

A Contradicting Message – 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ March 3, 2013

For I 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. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do 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.” We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No 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.



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

We tend to look at the past with rose-colored glasses. My childhood spent in Africa is filled with fond memories: memories of friends, memories of sporting events, memories of school. While I can remember some times that were not so pleasant, I remember far more of the happy times. I can look back on my time in Africa with rose-colored glasses, remembering Africa as a wonderful place. I have mixed feelings about going back there, whether just for vacation, or as a missionary. Would Africa live up to my rose-colored expectations?

I think many times the same thing can be said about the Bible. When we look at the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, it’s easy to look at it with rose-colored glasses. We think that it was an idyllic time, maybe not perfect, but at least pretty good. In our 2nd lesson for this morning from 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul bursts our bubble about the Israelites. In just the 40 years after the Israelites left Egypt, Paul recounts four examples of the Israelites wickedness and the price they paid for that wickedness.

“Don’t be idolaters...the people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.” At Mt. Sinai, while waiting for Moses to come down from talking to God, they made their own idols and worshiped them. **“Don’t commit sexual immorality...in one day 23,000 of them died.”** On the way to the promised land, many Israelites were led into temptation by the Moabite women. **“Do not test the Lord...they were killed by snakes.”** When the Israelites complained about their journey in the desert, God sent snakes. There was another instance when they grumbled and were destroyed by the destroying angel.

But Paul's idea here was not to recount Israel's sins and make us feel all warm and cozy that we haven't done those wicked deeds. **"they were written down as warnings for us."** With this background, Paul gives his readers a stern warning, "Don't do what they did!" But then in the next sentence he turns around and says "Don't worry about it." Is Paul speaking out of two sides of his mouth here? Is God speaking out of two sides of his mouth here? Absolutely not! When we look closer at the two statements, we see that both are true, and both are necessary for Paul to write and for Christians to hear. Because Paul gives A CONTRADICTING MESSAGE FOR A CONTRADICTIVE PEOPLE.

1. Don't abuse grace
2. Be assured by grace

(1)

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians as a reminder to stand firm, not to take grace for granted. Paul warned them, "Don't abuse grace!" He used the nation of Israel as a perfect example. Paul did not take the whole of Israelite history, he just took the 40 years they wandered in the desert as the perfect example of a nation abusing the grace of God. The Lord had delivered Israel in spectacular fashion. He brought down the 10 plagues upon the Egyptians and their land. He parted the Red Sea for them to pass through on dry ground. He destroyed the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. He provided for them with manna in the desert. He led them with a pillar of cloud and fire. He brought them to the cusp of the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. By God's grace they had seen and been a part of things that no people before or since has been. They saw God's grace first-hand.

But despite grace upon grace, the people of Israel took that grace for granted, they abused that grace. They abused the grace that was given to them by their grumbling and complaining. They abused that grace by not putting their trust wholeheartedly in the Lord. And as a result of abusing that grace, the Lord punished them for it. The Corinthian congregation was not unlike the people of Israel. The Corinthians had been touched by God's grace – the way to salvation was revealed to them, and yet they too took God's grace for granted. If you just read 1 & 2 Corinthians you see one unhappy sin after another.

It was for this very reason that Paul warned the Corinthians of the results that happened to the Israelites. He was not warning them because they were unbelievers, but because they were believers. He said, **"If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"** Because Paul knew as well as anyone that a Christian is at the same time a sinner and a saint. In his letter to the Romans he writes, **"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature, I don't understand what I do...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do."** The sinful nature is with every Christian, there is no getting away from it, and it is the sinful nature that is leading us to do what is displeasing to God, and it is ultimately leading to hell.

We can see examples of the effects of the sinful nature in the characters found throughout Scripture. Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' own disciples, betrayed Jesus, and then went out and hung himself. King David, a man after the Lord's own heart, let the sin of lust fester in his heart then he let it out. Not only that but he continued to hold onto that sin, and it ate him up inside. It was this effect that Paul did not want to happen to his brothers in faith in Corinth, and it is something that he certainly doesn't want for us either.

