

Overcoming Temptation

(1 Corinthians 10:1-22)

It's been said that people often crucify the present between two thieves, yesterday and tomorrow. In other words, often people don't live in the grace that God provides for the present because either they are held hostage by past hurts, failures or regrets, or they're worried and anxious about what the future holds.

When we're stuck in the past or worried about the future we are not living in the present by the grace that God provides. If we avail ourselves of God's grace, He will heal **past hurts** so that we might rejoice in the **present hour**. But when we worry about tomorrow we borrow from tomorrow's troubles. And God doesn't give us grace today for tomorrow's troubles. (Matthew 6:34). He gives us grace for today.

Corrie Ten Boom put it like this: "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength."

Now when we are not living in the grace that God provides in the present, we are more susceptible to the temptation of finding relief, comfort and pleasure in ways that are sinful and destructive. And this is what the bible calls idolatry. Idolatry, you see, is more than bowing down to a physical idol. We commit idolatry when we try to find in something or somebody what we can only find in God.

Main idea: *Christians must live in the grace of God's presence and lean on His power to be led away from the temptation of idolatry.*

This morning we are going to consider 3 principles for overcoming the temptations that are common to all people.

1. Looking to His Provision

This first principle for overcoming temptation is **looking to God's provision**. If you recall, chapter 9 ends with an exhortation from Paul

for believers to run their race to win, which means living a life of faithfulness to God—a life that will make an eternal impact. To live that life Paul said that he lived a *disciplined* life so that he would not be *disqualified* (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Remember, Paul wasn't talking about losing his salvation, but losing his testimony of faithfulness to God—a testimony that could draw others to Christ and obtains eternal rewards. Paul wanted to endure to the end and get to the finished line having fulfilled the call of God upon His life. He wanted to experience the fullness of all that God saved Him to be in Christ.

With this in mind, notice that Paul looks back to the history of Israel as an example of what not to do so that the Corinthians would not end up disqualified like the Israelites in the wilderness. He writes:

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ 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” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

When Paul refers to the Israelites that came out of Egypt being under the cloud and passing through the sea, he's speaking of their **experience** of God's presence and power. (v.1) When Paul further adds that they were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea and all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink he was **reinforcing** the idea of how close they were to the supernatural activity of God. (v.2-4) They were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea in the sense that they were identified with Moses and partook with him in the experience of God's deliverance from Egypt. They also ate manna from heaven and drank the water that God supernaturally provided from a rock in their journey through the barren wilderness. And the rock from which God provided water to sustain the Israelites symbolized Christ, who is the Rock, the foundation and source of all spiritual blessings.

Now why is Paul pointing the Corinthians to the spiritual experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness? He's referring to them because in many ways what happened to the children of Israel in their journey through the wilderness was also happening in the church of Corinth. Like God through Moses miraculously called out His people from the bondage of Egypt and assembled them together in the wilderness, the Apostle Paul also through the power of the gospel called out the Corinthians from the world and planted the church in Corinth.

But now, although the church of Corinth, like the Israelites in the wilderness, experienced the supernatural activity of God, they also, like the Israelites, were a **dysfunctional** congregation. Notice that after pointing to the activities of God in the wilderness before the Israelites, Paul continues: "*Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness*" (1 Corinthians 10:5).

With whom was God not pleased? He was not pleased with the Israelites that were led out of Egypt by Moses through the power and presence of God. And because God was not pleased, the majority of the Israelite's that came out of Egypt, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, died in the wilderness and did not make it into the promised land.

Remember that Paul is recounting what happened to the Israelites in their wanderings through the wilderness so that the Corinthians would not succumb to the same temptations and also be disqualified. It's been said, that he who doesn't learn from history is bound to repeat it.

What does Paul want the Corinthians to learn? Paul was teaching them that although they also experienced the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, like healings, speaking in unknown languages and other miracles, they were not exempt from giving into the same temptations that kept the Israelite's out of the Promised land.

