins. As we go through these verses we have three headings, in v1-5 we will see that even the people of God are disciplined for sin; in v6-10 we will see that even the people of God are tempted by sin, looking at the specific sins Paul highlights; and thirdly, we will see in v11-13 that the people of God are provided for by God against sin.

The people of God are disciplined for sin

V1, 'For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea.' It should not be missed as Paul begins this section that he presumes to inform those who claim to have knowledge. In these opening verses he wants to establish their identity as the people of God, and then show that despite being the people of God, God can be displeased with them and discipline them. He calls them 'brothers'; he refers to OT Israel as 'our fathers.' Now it would be understandable that Israel would look upon OT Israel as their fathers, but Paul is deliberately trying to show the

solidarity that the Church of Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile have with the OT people of God. A thought consistent with what Paul says about Gentiles being grafted into the olive tree in Rom. 11:17. The point he is driving towards is v5, 'Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.' First though he lists the many spiritual benefits and blessings they had participated in. They were all under the cloud. You will remember when God rescued Israel from Egypt under Moses that the manifest presence of God was present with God's people as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. The language of 'under' comes from descriptions of this cloud in the Psalms and speaks to God's protecting and guiding presence. Paul will use the word 'all' 5 times in these verses underlining the pervasive nature of God's blessings, and to hint at both the weak and the strong being included in these blessings. All passed through the Red Sea. God opening up the Red Sea in Ex. 14 was a great deliverance by which Israel separated from Egypt and became the people of God.

V2, 'and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.' Paul continues to draw a parity between the OT people of God and the NT people of God in order to show that God has not changed and still disciplines His people for sin. Firstly, there was a type of baptism that Israel experienced. Most recognize that this is a loose parity, for if we were to draw a tight parity, circumcision would correspond to baptism and the Passover to the Lord's Supper. Baptism into Moses likely means a baptism or identification with the teachings that He gave from God, an identification as God's people with the law as given by Moses. The cloud and sea may have correspondence to the Spirit and water, the internal and external aspects of what we receive in the New Covenant.

V3-4, 'and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.' The Israelites were miraculously sustained by the manna that God provided each day, as well as the water that God caused to come out of the rock. We should not forget that eating meat offered to idols, and drinking wine offered to idols was being argued for by the Corinthians, and here Paul is underlining that Israel had all they needed and should not grumble and covet the meat pots of Egypt, which they did. Paul may be hinting at the spiritual benefits that the Corinthians enjoy in the Lord's Supper so as to expose their coveting meat offered to idols as a criticism of what God has provided. You will notice the curious language of the rock following Israel, there is an old legend that the rock literally miraculously followed Israel and provided ongoing water. But I think Paul makes clear that it was Christ that followed them in the wilderness not the rock. Here we have a little typology where Paul points out that the rock was pointing to Christ. Moses struck the rock and it gave water to refresh the people of God. Christ was struck and from Him comes the Spirit, cleansing, refreshing. Paul wants to underline the presence of Christ with His people to highlight how unseemly it is to then go into an idol's temple.

V5, 'Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.' We can see what Paul is trying to say. Even if you are one of God's people, you cannot play with sin. We know that all but two, Caleb and Joshua, died in the wilderness. This strong language is deliberate to warn us and it raises a question for us: is Paul trying to say that a Christian can lose their salvation? I do not believe Paul is trying to say this, but we also must not minimize the warning Paul is giving. Paul we know believes that nothing created can separate us from God's love, Rom. 8:38-39, 'For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to

