**1 Corinthians 10:1-13** March 24, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Lent 3

*1 Corinthians 10:1I 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. 2They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3They all ate the same spiritual food 4and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. 5Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.*

*6Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 7Do 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.” 8We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 9We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. 10And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.*

*11These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. 12So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! 13No 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.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Why Fight Temptation?**

“Winning hearts and minds” – it’s a phrase we heard a couple times over the last two decades. You see, when you have the mightiest army in the world you can win conventional wars pretty easily—kind of like a #1 seed vs. a #16 seed in the NCAA tournament. But a resounding military victory can be of very little value if the people you have liberated don’t like you. They will resent you and make you suffer, not through military force, but attrition and subversive techniques, until you finally go away. In the long term, it is at least as important to win in hearts and minds as it is to win on the battlefield.

Having said that, this lengthy reading, the most shocking part of it, doesn’t sound like an exercise in heart and mind winning. We hear about God’s shock-and-awe tactics.

Did you hear the bullet points? Paul went through four different events (and he could have mentioned many more!) One time the Israelites got all worked up into pagan carousing – a mighty strong temptation to a religion of chastity and service to others – 23,000 killed by a plague in one day. Another time God miraculously provided food and the Israelites complained bitterly about it. So God sent snakes to punish them. Many died – no body count that time. I don’t have to go through them all. You get Paul’s picture.

What went through your mind when you heard these blood and guts stories? “Don’t cross God!” Or somebody thinking of the New Testament might say, “I sure am glad God has changed his way of doing things since back then.” Maybe if you are here today with a visitor, you were thinking, “Great! Plagues, destroying angels, snakes. My friend is going to have such a bad impression of us. He’s going to think we are one of those fire and brimstone outfits.” What did God’s acts of judgment make you think?

Our reading tells us exactly what we are supposed to think. This “book” of the Bible, this letter, was addressed to a group of Christians living in a morally bankrupt culture. To these Christians living under spiritual siege, God’s word says, ***“I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they passed through the sea.”*** Paul takes these Christians back to the time of the Israelites. Before all the bad things happened to those Israelites, they were miraculously delivered from Egypt. The Lord God parted the Red Sea before them. When they were across he collapsed the sea on the pursuing Egyptians. In the desert, day after day God led and directed his people with a pillar of cloud. The Israelites experienced God’s goodness, his grace, his love, day after day. Paul wanted these Christians to remember that the Israelites had been recipients of God’s grace, abundantly.

Verse 5: ***“Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”*** In spite of God’s continual goodness, they rejected God’s ways. That’s where the plagues, destroying angels and snakes come in.

Verse 6: ***“These things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things.”*** To keep us from doing what? ***“To keep us from setting our hearts on evil things.”*** Notice, it isn’t to keep us from doing those sins, but to keep us from *desiring* those sins. Temptation.

Now how does God smiting the Israelites keep you from setting your heart on evil things? Well, it depends on your relationship to God. If you have been touched by what God has done for you; if you have watched with awe as Jesus went to the cross for your sins; if you think about the fact that Jesus subjected himself to God’s law at all times to be our substitute law-keeper; if you believe that God has given you eternal life out of undeserved love, then you are going to want to say thank you. And when you hear about the things that upset your God, you will want to avoid them, out of thankfulness, respect and love for God.

Now there is a second reason that people sometimes avoid what God hates and that is raw fear.

Let me illustrate the difference. You are traveling down the freeway, cruise control set at 83mph. Most of the cars around you are moving the same speed or faster. Suddenly, brake lights go on. You just barely get your foot on the brake in time. Now the traffic moves at 65 mph. Your blood pressure is rising. You fume, “Must be one of those slow pokes in the fast lane again!” About ¼ mile up you pass a police car parked and waiting for speeders. Now you know. Why did everyone suddenly obey the law? It wasn’t out of respect for the law, it was out of fear of punishment.

Someone else, however, carefully travels 70mph all the time. They really wouldn’t have to because truth be told, we all know that you can drive 5mph over the speed limit without being stopped. Even this slow driver knows it. But why not drive at least 75mph? This person travels at that speed out of respect for the law, not out of fear of punishment.

In the same way that there are two totally different reasons for keeping the speed limit, there are two totally different reasons for avoiding sin.

