

Today we begin a new summer, sermon series entitled, “Bumper Sticker Theology.” What does that mean and what can you expect? There are certain phrases that many of us who follow Jesus have come to believe, tell others, and even count on that we have not carefully examined. Scripture holds authority, yet many of us interpret it differently. I was walking with two clergy friends on Friday and one was telling of another friend who called the Bible the instruction book. My friend was taken aback, as she views Scripture as a love letter from God. The other friend commented that for her Scripture is a reflection of our shared, sacred story as God’s children. I see Scripture as a witness to Jesus Christ at work in the world. People often begin arguments with: The Bible says... but does it really say that? If the Bible says it, don’t I have to believe it? I can do all things through a verse taken out of context. Proof texting or cherry picking Scripture has led many people to be not believe. You can not only find Bible passages to support these phrases, you can also find Bible passages to support all kinds of things. For example, people who beat their children can support their practice with Proverbs 13:24, “Those who withhold the rod hate their children.” Or when a young woman is repeatedly abused by her husband, her parents or friends could urge her to stay with him because Malachi 2:16 has these words, “I hate divorce, says the Lord.” Scriptures must be interpreted. This is why it is always important to read any Scripture in the light of its context and the Bible’s broader message and themes. “We interpret all Scripture through and in the light of Jesus’ life and teachings, as well as with the help of the Spirit’s witness, the wisdom of scholars. And our intellect and life experience” (Hamilton). We do this for many reasons:

Often these quotes are used in hurtful ways. They also can lead people to conclusions about God that are not only untrue but that may push some people away from God. Some of these phrases “are used to avoid careful thinking about complex issues. Some are used to justify our own biases or prejudices. Some, when spoken to others, can bring pain” (Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths*). Our faith invites us to explore the sacred story of Scripture.

Warning: when some of our beliefs or phraseology are questioned, we may become defensive or irritated and that’s ok. “I’m not suggesting that these statements are entirely untrue (ok, some may be less than half true, but certainly there is some truth in each of them). Because Scriptures must be interpreted, you and I may sometimes disagree about our interpretations and other issues of faith” (Hamilton). And that’s ok, too. It is my honor and privilege to serve as one of the pastors of this wonderful congregation, and I trust God’s Spirit in this process. I don’t have all of the answers, and I invite you to explore Scripture with me, as together we seek to follow Jesus and grow in our faith. Having said all of this, today’s beginning bumper sticker phrase is: **“God doesn’t give us more than we can handle.”** This comes from one verse in the Bible (though I highly doubt that those of us who use this phrase know exactly where it is located in Scripture). It comes from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 10, verse 13. As should always be our practice when studying scripture, let’s first invite the Holy Spirit to help us explore Scripture together. Let us pray together. **PRAY.** **READ 1 Corinthians 10:13.** Now that we’ve heard that one verse, let’s now read it in context as we continue to listen to God’s Word for us this day. **READ 1 Cor. 10:1-14.**

I remember it vividly. You know those conversations or comments that stick with you, even if you weren't completely involved in the matter?! A family I grew up with at church, who were distant relatives, experienced tragedy upon tragedy within one month of one another. This family of five- after two fatal car accidents- were now a family of three- two parents and a daughter- both sons killed at ages 19 and 12- both in the same year- both killed on impact. Kenny and Casey were their names. While it has been over 35 years ago, I still remember them well. Now to my memory: a few months after Casey, the second child, died, Kathy, Casey's mom, was bawling to my dad, her pastor, after worship one Sunday and I was standing close by, as my dad held her close as she collapsed in his arms. As she was crying, someone walked up to her and said, "Oh, Kathy, it's going to be alright. God doesn't give you more than you can handle. In time, you will be ok." Well, Kathy, stopped crying, looked up at this woman and said, "Well, God sure has given me WAY more than I can handle. I am not superhuman. Look at me! Do I look ok to you?" Wow! The courage it took for Kathy to say this in response to this well-meaning woman, who really didn't know what to say to a grieving mother- twice over but who was trying to be encouraging and supportive. Well, needless to say, this wasn't the first time Kathy heard this phrase, and it didn't sit well with her. It wouldn't sit well with me, either. In that moment Kathy had WAY more than she could handle and to think that God had given her this unbearable load of losing not one but two children, well, that would make anyone not want to believe in that kind of God.