come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ Those whom God has predestined will be glorified. Even later on in 1 Cor. 11:30-32 we see that God disciplines Christians for their sin, they even die, not to be sent to hell but to save their souls, ‘That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.’ Added to this we know that in the OT even though someone died in the wilderness does not mean they were not believers and went to heaven. Moses himself because of his disobedience to God did not enter into the land but did die and go to heaven. But in saying this we must also underline the seriousness of sin, that God does not take sin in the lives of His children lightly, just read through the letters to the 7 churches in Revelation to see this. We must issue a warning here against those who think that now that they are Christians they can live any way they please and just assume they are going to heaven. This is a false assurance. There is a dangerous doctrine going around called ‘Once saved always saved.’ It comes from a certain type of Arminian and Dispensational theology, and it believes that you can say a sinners prayer, live any way you want and still be assured of heaven. We reject this as unbiblical. We believe in the perseverance of the saints, that those who are truly born again, will inevitably put sin aside and strive to live for God. This is not a belief in perfectionism but a dedicated and repentant walk in God’s commands. If they sin they do not justify it, but get up and get back on the horse, repenting of their sins and rededicating themselves to God. These words of warning in the Bible the Puritans called ‘gospel goads’. Those who are born again, who have the Spirit will hear these warnings and will not take them lightly, ignoring them and justifying their sins, they will take them to heart and they will be the means by which the true saint perseveres in holiness and not sin. Being saved, baptized, a church member, in ministry, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, even doing miracles like the Corinthians does not mean we have an excuse to be lax, to take sin lightly but we must all pursue holiness.

The people of God are tempted by sin

V6, ‘Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.’ Paul now centers in on some historical examples from the past where the Israelites were not self-controlled and did not walk in God’s ways and as a result reaped what they sowed. That word ‘desire’ is the same word that the Greek OT uses in numbers 11:4, ‘Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat!’ Paul outlines the sins that flow from this sinful craving on the part of Israel. Firstly, there was idolatry, v7, ‘Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” Paul quotes Ex. 32:6 alluding to the episode of the golden calf. You remember when Israel were waiting for Moses at the foot of Mt Sinai as he went to go and get the 10 commandments. They grew impatient and called upon Aaron to make them some gods to lead them into the land. He gathered jewelry fashioned a calf and proclaimed a feast to YHWH. At this feast they rose up to play. This is a euphemism for sexual activity. The first 2 of the 10 commandments deal with this matter of idolatry. Have no other gods before me, and do not make or serve an image of any other god or of God Himself. These two commands secure the purity of who we worship and the purity of how we worship. God wanted to consume the nation and start again. Moses had to intercede on Israel’s behalf. An episode that leaves us in no doubt to God’s

hatred of idolatry, even worshipping Him as an idol. For the Corinthians to show such disregard and wonder into idol temples, eating meat offered to them. This warning would be for those who are strong and for the weak. God is a jealous God and will not give His glory to another. This was a necessary warning in Corinth, what about us? We may not have a problem with idolatry in the secular West, though one could argue that paganism is making a comeback through the personalized spirituality of the East that has crept in through the New Age Movement. We can still have idols of the heart. If something has our ultimate allegiance that we are willing to sacrifice morality to pursue, to break God's commands to obey, this is the idol of our hearts.

V8, 'We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.' Paul is alluding to numbers 25 where the daughters of Moab seduced the men of Israel into idolatry; God sent a plague to punish them, this is also the moment Phinehas showed his zeal with a spear. Paul has had to speak to the problem of sexual immorality several times in his letter so far. Here is a blanket prohibition and warning. Christians are those who pursue sexual purity, when single and when married. We pursue God's will for our bodies in keeping sex in marriage, heterosexual; monogamous; faithful marriage. We guard our hearts and minds from illicit lust. We control our bodies taking them captive to God's commands and not indulging our desires in any old way we like. 1 Thess. 4:3-5, 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.'

V9, 'We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents.' Testing God is the third sin. Numbers 21 records Israel once again accusing God of bringing them into the wilderness to kill them, and complaining of the food and drink He was providing. This provoked the plague of serpents. You will remember that Moses was then commanded to make a bronze serpent, that any who were bitten looked to the bronze serpent were healed. Christ spoke about Himself as lifted up and those who looked to Him in faith as being saved. Please notice that though Israel were said to test YHWH, here Paul says that they tested Christ once again showing us a high Christology. Closely associated to this testing was the grumbling, v10, 'nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.' Numbers 16 records Israel complaining over the leadership of Moses and Aaron which resulted in a plague, or as Paul puts it here, the Destroyer, likely the Angel of the LORD.

