



God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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This month we are considering some of the more common Christian clichés that, while sounding good and seemingly built on truths of God, in fact have little to no scriptural foundation and speak little of the true nature of God. These half-truths and false positives help us feel better about ourselves for saying them, but often don't offer the kind of support others need when they are struggling with personal and professional troubles.

Today, we take on the saying, ***God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle.***

I have been around a number of people for whom such a saying seemed fitting. When just a few things go wrong, or when the wound isn't so deep, we often offer the false platitude, *Everything Happens for a Reason.* We debunked this cliché a few weeks back. Today, we focus on those times when the cut goes deeper, when everything that can go wrong does, and when the weight of the varied troubles seems to be compounding. 'God won't give you more than you can handle' is what we offer when a person is at their breaking point. It's our attempt to raise their spirits in hopes of helping them get through such a difficult time.

A number of years back, I was talking with someone who was going through a divorce. Rightfully she was struggling to understand the situation and to find positive thoughts to help her push forward. She mentioned to me that some of her supportive friends had offered her this quip, *God won't give you more than you can handle.* They wanted her to know that if she was dealing with it, surely God knew she was strong enough to handle it. Her response to me was to question why God would push her to the limits of her breaking point. In her mind, she was there – she was not prepared or willing to handle any more – but she knew it would get harder as she continued to seek resolution to the marital strife. So what did that mean about how much God cared for her?

These words are meant to inspire others and offer our support, but if we stop to think about what we're saying, it brings up some troubling theology of how we understand the work of God in the world. Yet, more so than the other clichés we're considering, this one comes the closest to being supported in the Biblical text. (It is the closest, but still lacking.) Being so close to the Biblical text, it is also one of the hardest to break from using. Let's see how it connects to God's word.

One of the most often cited scriptures in support of this claim comes in 1 Corinthians 10, with a focus on verse 13, which reads, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

The connection seems to be there: God won't give you any testing that you aren't able to endure, because God will be the one to provide a way out. At face value, this seems to offer the support we need to claim this cliché as truth. But hear me when I say this, I mean this in all love, if you're arguing that you have Biblical support for the things you say and do using a single cherry-picked verse, you are probably wrong. There are 31,102 verses in the Bible (roughly); it is improbable to say that any individual verse can stand by itself in teaching us the true will of our Creator God. In the same way that the true witness of the Church can not stand on the witness of any one person, the witness of the Word can not stand on the witness of any one verse. So, we take 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 to offer a better contextual understanding of this singular verse in hopes of better understanding what God is trying to say.

1 Corinthians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the faith community in the city of Corinth in the mid-first century AD. It was a specific letter written for a specific church dealing with specific issues at a specific point in the first 30 years of the existence of the Christian church.

Corinth was a large port city that offered a major pass-through for trade throughout the Mediterranean region. Being such a hub city on the coast, the city was filled with transplants from a variety of cultures. Each group that came in set up a temple to worship their unique god-like figures. If you visit Corinth today, you will still find the remains from these ancient temples.

With the presence of pagan temples, and as was the life of such a trade-based port city, Paul is addressing two major issues in this first letter to the church in Corinth. One issue was sexual immorality and the second was participating in idolatry. Prior to chapter 10, Paul has already offered a couple of critiques regarding these issues. He says in chapter 8 that while the members who are stronger in faith may be able to visit such temples without succumbing to temptation, they are setting a bad example for those whose faith in Christ is not as strong. "The knowledge of the strong might prove the spiritual undoing of the weak."ⁱ In chapter 9, Paul says that for the sake of the full community, the faithful must surrender their rights to participate in such activities so the full community may be safe from temptation. He makes the argument that everything that is possible is not permissible.

Then in chapter 10 he continues to make his argument regarding these two issues, idolatry and sexual immorality. In the opening verses of our text for today, Paul is making a connection for the church at Corinth to their Israelite ancestors. Hear his words, "I don't want you to be unaware that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink." All ... all ... all ... You are connected with them all, Paul says. There is an intentional linking of who the church at Corinth is in relationship to the all that defines the historical community of the church.

Why does Paul make such a strong connection? What's the connection of the young church in Corinth with the historic faith community? Verse 6 explains, "These things," meaning the recorded events of the historic relationship between God and Israel, "occurred as examples for

us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.” Evil is here defined for us in verses 7-10 as Paul names the things that the community must avoid: do not become idolaters, we must not indulge in sexual immorality, we must not put Christ to the test, and we must not complain as some of them did. Paul is still harping on these same issues that he has focused on in recent chapters. Don’t give in to the temptations of idolatry and sexual immorality. Don’t even play around with the possibilities of idolatry and sexual immorality and put Christ to the test. And don’t complain because you aren’t allowed engage with these acts.

Paul again reiterates for us in verse 11, “These things happened to the people of Israel to serve for us an example; they were written down to instruct us.” The temptations of the people of God throughout the history of the people of God were recorded that the faith community in the present time may learn from the mistakes of the past and not give in to the same temptations of idolatry and sexual immortality.