Do you know that there are professing Christians today that have experienced the power of God, but are not growing in spiritual maturity? The Corinthians were not lacking in any of the gifts of the Spirit. The miraculous gifts of the Spirit were prevalent in the church and yet many of the Corinthians were spiritually immature, which is why there was so much division and immorality in the church.

The same can be true today. The evidence that you are growing in spiritual maturity, for example, is not the gift of tongues, but that you have the self-control to tame your tongue. Sadly, the condition of some churches today is even more superficial than having the experience of spiritual gifts but the absence of spiritual maturity. Not only are Christians wrongly equating **spiritual experiences** with **spiritual maturity**, these so-called experiences are often artificial.

In his book “Transforming Presence” Daniel Henderson noted: "While participating in hundreds of these church services, I have observed that in more recent years, the idea of experiencing the Holy Spirit is evidently associated with concert-style technology, digitized lights, environmental smoke, thundering sound systems, gargantuan images of worship leaders on a screen, and emotionally charged repetitious lyrics. While these tools are not necessarily wrong, they can become the perceived systems of the presence of the Holy Spirit." Daniel Henderson

Let me repeat, spiritual experiences real or imagined are not necessarily evidence of spiritual maturity. With this in mind, notice that Paul continues:

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil 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 rose up to play.” ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer” (1 Corinthians 10:6-10).

Why is Paul taking the Corinthians back to the history of Israel's wilderness wanderings? The record of their journey through the wilderness serves as an example that they can learn from so that they don't give into the same temptations which resulted in disqualification and destruction. What are those lessons?

At the heart of Paul's history lesson is the bent of the human heart to commit the sin of idolatry. Notice that after explaining that Israel's wilderness wanderings serve as an example so that the Corinthians might not desire evil as they did, Paul commands: "*Do not be idolaters as some of them were;*" (1 Corinthians 10:7a). And later Paul concludes his observations with "*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry*" (1 Corinthian 10:14).

When the Israelite's desired evil things in the wilderness, they did so because they did not trust God to provide what they needed. And in the same way, if we don't trust God to provide for our needs, we will look to other thing to do for us what only God can do. This is idolatry.

In his book Counterfeit gods Tim Keller suggests that our hearts are idol-making factories that can turn just about anything into an idol, even good things. When we make good gifts from God *ultimate* in our lives, they take the place of God in our affections and allegiances.

Now to give the Corinthians an example of what idolatry looks like and what it leads to, Paul points them in verse 7 to the well-known occasion of Israel's idolatry recorded in Exodus 32:1-6. While Moses met with God on the mount in the wilderness, the people down below got **impatient**. Rather than waiting on God, who they could not see or control, they constructed a visible idol of their own making and sacrificed to it.

Afterwards the bible says, "*The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play*" (v.7). What's wrong with sitting, eating, drinking and rising up to play? There's nothing necessarily wrong with these unless they're connected with idolatry.

Remember that the Corinthians were exercising their liberties by eating meat sacrificed to idols, which Paul addresses again in this chapter. But the problem was that their liberties were also a stumbling block to their weaker brothers. If this was the case, why weren't they willing to give up their liberties and entitlements for the sake of others? Because their liberties were taking the place of God in whom they were to find their ultimate joy and satisfaction. And since their liberties were taking the place of Jesus, they became enslaved to them. They were mastered by their entitlements.

Whatever takes the place of God in our lives will be our master too. And any master other than God will always lead us down a dead-end road. Notice that Paul also looks back to when the Israelites engaged in sexual immorality (v.8). This took place when they intermarried with pagans that worshipped other gods as recorded in Number 25:1-3. And knowing the mastery that idolatry can have on His people and the depravity that results when something other than God has our allegiance, the Lord meted out severe discipline and judgment (v.8).