Idolatry; sexual immorality; testing God by demanding the meat pots of Egypt; grumbling against God's leaders that He has put over them, these are the sins that Paul warns the Corinthians of, and it is a fitting warning. They are flirting with idolatry, guilty of sexual immorality, demanding meat, and there are divisions over leadership in the church. The areas of purity of worship; sexual purity; the demanding of rights and liberties; divisions over leadership, are these areas of sin in our lives? Do we need to be reminded that God takes these matters seriously?

The people of God are provided against sin

Paul moves now to apply these things to the Corinthians, he does so by showing three things that they have to help them stand strong, v11, 'Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our

instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.' The first thing that we have to help us in our walk with God is the OT. I want to underline this point. There are many who think that the OT is irrelevant. They wrongly entertain the idea that God has somehow changed, that the bible has two gods, a harsh one and a loving one. No, there is only one God of the Bible. The OT is the inspired word of God which is given for us, Paul says as much to Timothy who was reared on the OT, 2 Tim. 3:14-17, 'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.' Some think that we should not preach from the OT, but here we see that this is wrong, Paul preaches from the OT and tells these new testament believers to take these lessons to heart.

The second thing that Paul tells them they need is a humble attitude, v12, 'Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.' Pride comes before a fall, those who overestimate their strength are vulnerable to attack and inevitable failure. The Corinthians are in danger because they are self-assured, and full of their own importance. They think they have all knowledge, they present as those teenagers who don't like to be told things because it makes them look bad. But Paul has to humble them, he has to remind them that like all other sinners, if they lie to themselves about their strength and the strength of sin they will fall into it. When we think to ourselves, I would never fall into that sort of sin; when we think we don't need to confess our sins to a fellow believer and be in an accountability relationship; when we think that we have overcome that sin and will never fall into it again; when we think that we are strong enough to hang out with those people, that we will influence them not them us; when we say that that action, that substance may be a gateway for others, but not for us. This is the time to take this verse to heart. We all think we are stronger than we are, this is why we need to pray every day, lead me not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Every day the Lord's Prayer reminds us of our weakness and need for God's strength.

V13, '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.' The third thing they need in order to keep them from sin is a reminder of the faithfulness of God. When we are tempted to sin, we can sometimes catastrophize our situation thinking to ourselves, no one has ever suffered so much as I have, or faced so strong a temptation as I have. Some may even think that God has it out for them and is deliberately putting them through the grinder for low motives. Paul reminds the Corinthians that their difficulties are normal and common. That God is faithful, that He does not try and trip us up; that He is a good Father who is wise in what He allows; He is also faithful in fulfilling His promises in being with you, hearing your prayers, guiding you. He is in control of your life working all things together for good. He is not asleep at the wheel but is ensuring that there is nothing that we face that we cannot face with His help. God also provides a way of escape with every temptation. Many falsely think that this means that we do not face it. No, the way of escape is the highway of holiness that takes us through the situation. In the case of the Corinthians it was likely that a strong incentive for continuing to eat meat offered to idols was the social ramifications to no longer participating in the public festivities. Persecution would arise, loss of public acceptance,

financial costs as they lost business partners and customers, etc. the way of escape is the way of obedience to God a path He highlights for us by His word, a path He travels with us never leaving or forsaking us; a path upon which He strengthens us to do what He has commanded. We never have to sin, we cannot use the excuse that we could not help it, or that the devil made us do it.

Paul is giving good advice to us when we are faced with our own temptations. The three things he tells us we need apart from a reminder that God disciplines those who play with sin are, the word of God, not only the OT but the NT as well; a humble attitude towards sin and our own strength; and a recognition of God's faithfulness and provision when we are tempted.

Let me tie this in with the table. Jesus Christ died for sinners, we are those sinners. He died horribly pointing to the terrible way in which any who have to face God in their sins will one day experience judgement. He has reconciled us to God delivering us out of bondage; saving us out of the deceptions and lies that held us, from the gods we once served to the true and living God. The Lord's Supper is a reminder like the Passover was a reminder of this great deliverance by God. But the Lord's Supper is also a meal to be celebrated without the leaven of sin. To flirt with sin and then come to the table is to provoke God's discipline, this is why Paul writes, 'Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.' As an answer to the salvation that we have received in Christ let us respond with a zeal to put away sin and recommit ourselves to godliness. Let us spend some time in silence as we examine ourselves now.