

BAD EXAMPLES

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Third Sunday in Lent (Series C)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson for the Third Sunday in Lent comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 10, verses 1 through 13. In this epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul teaches us to think about some things we might not want to think about. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 10, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible is filled with examples. And we kind of enjoy the examples in the Bible. Sometimes, we might even crave them. We might search for them when we read the Bible. There are great heroes, like Daniel, who was faithful to the one true God, even though he knew he might be thrown into a lion's den. David, when he was just a boy, fought the mighty Goliath and won. Joshua and Caleb believed that God would give them the Promised Land, even though it looked impossible. We like these stories, because they make us think that, perhaps, we could be heroes too. Maybe these stories will inspire us. Or maybe we can find some secrets of wisdom in their stories that will work for us too. I've heard more than a few sermons that take the heroes of the faith, especially from the Old Testament, and extract insights for living.

But is that really the right way to use the Bible? Is that the right way to take examples from it? The Bible treats the characters in the story much differently. Most of the characters in the Bible are bad examples. And it's interesting to see what the New Testament does with the examples from the Old Testament. With the good examples, because there are a few of them,

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Hebrews 11 teaches us that they lived by faith. That is, even the so-called “heroes” of the Old Testament did not stand before God with their own good works. They stood before God by faith. And any good works they did, it was only through faith that they accomplished them, and it was only through faith that these works were commendable to God. Furthermore, of these faithful examples, many of the so-called “heroes” have some very scandalous elements to their stories.

Then there are the bad examples, and there are many more bad examples than good. Consider the people who came out of Egypt during the Exodus. That’s the example Paul gives us in this epistle lesson. We don’t have a complete census of all the people including women and children, but we do know there were about 600,000 men over the age of twenty (Num. 1:46). Of those 600,000 men, only two were permitted to enter the Promised Land, Joshua and Caleb. The rest “were overthrown in the wilderness” (10:5), and it was their children who entered the Promised Land forty years later. Even Moses was not allowed to enter. Two out of 600,000 ... I did the math on this, and the percentage is 0.0003%. You have a better chance of being a major league baseball player. I’ve done the math on that too.

So the bad examples in the Bible do a couple of things. First, they demonstrate human nature. We share the same fallen, corrupt, and sinful human nature as all the bad examples. If we had been there, we would have done the same thing. Or, at least, there’s about a 99.9997% chance we would have. Second, and even more importantly, it puts a big spotlight on the incomprehensible grace of God. Even though people are unfaithful to God, over, and over, and over again, he remains faithful, and he constantly desires that no one should perish, “but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

Now two out of 600,000 is kind of an extreme example, but it illustrates that the ratio of good examples to bad examples is very small. And it doesn’t mean that only two of the 600,000 men were saved. Certainly there were more than two who inherited eternal life, because inheriting eternal life is not based on our good works. But there were only two who were considered faithful enough to receive the temporal blessing of the land. And it shows that most of the examples in the Bible are examples of what not to do. So Paul says in verse 6, “Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.”

It seems that we’ve been talking a lot about the Exodus lately. I can think of at least three sermons in the last month that have had something to do with the Exodus. The Exodus is a really big deal in the Old Testament. If you’re not familiar with it, you should definitely read the book of Exodus. The biggest events in the Old Testament are probably creation, the fall into sin, and the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus is the big redemption story of the Old Testament, much like Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection is the big redemption story in the New Testament. It’s how Israel became God’s people.

It is the fulfillment, or really I should say the *partial* fulfillment, of God’s promises to Abraham. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and give his offspring the land of Canaan. You can read those promises in Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22. Abraham lived in the land of Canaan, but he didn’t possess it. He lived there as a nomad. But God promised to give the land to his offspring. And over the next several hundred years, his offspring did become a great nation, but they were not a free nation. They did not have their own land, but instead lived in Egypt as slaves to the Pharaoh.

And that’s where the story of the Exodus begins. The Exodus is a story of redemption, rebellion, judgment, and God’s faithfulness. The people were mistreated in Egypt, and God looked upon them in pity. He sent ten plagues upon Egypt. These plagues, culminating in the

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death of all the firstborn, was a judgment against the land of Egypt. And it gave the people of Israel a chance to escape. The Pharaoh, in his foolish greed, pursued Israel to the Red Sea. It was there that God miraculously parted the Red Sea, allowing the people of Israel to cross on dry ground, and then closed the sea, drowning Pharaoh's army.