We too should take heed of that warning, **“If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”** As Christians, it can be easy to think that our life should all of a sudden be better, better because we have Jesus in our life, better because we now love God, better because we can finally do what is God pleasing. But Paul gives a contradictory message, he says to watch out. Look what happened to the Israelites! Don’t let it happen to you! And we can take those words at face value and again think of ourselves as pretty good, because we haven’t been idolaters, we haven’t committed sexual immorality, we haven’t really tested the Lord, and we don’t grumble...much.

We may think at times we have a firm footing. We are here in church, maybe we read our Bibles every day, we don’t go visit the strip clubs. But it is precisely because we think we have a firm footing that we should watch out. We should watch out that we don’t take God’s grace for granted. Because we know that we still have a sinful nature dwelling inside us. King Solomon wrote in the book of Ecclesiastes, **“There is nothing new under the sun.”** The same sinful heart that infected the Israelites, infected the Corinthians, and it infects us in 21st century America today.

It is the sinful nature that thinks sin is no big deal. God’s Word disagrees. It is the sinful nature that tells us, “you will never fall from faith.” It is the sinful nature that leads us to believe that we are strong enough to resist sin when we want, but just after this one last time. And it is that same sinful nature that leads us to take God’s grace for granted. The sinful nature that leads us to compromise God’s word for the sake of unity among “brothers.” The sinful nature that leads us to question God, much like the devil tempted Eve, “Did God really say...?” “Does God really know what’s best for you?”

We take God’s grace for granted when we don’t see church as a place we can hear about God’s grace. We take God’s grace for granted when we whine and complain more about what we don’t have, instead of being thankful for what we do. It is precisely because we have a sinful nature that we will at some time take God’s grace for granted. And it is Paul who warns us to watch out. And that is exactly what our sinful nature needs to hear.

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If this was where the message stopped, what a question that would leave in our life, what a question that would leave in our faith. Would we ever be sure that we could get to heaven? This would lead us to live our lives in anguish, always wondering. But that isn’t how God wanted us to live. Paul gave A CONTRADICTING MESSAGE FOR A CONTRADICTIVE PEOPLE. First he said, don’t abuse grace, but now he says be assured by grace. The abuse of grace is a warning to our sinful nature, the assurance of grace is the comfort God gives to believers who are convicted of their sin, convicted of their guilt.

This promise of God that follows the strict warning goes like this, **“No 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.** To our new man, the new nature that was created in us by God, he gives us reassurance. The reassurance that God is faithful. With many medical insurance plans out there, there is a max out of pocket cost. An amount that once you reach it, the insurance will take care of the rest. This is to protect you from catastrophic emergencies that you could never handle on your own. God’s promise is similar to that. There is a “max out of pocket” amount of temptations that God will let you endure. That much and no more.

And the promise continues, **“But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”** So while the world, the devil and our sinful nature are tempting us into sin, we have a God standing right beside us giving us the ability, the power, the will to say, “No!” The promise doesn’t say it will be easy, but it says it will be possible. Paul gives this promise to every Christian, because he realizes that we are at the same time both sinner and saint. So there is not only the part in every Christian that opposes God – the sinful nature, but there is also the part that loves the Lord. We call this the new self.

But before we leave that promise, it's important that we remember on what that promise is based. All of that promise hangs on the words, “God is faithful.” Our faithfulness may wax and wane, but God's faithfulness never will. His faithfulness that punished his one and only Son on the cross for the sins that you and I have done can never turn his back on us.

So, does Paul contradict himself when he tells believers, "Watch out that you don't fall away from faith" and in the very next breath he says, "Relax, you don't have to worry?" Of course he does. And you can find contradictory statements in many places in the Bible, most especially when the Bible says, "God hates and punishes sinners" and "God loves and forgives sinners." The only place that you can reconcile those two contradictory statements is at the foot of the cross...where you see exactly how much God hates sinners...and how much he loves them. Both statements are true even though with our puny human minds they appear to be contradictory. Praise be to the Lord who gives both warnings and promises to us sinner-saints so that one day we will be just saints together with him in heaven. Amen.