

## Presumption

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, February 26, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 103:1-13; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

"To live like a Corinthian" was the way people in ancient times described loose and immoral living. There was another saying among pagans that not everyone should go to Corinth. Temptation there was certain to drag many visitors down into sin. Yet the apostle Paul went there because he believed that the Gospel of Jesus could make a difference in that decadent city.

The church in Corinth owed its life to Paul. It was on his second great missionary journey that he came to Corinth. For a year and a half he lived there with Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish-Christian couple who had been ~~forced to leave Rome.~~ As a result of his ministry some prominent Jews and many gentiles were won over to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. When the church seemed well established, Paul left and came eventually to Ephesus.

Periodically he would hear reports about the Christians in Corinth. Much of what he heard deeply disturbed him. The church was torn into jealous factions. Although many Christians in Corinth had spectacular spiritual gifts it didn't seem to make them any more Christlike. Worship services were oftened disorderly. Wealthy Christians would bring food to church dinners and not share with the poorer Christians. Doctrinally they were confused as to such basic beliefs as the resurrection. And there was sexual immorality, immorality so gross that even the pagans found it disgusting. Not only did the church leaders not exercise discipline, many prided themselves on their tolerance of wickedness. "All things are lawful", they said. "We're no longer under the Old Testament Law, we're

under grace. We're saved and we're safe.

I have been saved,  
Oh, happy condition.  
Now I can sin,  
Without fear of perdition.

There was something of that attitude rampant in Corinth. There was a presumption that, because they were baptised and because they participated in the Lord's Supper they were protected, as if by some magic, from spiritual danger.

They were presumptuous. Their motto seems to have been: "If we aren't allowed to sin, at least there's no harm in being tempted." There was a kind of spiritual elitism rampant among the Corinthian Christians. "We can live dangerously. We can do things and go places that would be unsafe for less mature Christians.

But, Paul reminded them, no matter how spiritually privileged we are, we're still human beings, most in danger of spiritual shipwreck just when we think we've got it made spiritually. He illustrates this in the early verses of chapter ten, read this morning, flashing back to the experience of Old Testament Israel. You'd think that a people so blessed as ancient Israel would be a godly people. And yet, Paul says, "God was not pleased with them; for they were overthrown in the wilderness."

God has also blessed us richly. And yet, when we have so much going for us, we can bring tragic consequences to ourselves through presumption. I think of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Baker. I believe God gave both Swaggart and Baker tremendous spiritual gifts. I believe that God used them to bring many men and women to faith in Christ. And yet we see so clearly in them what presumption can, how far we can fall just when we think we're standing tall. But we don't have to go so far. Think of the tragedy families experience when Christian men and women, baptized and

in communion with the church, fall prey to scandalous sin. None of us can presume that it can't happen to us. "Whoever thinks they are standing firm had better be careful that they do not fall", Paul warns.

But I want to move on to a more hopeful note. Warning isn't enough. We also need hope. In verse thirteen Paul addresses a potential despair and discouragement which so often comes to Christians when they feel vulnerable to testing and temptation. "Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps his promise, and he will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out."

It's important to note that the word for *test* and the word for ~~*temptation*~~ are one and the same. Testing is temptation. God sometimes puts our faith to the test with some of the things he allows to happen to us. God doesn't tempt us to sin however. The classic example of this is Job. On the one hand we see Satan tempting Job to sin. Satan wants to destroy Job's faith. He wants to attack Job's reliance on the Lord. On the other hand we see the Lord allowing Job to be tempted so as to test the quality of his faith and actually strengthen him.

All of us are subject to temptation. All of us are tested. You may be going through a terrible struggle. Maybe you can't even imagine that anyone else has been tempted to do the things you're tempted to do. You're struggling with evil thoughts. You're bombarded with intellectual doubts about the faith. You've come close to repudiating Christianity as unworkable. But you're not the first. "Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people." Testing and tempting are normal things for us to experience.

There was a time when I was sunk in the despair of doubt. I believed, but I doubted. I was tempted to think I was lost and my situation was hopeless. I was reading John Bunyan's, *Pilgrim's Progress*, at the time. And in the biographical introduction, I discovered that Bunyan had ~~once~~ been tempted just like me and he found a way out. Even in my doubt, I found hope. <sup>God can provide</sup> ~~There's~~ a way out of doubt.

You may be going through the most severe testing. Maybe you're a widow or a widower, alone in this world. You relied upon your husband or wife for everything. Now that special person is gone.

Or maybe your job is loaded with problems. Just a few years ago, things looked so good. Now you don't know how you can possibly make it through to retirement. What makes it even harder is that you know you've made some mistakes. ~~Some of the problems may be of your own making.~~

Or maybe you've been tested and tempted and given in and failed and fallen. God provided a way of escape but you didn't take it. You've sinned. You've failed. And you've done this, not once or twice, but you've done it over and over again and you begin to feel that there's no way out, there's no escape. One of the most sinister temptations and tests of all is to think God's promise to strengthen and to provide a way out is good only for those who have not fallen repeatedly. But at the heart of the Gospel is the good news that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He did not come to save the righteous, but the sinner. "For when we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked... it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!"

Christ gave his life to make sure of victory for us. He was lashed with leather thongs studded with steel. He was spit upon, humiliated. He was willing to be nailed to the cross with huge spikes driven through his hands

and feet. He was willing to endure such pain as we can't imagine, willing to burn up with thirst, willing to be separated from his father in heaven, willing to go to hell for us. As Peter Marshall once said, Christ, therefore, now, is able to save from the guttermost to the uttermost.

Jesus died to ~~offer~~ <sup>strengthen and to show us ... I am the Way ... Jesus said.</sup> us a way out... the opening of our wills and hearts and minds to his cleansing, the giving of our lives to his safekeeping, the acceptance for ourselves of what he did for us on the cross.

He's the only One who can supply us with the strength to resist temptation, the only one who can forgive us when we don't avail ourselves of that strength. As Peter Marshall once said, "Others promise sins excused, discounted, denied, explained away. But only at the foot of the cross do we ever experience sins forgiven."

Let us pray:

Resources:

John A. Huffman, Jr., Warnings, Overconfidence, Temptation, and Possible Victory.  
Peter Marshall, John Doe, Disciple, "Our Friend, the Enemy".  
Floyd V. Filson, Opening the New Testament.