This was another act of judgment on Egypt, and it was the redemption of Israel. The word "redemption," remember, means to purchase something. This was how the LORD, in a sense, purchased Israel as his own people. He bought them out of slavery. They no longer belonged to Pharaoh, but they belonged to the LORD. And belonging to the LORD is much different than being a slave. If you're a slave, it probably means that your master owns you in order to extract some kind of value or service from you. That's what Pharaoh did with the Israelites. Slavery usually nets some kind of financial profit, though sometimes there's a different nefarious goal. But belonging to the LORD is different. Instead of purchasing people in order to get something from them, he purchases people in order to serve them. It's the difference between good authority, as God designed it, and abusive authority. It's the difference between being a child and being a slave. In both cases, you belong to someone, but that's about all they have in common. Slaves serve their masters, while parents serve their children. God never redeems people for slavery, but only to be his children. And that's what the Exodus was. God redeemed Israel for their good.

The crossing of the Red Sea is one of two really fascinating sacramental pictures in this text. Paul says, "They were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (10:2). Remember, the pillar of cloud was the presence of God as he led them through sea. So this thing about the cloud and the sea is very similar to what Jesus says in John 3 (v. 5-6) about being born again of water and the Spirit. You have the physical element of water attached to the presence of God, because God is the one who actually makes it work. Baptism is your own personal redemption event. It's where God purchased you ... individually. Jesus' death on the cross is where he paid for the sins of the whole world, and your Baptism is how he applies that to you. Baptism, like the crossing of the Red Sea, is a judgment event. It's one of many "destruction deliverances" in the Bible. God drowns your sin in the water of Baptism. It does not work apart from Jesus' death and resurrection; that's one of the most common myths about Baptism. Rather, it works by joining us to Christ's death and resurrection. We are buried with him and raised with him. So God destroys our sin, similar to how he destroyed Pharaoh's army, and we emerge as his redeemed children, much like how the people of Israel emerged on the other side of the water as a new nation, belonging to God.

But the people rebelled against the LORD. And in this way they are a bad example to us. So what did they do? Paul lists four things: idolatry, sexual immorality, testing, and grumbling.

The first one is the big one. They committed idolatry. Idolatry is the technical term for worshipping a false God. That violates the First Commandment. The verse Paul quotes, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play," comes from Exodus 32 (v. 6). That's where the people created and worshipped a golden calf. We talked about this a little on Wednesday evening. The people felt abandoned by the LORD when Moses was meeting with the LORD on Mount Sinai. He had led them out of Egypt, and now they were waiting in the wilderness for whatever was supposed to come next. They panicked and sought the help of some other god. That's what the golden calf was. It was a representation of some false god they were hoping would come and help them, since they didn't know where their actual God had gone. It's

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kind of like when a newborn screams when its mommy walks into another room. They panicked, even though everything was under control. They did this because they did not trust the one true God, even though he had just proven his power and favor to them.

The second thing Paul mentions is sexual immorality. And here Paul seems to be referring to the incident in Numbers 25. While Israel was dwelling in the wilderness, one of the nations they came near enticed them to worship the false god Baal. Baal worship, as was fairly common in the ancient world, included sexual immorality. It was actually part of their worship practice, or what you might call their “liturgy.” That might sound kind of weird to us, because in our culture, sexual fidelity is often associated with religion, while sexual immorality is often anti-religious. The sexual revolution has set itself against religion, especially Christianity. But Baal worship embraced and promoted sexual immorality. And that’s a sure sign of a man-made religion. As a consequence of this, Paul says twenty-three thousand people died in a single day.

The third thing Paul mentions was their testing of the LORD and the plague of serpents. This occurred slightly before the Baal-worship thing. It’s recorded in Numbers 21. After some time in the wilderness, the people became impatient with the journey and disgruntled with the food and water. So God sent a plague of serpents among them. We don’t know how many of them died in this one. The cure was to make a statue of a bronze serpent on a pole, and everyone who looked at it would live. This deserves an entire sermon of its own, so I won’t get into this other than to say that statue of a serpent was a prophetic image of Jesus Christ (John 3:14).

And the fourth thing Paul mentions is their grumbling. There are a few places during the Exodus where the people grumbled against the LORD. One of them was the incident where the people had no water, so they grumbled against the LORD, and he gave them water from a rock. This actually happened twice (Ex. 17; Num. 20). And since Paul mentions the rock earlier in this passage (10:4), this seems to be the grumbling he’s talking about.

And this is the other really fascinating sacramental connection in this text. The first one had to do with Baptism. This one has to do with the Lord’s Supper. Paul says, “All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (10:3-4). Later in chapter 10, and also in chapter 11, Paul will speak more about the Lord’s Supper, so it’s quite natural to see this as a reference to the Lord’s Supper in preparation for that discussion he’ll have later.