But when God’s people become aware of what God thinks of sin, they want to avoid it just because their loving God hates it. They get in synch with God. Think of how little children do that with their parents. A three-year-old girl loves a song just because her mom loves a song. A father yells at the TV and so his three-year-old son yells at the TV. They get in synch.

That is the intention of these shocking stories from the Old Testament. God’s intention is that we realize how hateful sin is to God, and therefore hate it. Because God has so loved us, we take our cue from God. We love what he loves. We hate what he hates. We even hate things that lead to what God hates. And that is why we fight against, not just sin, but also temptations to sin. That is why a Christian might just walk out of a movie. That is why some might refuse even the first drink. That is why we stop gossip dead in its tracks or focus on building a person up rather than tearing them down.

God’s tells us what happened to the Israelites because he wants us to stay clear of sin, way clear of sin. Not because of fear, but because you realize how hateful sin is to God, and you respect that.

A question worth considering at just this point is when does temptation become sin. You see, being tempted in and of itself is not sin. We know this because Hebrews 4:14 tells us, *“Jesus the Son of God…[was] tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”* Temptation and sin are not the same thing. Then the question is, when does temptation cross over into being a sin of thought?

I want to use an analogy—not an example, mind you, but an analogy. Think of an addict fighting a temptation to go back to an old bad habit. (Now when I use this example, I want to be clear that I am not making light of the challenges that recovering addicts face. Quite the opposite, I have great respect and empathy for them and the battle they must daily wage.) Most recovering addicts at least initially, often feel the allure of their destructive habit. Now as long as they are fighting that temptation, they are winning their battle, even though they feel the temptation. When they start to desire, to make plans to get back to the habit, they have lost. The analogy is this: when you have a temptation but are fighting it, there is no sin. When you start to make the excuses and plans to give into that sin, when you simply *desire* to take part, you are in sin, even if you have “done” nothing. Exactly when you cross that line, only God knows. But in a general way, temptation becomes sin when the fight stops.

On the other hand, if you take God’s warning to fight temptation seriously, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. If you ever feel overwhelmed by temptation, listen to God’s amazing promise in the last verse: ***“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.”***

God does not say there will not be temptation. Oh, there will be temptation! But God promises a way out of every single temptation.

What is that way out?

Sometimes the way out will be right through that temptation. A few weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Lent, we read about the temptation of Jesus. He had to go straight through those temptations. There will be times that we will be tempted, and God’s way out is to give us the strength to say “No” again and again and again.

Sometimes the way out of temptation will be exactly that, a way out, an exit ramp. God will speak to your conscience, and you will realize that you as a Christian have no business being in a place or situation and you need to leave. Walk out of that group, that place, even that job!

Sometimes the way out of temptation is when God makes someone walk in the door and you are forced to quick cover up, or change the computer apps, and you realize you are doing something you shouldn’t. Don’t feel frustrated, feel relieved! God has given you a way out!

Sometimes the way out is when God breaks through your best laid plans and plots and he frustrates your exercise in sin.

Sometimes God’s way out is a fellow Christian, a messenger from God himself who asks a question, who shows up on your doorstep, and you want to tell them, “None of your business!” but for at least half a second you realize that this person is God’s faithfulness in time of temptation.

Which brings up an interesting point: More often than we want to admit, God’s faithfulness is me not getting what I want.

We once knew a women who gave a powerful witness to this point. She was blind. She had not been born blind. But while she was in the flower of her youth, at university, she went blind. Lost her sight completely. This was in an African nation where almost no one had the opportunity to go to a university. She had a huge opportunity and she lost it for the rest of her life. Her future, her hopes for a career, of an exceptionally privileged status, all gone. Do you know her testimony? She praised God for his faithfulness to her, because the trajectory she had been on in that university, was headed away from God. Headed into all that she hoped and dreamed for, to be sure; but away from God. She counted that blindness for which there was no cure, as God’s mercy to her, his way of being sure she gets to heaven.

That is why God gives a way out of every temptation. He wants you in heaven.

But if God promises a way out of every temptation, you know what that says about our sins and trespasses? That’s right. Our sins are our choice to reject God’s way out.

And so while God gives us hope, promising to strengthen us and give us the way out of every temptation, I encourage you to remember one of the most important Bible passages there is, a Bible passage that only people who truly fight against temptation understand: *“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world”* (1 John 2:1-2). Doesn’t that make you want to fight temptation? Amen.