

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 4, 2007**

HISTORY LESSONS

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

The blessing of God in a person's life is no guarantee of spiritual well-being and fidelity to God in that individual's life. The gracious blessing of God in the life of a church – any church, including this church – is no guarantee that the church will serve and follow Christ faithfully. The blessing of God in the life of a nation is no guarantee that that nation will prove to be faithful to God over the long haul.

This is one of the central truths Paul wants the Corinthians to comprehend in our Scripture reading today from 1 Corinthians 10. The gracious blessings of God, such as the privileges and provisions of God's grace received by the people of Israel when He brought them out of Egypt and provided for all their needs as He led them toward the Promised Land, do not constitute an automatic guarantee of spiritual prosperity or success.

In the closing verses of 1 Corinthians 9, Paul compares the Christian life to a race. Our goal in life is not merely to be in the race. Our goal as followers of Christ is to finish the race. To finish well. Like a candidate running for President, we are "in it to win it." And, like a runner in a race, we've got to be disciplined, dedicated, determined, and diligent if we are to run the race of life successfully in order to fulfill God's purpose for our lives, allowing Him to use us whenever, wherever, and in whatever way He desires.

The concern Paul expresses in verse 27 about somehow being "disqualified for the prize" was not a fear of losing his salvation. The Bible assures us that those who truly belong to Christ will not – cannot – lose their salvation because, as Jesus said in John 10:28, "no one can snatch them out of (His) hand." What Paul recognizes, though, is that while he could not lose his salvation, he could lose his ministry. If he (or any of God's servants) were to become lax in self-discipline, if they were to become spiritually lazy and indulge their desires, if they were to fall into a recurring pattern of unrepented sin, they could disqualify themselves from ministry and lose the opportunity to serve God.

That could happen to anyone. If Paul was concerned that it could happen to him, you and I need to be concerned that it could happen to us. To me. And to you.

Ray Stedman said that two things are necessary in the Christian life. Discipline and dependence. Not one or the other. Not one without the other. But both discipline and dependence. Exercising godly self-discipline and practicing the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. But also recognizing your dependence upon God and your impotence apart from His grace and power at work in your life moment by moment. Discipline and dependence. We need both.

In chapter 10 Paul uses several examples from the history of the people of Israel to give warnings to the Corinthians – and to us today – of the dangers and consequences of disobedience and unfaithfulness to God.

Paul says: “Remember our history, friends, and be warned” (10:1, *The Message*). He then recounts several blessings the people of Israel received from God when He brought them out of Egypt. They had the blessing of God’s presence and guidance symbolized by the cloud which led them by day and the pillar of fire which led them by night. They had been delivered from Pharaoh and his army when God parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could cross it on dry ground. God had brought them all under the leadership of His chosen servant, Moses. Through the ministry of Christ, the eternally pre-existent Son of God, who was with them in the wilderness, God supernaturally provided them with manna and quail to eat, and water to drink, to meet their needs.

Yet none of these blessings from the hand of God – not even all of them put together – guaranteed that the people who left Egypt would themselves reach the Promised Land. As Paul says in verse 5:

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered over the desert.

To say that “God was not pleased with most of them” is a bit of an understatement, for of those whom God brought out of Egypt, out of the entire generation of those who were twenty years of age or older, only two of them – Caleb and Joshua – were permitted to enter the Promised Land. All the rest of that generation, because of their unfaithfulness and chronic disobedience to God, forfeited the promise and died in the wilderness. They did not cease to be God’s people, but they were disqualified from receiving the prize of the Promised Land.

Paul wants the Corinthians to understand – and I want you to understand – that this is serious business. Paul says that what happened to the people of Israel in the past could happen to us if we don’t learn from their mistakes. What happened to them could happen to us if we don’t keep our hearts from lusting after evil things (verse 6), as they did.