Those two rocks in the wilderness were a prophetic picture of Jesus. Actually, the way Paul states it is even stronger. Even though there were two different rocks, much like there are many cups used for the Lord’s Supper, Paul speaks of them as one “Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” He’s teaching the real presence of Christ in the form of those rocks. “The Rock was Christ.” And the LORD commanded Moses to strike this rock, and living water flowed out, giving life to all of God’s people. I assume this is the inspiration for the hymn “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me.” It’s a picture of what would happen to Jesus at the cross. He was struck, and blood and water flowed out. Striking the Rock gave life to all who drink.

So these are the four sins of Israel during the Exodus: Idolatry, sexual immorality, testing, and grumbling. In my mind, they all kind of mush together. Maybe they do that for you too. I had to distinguish them all so I could list them for you, but they still just mush together in my mind. That’s because it all goes back to the same thing: idolatry. All of these sins were just slightly different ways of rebelling against the one true God or seeking after false gods. That’s really what all sin is. It’s seeking pleasure, satisfaction, fulfillment, or deliverance from

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something or someone other than the one true God. And the basic problem with all these false gods is that they cannot save us.

So these events from the Exodus are written down for our instruction, so that we would have an example of what not to do. But we also see what God did in response to these sins. And that's really the most important thing to see. One of the things we see, and there's no getting around this, no matter how much we might want to, is that God judges. And in some of these instances, God judged by killing people ... lots of them. He drowned an army in the Red Sea. He struck down twenty-three thousand of his own people for sexually immoral false worship. And there were others, it doesn't say how many, who died from snakebite before God provided a remedy for that plague.

We see from this that God takes sin seriously. And he judges sin. And he has a right to do it. How, and why, and when he does it is probably a mystery to us. And it's important for us to remember this: outside of a few examples given in the Bible, we cannot say that a certain disaster or plague was the direct judgment of God. We just don't know those things. Even in the gospel lesson today, where Jesus mentioned a couple different disasters, he does not say why those things happened (Luke 13:1-9). But Paul says regarding these judgments during the Exodus, that "these things happened to them as an example, and they were written down for our instruction" (10:11). God killed people, lots of them, as an example to the rest of his people and to us. You might not like that. That might seem harsh to our modern sensibilities. But whether or not we like it doesn't matter. It's possible—actually it's more than possible; I think it's quite likely—that our modern sensibilities are just plain wrong. We hear stories like these from the Old Testament, and we might dismiss them, assuming that a loving God wouldn't actually destroy people. Or we might imagine that God used to be like that, but has since "repented." More often, for Christians who take the Bible as history, we try to ignore these stories. We admit that they are historical, but then we try to talk about something else. But these stories are written down for our instruction. We should pay attention to them. "Let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (10:12). Any of us can fall into some kind of idolatry and be destroyed. And I don't mean that we will meet a destructive end to this life, but we will be destroyed for eternity.

Now we can't explain why God does everything he does. Or, at least, we can't fully explain it, and we should not go beyond what God has revealed. But this is part of the calculus: God values eternal life far more than he values this life. And that doesn't mean he doesn't care about this life. He does. He cares more about human life on this earth than any human being on this earth cares about human life. But he sees that whether you spend twenty years on this earth or eighty is less than insignificant compared to your eternal life. And I'll warn you again that this is probably only part of the equation, but this is part of why he killed twenty-three thousand of his own people. It was an example to the rest of his people, including us. Our modern sensibilities gag on this, because our hearts are in love with this world. We live like the worst thing that could happen to us is an untimely death. That's not even close. The worst thing that could happen to you is that your sinful heart chases after some false god who cannot save you, and you perish for all eternity. Modern sensibilities are just wrong, because we love the wrong things.

God desires that you would be saved for all eternity. This is his good and gracious will for all people. This is why these examples are written down. And this is especially why God has given his only Son for us. If we find it offensive that God would destroy those who rebel against him, it's many times more offensive that the Father would crush his own innocent Son. But God's calculus is different. He has better priorities. He sees things clearly. And instead of being

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concerned about his own comfort, he looks out for the needs of his creatures. So he was willing to endure the intense, but temporary anguish of the cross. And the Son was willing to endure the complete wrath of God. And the Father was willing to pour the entire wrath of God upon his own Son. When God judges sin, he doesn't just condemn the rebels. In fact, he desires to save the rebels. So he takes the condemnation himself.

This is your God. And this is what he has done to redeem and save you. So do not chase the false gods. Whoever they are, whatever they are for you, the end of that path is destruction. And that is not God's good and gracious will for you. His will is that you would persevere, remain in the faith, and receive your promised inheritance. He has given himself into death for you. He has given his Holy Spirit to strengthen and preserve you in the faith. And when we are tempted to chase our false gods, he sets a limit to those temptations. He owns you. And he intends to keep you. You can trust yourself to him. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.