

Jan 21 –

Sermon: God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle

Scripture: I Corinthians 10:12-13

“I know you are going through a tough time right now. You feel like you are sinking. The burden is too heavy. You don't know how much more you can bear. But it is going to be all right. You are going to make it through. Remember, God never gives us more than we can handle.” I suspect every Christian has heard some variation on those words. You might have even shared these thoughts with another. They are words that can give comfort, in the right situation, and when used thoughtlessly can drive people away from a God that seems cruel and uncaring.

This idea has some scriptural basis. I Corinthians 10:13, which we read today says, “God won't let you be tempted beyond your abilities. The word tempted has also been translated as tested. So some want to proclaim that the Bible says you won't be tested beyond your abilities to handle it!

We need to understand that Paul was talking about temptations, not trials and hardships. “To live like a Corinthian” was a commonly used phrase and was synonymous with a lifestyle of drunkenness and sexual license. Corinth had a reputation of being the most wicked city in all of the Ancient Roman Empire. Even other Romans with their bacchanalian approach to life were offended by the way people lived in Corinth. So, temptations were strong and plentiful for these newly minted Christians that Paul was writing to. Many were converted Pagans who had embraced this debauched lifestyle before becoming a Christian. This passage is not about God declining to give you more burdens in life than you can handle. It is about God helping you when you are tempted.

Paul affirms that God will supply a way out of any temptation. The problem is that we often are not looking too hard for that escape. Adam Hamilton, in his book, talks about how, at the beginning of one year, he had made a decision to eat a more healthy diet. He walked to a deli at lunch and purchased a half sandwich that was low calorie and had lots of lettuce. He comes back to church as one of his staff is pushing a cart

with bags from Dairy Queen down the hall. Did he just walk by with his sandwich? No. He stopped and asked her what she was doing. It seems that a group had ordered food and then had not eaten it all. Instead of going on to his office he said, "What are you going to do with this food?" She said she was going to see if anyone in the church wanted it. She then said, "Pastor, would you like a sack?" Did he run with his sandwich to his office and shut the door? No. Instead, he said, "What do you have?" He found out there were some fries with sausage gravy, a favorite. He noticed some other bags and inquired about them, finding they held ice cream sandwiches. He took one of those as well. After eating he turned back to work on his sermon. It was about "Temptations!" He had many chances to turn away from the temptations on that cart. He chose not to look for them.

This is a half truth because these words can help us when facing difficult things. It can reassure us that somehow we will make it through this time of difficulty. But mostly, they are a lie. All of us need help at times in our lives because we find that we are dealing with things that are more than we can handle. We go to professionals: doctors, therapists, and lawyers because life has given us more than we can deal with on our own. People come to see me because life has beaten them down and they need a hand up. When we are facing hard times it is all right to admit, "I can't handle this by myself and I need help." Often God brings alongside us family, friends, pastors and church family to help us carry the burden. When life gets tough and we cannot handle it alone, through God's helping Spirit, seen through the love of others, we find we are able to manage. This help is not a sign of weakness but of strength.

Let us spend a moment seeing why these words can bring great harm. It begins: "God won't give you." Those words imply that whatever difficult or painful things that are happening in your life God gave them to you. It is saying that God gave you this horrible, painful, hurtful thing—but will stop giving you more suffering before you reach your breaking point! Do you understand, when someone is struggling mightily, to hear that the source of their pain might be God would cause them to move away from, instead of towards, God and the church?

A woman was dealing with horrible side effects from her cancer treatment, her nephew had committed suicide and her husband was in an Alzheimer's unit. She wrote her pastor saying that if one more person says to me, "God won't give you more than you can handle" I am going to lose it. She did not believe her loving God would give her cancer, allow her nephew in a fit of depression to take his life, or cause her loving husband to begin that long good-bye journey.

We will all face things that are more than we can handle. They are not sent by God but are part of the human experience. God doesn't send them but God promises to walk with us through them. The promise of Scripture is not that we won't go through these hard times. Scripture does not say that we can handle by ourselves everything that life throws our way. What Scripture does promise is that at all times, good or bad, God wants to be our help and our strength. "Throw all your anxiety onto him because he cares about you." 1 Peter 5:7

Instead of the phrase as it is usually given, I believe "that God will help you handle all that you have been given." At first glance, this might seem to be saying the same thing. Yet, the differences are significant. It acknowledges that adversity happens in life, but does not say God is their cause and it promises that when you go through trials God walks with you.

Let me share how profound the difference can be. In one of the churches I served, a family lost their baby due to an undiagnosed birth defect. At the memorial service one of the mom's good friends said, "We just want you to know that we are with you." The church organized meals, her friends visited and took her out to eat. Others reached out to the dad. People took their older son to their houses for play dates to give the parents time to grieve. This kept up for months. They were God's hands and feet supporting this family. The grief and loss they were feeling was more than they could deal with on their own. But, through the loving care of the church, they got through that time of grief. They never thought God caused their loss but instead were grateful for how God, through friends, helped them carry their load.

When someone is going through a tough time the easy thing to do is to tell them that God won't give them more than they can handle. But, as we see, that makes God into an uncaring monster and often makes the person feel ashamed if they have to ask for help. Instead, we are told that when we are having difficult times the most faithful and strongest thing we can do is ask for help. We can cast our cares on God who will faithfully walk beside us. Sometimes the journey through the darkness is brief and sometimes it takes a lifetime, but God is faithful. God also makes sure that we do not have to go through it alone. If we ask for help, God will send people to assist us.

I don't know what you are going through. Are you feeling that you have to handle this all yourself? Reject that idea and lean on God. Look around you. Do you see people struggling? Instead of just giving them a pat on the back and assuring them that they can handle it, think about what God is asking you to do in that situation. We all need help carrying our burdens and we can be a help to others.

I am glad to know the words, "God doesn't give me more than I can handle" are a lie. Instead, in the moments when life gives me more than I can handle, I find reassurance knowing God is there, often most visible through the love and support of other faithful Christians who have been touched by God to lift me up and carry me when I cannot do this alone. Thanks be to God.