Paul goes on to describe four ways in which the people of Israel proved unfaithful to God. The first was their pagan revelry and idolatrous worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32), while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the law from God. The second was their sexual immorality with Moabite women (Numbers 25), who also enticed them to worship Baal. Third was their testing of God’s patience, when they spoke against God and complained about His provision of food for them in Numbers 21. And the fourth was their almost perpetual habit of grumbling against God and those, such as Moses, He had placed in authority over them.

In each of these cases, Paul says, these things which happened in the past are all “warning markers in our history books, written down so that we don’t repeat their mistakes. Our

positions in the story are parallel – they at the beginning, we at the end – and we are just as capable of messing it up as they were” (10:11-12, *The Message*).

Make sure you hear that and take it to heart. You and I are just as capable of messing it up as the people of Israel were. If you think I’m wrong about that, if you think that you are somehow immune to the lure of sin, just remember Ted Haggard. If you think you can stand on your own, be careful that you don’t fall. If you think you could never mess it up, think again. Apart from the grace and power of God at work in us – apart from our dependence upon His grace and power and our exercise of godly self-discipline under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, you and I are guaranteed to mess it up. Royally. Just like the stiff-necked people of Israel. As Paul says over in Romans 12:3: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...”

An inflated view of self leads to over-confidence. And over-confidence leads to a spiritual complacency in which we fail to recognize our weakness or vulnerability to temptation. When that happens, we are in serious spiritual danger. And Satan, our adversary, knows where our spiritual defenses are weakest.

Let me tell you a story that shows how subtle Satan can be and how important it is to be faithful even in relatively small things.

Donald Miller was telling his friend John MacMurray about his new cell phone. “I got it free,” he said.

“How did you get it for free?” John asked.

“Well, my old phone broke, so I took it to see if they could replace it. They had the new computer system at the store and they didn’t have their records. They didn’t know whether mine was still under warranty. It wasn’t, I knew, because it was more than a year old. The guy asked me about it, and I told him I didn’t know, but it was right around a year. Just a white lie, you know. Anyway, the phone was so messed up they replaced it with a newer model. So I got a free phone.”

“Did you ever see that movie *The Family Man* with Nicholas Cage?” John asked.

“There’s this scene where Nicholas Cage walks into a store to get a cup of coffee. Don Cheadle plays the guy working at the counter. There’s a girl in line before Nicholas Cage, and she’s buying something for 99 cents. She hands Cheadle a dollar. Cheadle takes nine dollars out of the till and counts it out, giving her way too much change. She sees that he is handing her too much money, yet she picks it up and puts it in her pocket without saying a word. As she is walking out the door, Cheadle stops her to give her another chance. He asks her if there is anything else she needs. She shakes her head no and walks out.”

“I see what you’re getting at,” says Miller.

“Let me finish,” John says. “So Don Cheadle looks over at Nicholas Cage and says: ‘Did you see that? She was willing to sell her character for nine dollars. Nine dollars!’”

After a little silence, Miller spoke up. “Do you think that is what I’m doing with the phone? Do you think I’m selling my character?”

John said: “I do. The Bible talks about having a calloused heart. That’s when sin, after a period of time, has so deceived us that we no longer care whether our thoughts and actions are right or wrong. Our hearts will go there easily, and often over what looks like little things – like little white lies. All I’m saying to you, as your friend, is, watch for this kind of thing.”

Donald Miller went back to the cell phone store the next day. He says it cost him more than nine dollars, but he got his character back.

These things, Paul says, are all warning markers, written down so that we don’t repeat their mistakes. So that we don’t sell our character or compromise our faith trying to satisfy our desires.

This passage ends on a wonderfully hopeful note in verse 13, and I want to come back and talk about it in detail next Sunday. Temptation happens. Trials and temptations come to everyone. Nobody is exempt. But God is faithful. And He will not allow us to be tested beyond what we can bear, but He will provide the strength and grace for us to resist and overcome as we rely on Him and not on ourselves.

Praise God for that. And neglect neither discipline nor dependence upon God in your life, so that you don’t miss out on the blessings God has for His people.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.