This account by Paul leads us to verse 13, which is our focus text. “No testing has overtaken you that isn’t common to everyone. God is faithful and won’t test you beyond your strength, but amidst the testing God will give you a way out.” Read in context, the testing Paul is talking about is not the general woes and disasters of life. Paul is speaking specifically about the temptation to idolatry – putting others in the place of God and worshipping things other than God, and the temptation of sexual immorality – seeking self-satisfaction before faithfulness to God.

Paul goes on to say God will offer us a way to avoid giving in to such idolatry and sexual immorality, but even such promptings by God are not forced coercion to the will of God. Perhaps such promptings are best understood as nudgings by the Spirit to remind us of God’s call toward righteousness.

Simply put, no. The words of Paul do not promise that “we won’t be given more than we can handle.” Paul’s words are limited in scope to the temptations of idolatry and sexual immorality.

This text is indicative of other possible Biblical connections. There just isn’t the support for this saying, *God won’t give you more than you can handle*. Beyond Paul’s words, and any Biblical foundation for such a saying, can we see examples in the world around us, or in the historical connection to our ancestors in the faith, that God won’t give us more than we can handle? Again, simply put, no.

The first problem with saying “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” lie in the first four words, “God won’t give you.” In recent weeks we’ve debunked theological determinism and named that God isn’t some bully in the sky whose hope it is to test how faithful you can be in times of hardship. Despite what you may think when sitting in traffic, or when single-tracking on the Metro, God isn’t out there pondering, ‘I wonder if I can find Thomas’ breaking point today.’ “God is not some sadist who delights in our trials and tribulations. God is not some architect of divine destruction. God is not sitting up in heaven plotting away about what terrible things to send for us to handle.”ⁱⁱ That’s just *not* how God works.

“The promise of Scripture is not that we won’t go through hard times. It is not that we can handle by ourselves everything 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ Consider what is likely the most well known of all scriptures, one that is read at many funerals, Psalm 23: “Yes, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you (God) are with me.” God does not wish for us to endure hard times; it is not God who gives such hardship. Quite the opposite indeed. God is the one who stands by us in such hardships.

The second half of our cliché also presents problems. If we take God out of the statement, having proven our hardships to not be of God’s hands, we are left with this, “You won’t be given more than you can handle.”

This still doesn’t pass muster. Any small time spent applying rationale thought to this statement would prove it to be false. Did you know the 10th leading cause of death in the United States is suicide? In our nation alone, there are over 44,000 successful suicides per year; another 500,000 people seek medical help for injuries due to self-harm. This number suggests that for every successful suicide, there are approximately 12 others who inflict harm upon themselves. Such statistics imply that it is far too common for people to be dealing with more than they can handle.

So we have a statement that holds no water. God doesn’t give us more than we can handle, for God isn’t giving us the difficulties of life. And truly, people are being given more than they can handle. So in seeking a more faithful way, what is a better way to relate to those dealing with compounding difficulties than to suggest, God won’t give them more than they can handle?

For such an answer, I want to turn back to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

Paul is writing this letter to a community – to a gathering of people. When Paul says to the community, “You won’t be tempted into idolatry or sexual immorality without God being there to offer a way out,” he uses this personal pronoun *you*. In our English translation we read the word ‘you’ and take at face value the seeming singular nature of the word. But Paul isn’t writing to any particular person, he’s writing to a whole community. When Paul says ‘you’ what he means is the royal ‘y’all.’ Paul’s ‘yous’ should be understood as ‘y’alls.’

Heard appropriately, Paul’s writing reads this way: “I do not want y’all to be unaware, brothers and sisters ... Don’t do these things our ancestors did. If y’all think y’all are standing, watch out that y’all don’t fall. No testing has overtaken y’all that isn’t common to everyone. God is faithful, and won’t let y’all be tempted beyond y’alls strength.”

In the correction of the English translation, we find the answer for how to handle the difficulties that come our way. We handle them alongside one another. Paul isn’t teaching the church as a sea of individuals, he’s teaching them as a unified conglomerate. Going through difficulties is not something we must endure as individuals – but something we must prepare to endure as a

community. “We respond to life’s ups and downs, joys and sorrows, expected and unexpected happenings as a unified body that transcends time and location. Though we are diverse in settings, ethnicities, backgrounds, genders, and experiences, Paul reminds us that God is faithful to us as one body.”^{iv}

Saying to another, God won’t give you more than you can handle seeks to write off each person as an individual who must bear such hardships on their own. But the irrational gospel of Jesus Christ calls for us to be united as one body. There is no I in the body, there is only the corporate identity as the called out community who is empowered by the love of God to offer support and strength to one another.

Don’t try to bear your difficulties by yourself. Don’t try to hide your brokenness behind closed doors with rivers of tears. But let us instead be faithful to the God who gives us the support of a blessed community that we may endure the times of life when life gives us too hard to handle. For no person can handle the struggles alone, but together, with the support of the Redeemer and Sustainer in our midst, we can endure this journey together. So may the good news of the great love of God call us to bear with one another, and to offer the nurturing love of God to all who pain in our midst. For the glory of God, Amen.

ⁱ Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Taylor Mertins. thinkandletthink.com. Retrieved May 11, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

^{iv} Shively Smith. workingpreacher.org. Retrieved May 11, 2017.