What does this phrase actually mean? Before we dive in, let me say that there a lot into today's passage. It is a complex passage. We could spend weeks looking closer at the context. When writing about this text, one scholar said, "This passage is taken from a letter addressed to a faith community rocked by the arrogance and choices of spiritual smart alecks" (Sudan Hedahl, workingpreacher.org)! Here Paul is concerned with the new Christian community in Corinth and their fidelity to Christ alone. Some of them sound like they've got this faith thing figured out. Paul begins by giving an rough outline of the spiritual nature of the exodus story. Paul is "hoping to make his points about the gravity of the Corinthians' spiritual behavior by grounding it where he places all his theology- in the heart of Israel's history" (Hedahl). Why is Paul doing this? "Paul is writing here to the Christian community at Corinth, a large port city in Greece. During his missionary journeys, Paul founded a church there. Corinth was like many port towns: people and influences from all over the world were on display there. Pagan influences were everywhere" (Hamilton). Much like churches here in Greenville, there were pagan temples on practically every corner. "If you purchased meat in the local marketplace, chances were good that it came from an animal that had been sacrificed to a pagan god at one of Corinth's temples. Such was Corinth's reputation in the Roman world that 'to live like a Corinthian,' a phrase popular at the time, was synonymous with drunkenness and sexual license. Most of the newly minted Christians Paul was addressing had been pagans until the church was founded. They were trying to leave behind idol worship and the temple prostitutes that were part of religious life in places like Corinth's shrine to Aphrodite, the

Greek goddess of love. And yet these Christians still lives in a city where they were surrounded by sexual immorality and idolatry. Temptation was everywhere, and it was bound to be strong among those who had spent most of their lives immersed in pagan practices” (Hamilton). They were trying to follow Jesus but some were slipping back into their pagan ways. Therefore, the context of this verse is self-discipline in the face of temptation. Paul is sharing with the Corinthian church that their experience is not unique. Just as the Israelites were tempted, so too the Corinthians will be. In fact, we all are susceptible to temptation. Jesus himself was also tempted.

Paul informs the church in Corinth that they are not better than “our ancestors” in Israel (v. 1), and they may not want to repeat history. For it was the same God who worked through Moses who also worked through Jesus. Paul reminds those recently baptized into Christ and therefore grafted into the story of Israel that catastrophe awaits those who flirt with idolatry (Richard F. Ward, *Connections*). Paul is working with a very specific meaning of the word “test” or “temptation.” “Paul’s discussion is not referencing the occurrence of random and unexpected life events. Rather, he is referring to challenges that strain one’s loyalty to God and their community. He does use fear as a motivator to avoid or stop engaging in things that hurt us or our relationship with God. You know- like a warning label. This passage of 1 Corinthians falls within the question-answer section of the Corinthian letter. Paul is in the midst of responding to questions and issues the Corinthians have posed to him in a previous correspondence

(7:1). Questions such as how one should handle meat sacrificed to idols (8:1-11:1). More broadly, Paul is actually discussing communal fellowship and hospitality. What are the do's and don'ts of our fellowship with each other and God? In Paul's language of testing or temptation, he is clear that such challenges come from a source other than God. Temptations are a part of the everyday dealings of life" (Shively Smith, WP).