The final example that Paul gives of the Israelites struggle with idolatry and putting Christ to the test, happened when they were grumbling and complaining about the lack of food (v.9). Number 21:4-9 records that because they grumbled and complained, the Lord sent poisonous serpents, but as Stephen Um noted “[God] also gave them a means of escape, [namely the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness, which symbolized the cross of Jesus] (John 3:15). They failed to trust him, so he sent a trial into their lives to show them that the one means of escape is to trust in him.”

O brothers and sisters, do you look to God at all times to lead you and to provide for your needs? As Jesus taught us, we must pray “Your kingdom come” so that His will is done in our lives. Are we waiting on God and trusting His timing or do we take matters into our own hands? **God is worth waiting for!**

But like the Israelites, many Christians today are wandering in a spiritual wilderness never making it into their Promised land—into the

fullness of all that God desires for them to be in Christ. O they may have had some spiritual experiences in the past, but they're failing to trust God's provision in the present and consequently they're turning to idols of their own making to do for them what only God can.

Now it's important to see that in the race of life we must **look to God to provide** and not take matters into our own hands, but we must also **lean on His power** to endure trials. You see, the way of escape is not only God providing a way out of trouble, but the power to endure troubles for our good and the good of others.

This brings us to a second principle for overcoming temptation.

2. Leaning on His Power

To overcome the temptation to craft our own gods and give into evil desires, we must not only **look for God's provision**, but also **lean on His power**. After pointing to the example of the Israelites' propensity toward idolatry that are recorded in scripture for our instruction, (v.11), Paul writes: *"Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall"* (1 Corinthians 10:12).

What the Corinthians arrogantly viewed as their liberties in Christ, not only caused others to stumble, but also put them in tempting situations that should have been avoided.

Remember, that some in the church were eating food offered to the worship of idols. This food was purchased in markets, and eaten at home, but it was also served in pagan temples. And in these pagan temples more was going on than the consumption of food and drink. Although the gods that these foods were offered to had no real existence (1 Corinthians 8:4), Paul explains in verse 20 that demons were behind the ritual practices going on in these temples which included cult prostitution. Hanging out in these temples not only opened the door to temptations, like sexual immorality, but also to demonic influence and participation (1 Corinthians 10:19-20).

Notice that Paul further explains to the Corinthians in verse 13 that *no temptation has over taken them that is not common to man. And because God is faithful he would not let them be tempted beyond their ability, but provide a way of escape that will enable them to endure* (1 Corinthians 10:13). I want to submit to you that Paul is stating a general principle here that would only be realized if the Corinthians looked to God's provision and did not lean on their own power and understanding, (Proverbs 3:4-5).

The word translated *temptation* here could mean both the difficulties of life or the allurement of sin. When we look to God and lean on His power, we can trust His faithfulness to deliver us from a hardship or to give us the grace to endure it. If the temptation is an allurement to sin, and we lean on His power and not our own understanding, he will give us the strength to escape either by avoiding it or by fleeing from it.

But if like the Corinthians, we think that we can in our own understanding exercise our liberties and stand up to whatever temptations might be associated with them, we are putting God to the test. It's not that we are making it harder for God, but that we are making it harder for ourselves.

In other words, when we are looking to God and leaning on His power —when we pray, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we won't put ourselves in vulnerable situations simply because we think we have the liberty to do so. We won't sit down at a Hooters restaurant where the waitresses are scantily dressed because we like the chicken wings. You won't sleep over at your girlfriend's house. When your ultimate allegiance is to God and not to something or somebody, which is idolatry, you will avoid people, places and positions that will feed sinful appetites and give the devil a foothold.

This brings us to a final principle for overcoming temptation.

3. Living in His Presence

To overcome temptation, we must **look to God's provision, lean on His power** and lastly **live in His presence**. Having explained

that because God is faithful we can trust Him in times of trials and temptations to make a way of escape so that we may be able to endure it, Paul continues:

“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14). In other words, Paul is saying, in view of God’s faithfulness and promises, don’t make your own way of escape, but trust in God’s way of escape. Don’t be like the Israelite’s who got **impatient**. And rather than trusting the faithfulness of God, who brought them out of the bondage of Egypt, manufactured their own god to provide for their own heart’s desires.