"In one of the most quoted verses in the Bible, Paul goes on in verse 13 to note several things about the nature of temptation. First, it comes to everyone. Second, that God will remain faithful to the one tempted. Third, that the temptation will not exceed one's strength to resist it- a debatable point some would say- and finally, God will 'provide the way out...' (Hedahl) should you choose to act on it. This passage is about temptation, not suffering. This passage is about God helping you when you are tempted, not about God not giving you more than you can handle. "Temptation is indeed a test of your resolve, your character, and your faith. And that is what Paul is talking about here- not about adversity and the difficult circumstances that come into every life at some point. My own experience is that when I'm tempted, there is always a way out. The problem is that I may not be looking very hard for an exit" (Hamilton).

God doesn't lead us into temptation. However, when we recite the Lord's Prayer in a few minutes, some of you may say, "Now Pastor, it clearly says here 'Lead us not into temptation.'" The emphasis is on "lead us," as in "Please, God, lead us- not into temptation, as we would lead ourselves- but onto the right path. And deliver us from the evil one." "The problem isn't

that God fails to provide a way out of temptation; it's that when a way appears, we usually don't pursue it (Hamilton).

One of Paul's main points is that idolatry has eternal consequences. The temptations to idolatry are prevalent and perpetual. As we carefully examine this context, we can begin to see that it's not about whether God will give us more than we can handle. "Neither is it about whether God will lead us into greater temptation than we can handle. Instead, Paul is saying that when we are tempted- as, inevitably, we sometimes will be- God will make sure the temptations are not so strong that we can't resist them. God will offer us a way out of temptation, if only we are alert to it and seize it. That's a helpful promise. You can overcome temptation with God's help" (Hamilton).

How we read and interpret scripture makes all the difference in the world. It is vital to remember that while God remains a righteous judge, God is, above all, a God of grace, a God who- like we talked about the last several weeks in Paul's letter to the Romans- while we were yet sinners, first loved us. This phrase "God doesn't give you more than you can handle" is not the only potentially hurtful thing here. For example, 1 Corinthians 10:8 was "horrifically appropriated by some during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s to proclaim that the awful suffering and death were God's judgment upon gays and lesbians. This is a terrible interpretation because it is not accurate nor true. Many scholars report that Paul is reminding the Corinthians about

God's judgment against the Israelite men who had sexual relations with the women of Moab so maybe that is what was going on in Corinth? We don't know. What we do know is whatever things could separate people from God, all are capable of it. Most Christians rightly condemned the hateful rhetoric from the 1980s as inconsistent with the overarching biblical witness, but it is true that an unfortunate picture of a vindictive God and a self-centered logic- do not do these things or God is going to hurt you- easily flows from a plain reading of 1 Cor. 10:5-12. Such a reading can reinforce a fear among those enduring hardship that God is angry with them and punishing them" (William Greenway, *Connections*). Who wants to worship that kind of God? I know I don't! It makes me sad and angry when Scripture gets taken out of context.

One can see in today's text that Paul's love for the Corinthians shines through his warnings. "What we hear in verse 13 Paul's confidence in the ultimate triumph of grace, Paul's conviction that God would never tempt us beyond what we can bear, that nothing, not 'hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:35-39)" (Greenway). God is always faithful. Always. Therefore, when you're facing temptation, by all means read this passage, especially verse 13. In reading it, remember that God will help you find a way through the temptation. But if you're walking through hard times, it's ok to say you're not ok- that you cannot handle things by yourself and need help. Most, if not all of us, will- at some point- face things that are more than we can handle alone. That's

when we may need to call a doctor, therapist, pastor, case manager, friend or family member or a support group. “I don’t believe God gives these hardships, but I trust that God walks with us through them- in fact God, in the person of Jesus, has already walked through our shared human experience with us. And his resurrection proclaims that evil, hate, pain, and death itself will not have the final word in our lives” (Hamilton). The psalmist says it well in the 23rd Psalm, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.” I trust that when bad things happen during the course of life, God will sustain each of us; walk with us; and hold us near providing comfort and care. We turn to God, in good and in bad, trusting that God’s Spirit is at work in us and in our life situations, helping us handle all that life gives us. Thanks be to God! Amen.