Remember the Corinthians were eating food offered to the worship of idols without regard for how their so-called liberties were negatively impacting others. Their unwillingness to give up their entitlements was evidence that their love for their liberties had replaced their love for Christ. As a result, their sense of entitlement, not the law of Christ was controlling their lives. Furthermore, because they were being controlled by their sense of entitlement and not the law of love they put themselves in places and positions that opened the door to greater temptations and participation with demons.

To explain this, in verses 15-20, Paul contrasts Christian participation in the Lord’s Supper, with the participation of some Corinthians with demons by eating meat offered to idols in pagan temples. What is the point of this contrast? Paul explains it beginning in verse 19:

“What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons” (1 Corinthians 10:19-20).

Why do we partake of the Lord’s supper? Because like the observance of Passover was a physical reminder of **God’s faithfulness** in providing deliverance to the Israelites, the Lord’s Supper is a physical reminder to us of God’s faithfulness in providing salvation through the sacrifice of His son. When we look unto Jesus we can rest secure in all that Christ’s provides for us through the giving of His body and the

shedding of His blood. When we eat the bread and drink the cup in faith we experience communion with Christ and receive nourishment for our souls that strengthens us to flee idolatry.

This is what Paul means when he writes in verse 16: *“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”* Paul is not saying here that the bread and the cup literally become the body and blood of Jesus and that’s how we participate with Christ’s atoning work. We know this because of how the word *participation* is also used in verse 20.

Remember that Paul is contrasting a believer’s participation with Christ through the Lord’s Supper with the participation that pagans have with demons through eating meat offered to false gods (v.20). When Paul uses the same word *participation* in relation to demons he’s not saying that the food they ate was infused with evil spirits (v.20). What he means is that through their cult practices they were giving themselves up to and coming under the influence and control of demons.

Similarly, when we eat the bread and drink the cup in faith and in the worship of Christ, we are giving ourselves up to Christ afresh, coming under His influence, and surrendering to His control. When we draw near to Christ through the Lord’s supper and other means of grace, like prayer and the word, Christ’s draws near to us. In other words, we experience His presence and enjoy His fellowship through the work of the Spirit in our hearts. And brothers and sisters, it’s the joy of communion and fellowship with Christ that provides the way of escape in trials and the power to flee idolatry.

Notice that after explaining how we participate with Christ through the Lord’s Supper, Paul concludes: *“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. ²² Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”* (1 Corinthians 10:19-22).

Why does Paul say you can't partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons? John Piper explains it like this: "You can't. Because when you truly partake of the cup and the table of the Lord, you are being nourished and satisfied by the Lord, and loving the Lord, and delighting in the Lord, and trusting the Lord and fellowshiping with the Lord. That's what it means to [participate] in the blood and body of Christ—to sit with Jesus at the banquet of the benefits of his death. In that kind of experience idols and demons lose all their attraction and all their power" (John Piper).

Conclusion

How do we keep from provoking the Lord and putting him to the test by living as if we or something else is stronger than he is? How do we overcome the temptation to make idols in our hearts of even good things, which will then become our masters and keep us from God's best for our lives? How do we keep from going in circles in our own **spiritual wilderness** so that we might obtain the fullness of the **spiritual life** and blessings that Christ purchased for us with His own blood?

We **look to His provisions** and wait on Him in all circumstances. We don't crucify today between the two thieves of yesterday's hurts and tomorrow's uncertainties. We trust God and look to Him to supply the grace we need for each and every day. We overcome the snare of idolatry by **leaning on His power**, not our own understanding or the false securities of this world.

But more importantly, the idols of this world will lose all appeal when we **live in the enjoyment of His presence**—when we bask in all that God is for us in Christ. **God is faithful!** And not only can we trust Him to make a way of escape when there seems to be no way. But living in and delighting in His presence is our escape. Christ's is our rock and only sure foundation. May we forever drink of His fountain, which will never run dry.