

God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle?

1/17/2016

1 Corinthians 10:13, Psalm 46:1-2

We've been using resources from Church of the Resurrection UMC to examine ½ truths – those statements that Christians and non-Christians alike say to people that are in a sense “Christian clichés”. There is some Biblical truth to the statement, but under closer examination they don't hold up and often are more hurtful than helpful.

Today we turn our attention to a phrase that we've all heard and perhaps even said to someone. My aim is to get you to scrub this from your vocabulary after today. That phrase is up on the screen, let's say it together: GOD WON'T GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE. We mean well when we say this. It sounds encouraging, right? No matter how hard things are right now, you're going to make it through because God's not going to give you more than you can handle. We're going to look deeper at this phrase and see if it really is a good way to express encouragement.

Here are some humorous examples from Eric and Andy who are roommates and on the staff at Church of the Resurrection:

< COR website video clip >

So we can see from that clip that there are times when it is not appropriate to quote that statement, but I want to suggest that there are a whole lot more times when it is not appropriate, in fact I'm going to suggest maybe it is never appropriate.

Like many half-truths, this statement is rooted in scripture—just a bit of a scripture taken out of context. We just heard it, but here's the original, as near as I can tell: "No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it."

So it sounds a little like "God won't give you more than you can handle", but Paul is talking about temptation, not difficult things coming our way. The context for this verse is the hope of avoiding sin, particularly the sin of idolatry. Chapter nine ends with this focus and chapter ten begins by talking about the Israelites who sinned against God through the worship of idols and immorality. Paul describes how God struck the Israelites down because of their sin, then he writes: "These things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did."

Then he says, "So those who think they are standing need to watch out or else they may fall. No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people," so Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians they will be tempted in the same way the Israelites and all human beings are tempted. Then he picks up with, "But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it."

Christmas treats temptation story

God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our abilities, but he will always supply us with a way out so that we can endure the temptation. You know that voice you hear in your head that says, "don't eat that or you shouldn't do that"? I call that my inner God voice and if I would just listen I'd be much better off. God helps us in our times of temptation. This is not about God not giving you more than you can handle, but God helping you when you are tempted. In other words, the devil can't make you do anything! You can resist temptation.....

I think of the Lord's Prayer that we pray each week. That line about temptation....Perhaps the comma is in the wrong place.

Here's how we pray it: "Lead us not in to temptation, but deliver us from evil". In essence we are asking God not to lead us into temptation. Does God lead us into temptation? Is that God's way to tempt us or is it the devil or the forces of evil if you don't believe in a literal devil, the dark side of our human psyche? The book of James says; God won't tempt you. So if we're asking God not to tempt us we're asking God not to do something that God is not inclined to do anyway. So perhaps the comma is in the wrong place. It's not "lead us not into temptation comma but deliver us from evil".

It should be "Lead us comma not into temptation comma but deliver us from evil". I find myself leading myself into temptation all the time. I led myself to that shiny tin filled with Christmas goodies. If we use the comma this way we're saying God, you lead me, because I am going to lead myself into temptation, so YOU lead me, not as I would lead myself, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Just something to think about with regards to that prayer and how we think about temptation.

So what this passage is saying is you don't have to give into temptation. God will make a way out if you're paying attention and watching for it. The devil can't make us do anything and resistance is not futile. What it is not saying is that God won't give you more than you can handle.

So what of this statement about God not giving us more than we can handle? Let's start with the first four words, "God won't give you..." These four words imply that whatever horrible thing you are going through, God gave it to you—but lucky for you, he won't give you more than you can handle. So 3 of your friends may have died this year, but hang in there because God won't give you more than you can handle you might be able to handle losing a 4th or 5th friend, but he won't give you more than you can handle, he's going to stop, he's going to let up just before you collapse.

Now if you are going through a really tough time and a friend tells you God has given you all of this stuff so far and says “but you’re strong enough, you’re tough and you can handle it. God’s going to give you just enough and then he’ll relent”. That doesn’t sound very comforting to me.

We spoke about this idea of God giving us suffering in the first sermon in this series “Everything Happens For a Reason”. Yes, we live in a world of cause and effect, but God is not making bad things happen to you for some grand purpose. God is not in the business of making us sick or hurting his children in order to make his plan come to fruition.

So when we say God won’t give you more than you can handle, we’re saying, “God gave you this horrible and painful and hurtful thing. But he’s only going to give you so much—he’ll stop giving you this stuff just before you break. So don’t worry, you’ll be okay.” God does not give us bad things.

Consider this note one of the members at Church of the Resurrection wrote to Pastor Adam: “In response to your question about God not giving us more than we can handle...If someone tells me this one more time, I may lose it. First of all, God didn't cause my husband to beat me, he didn't make my brother commit suicide, he didn't plant the IED that my nephew hit which will result in him losing his leg, God didn't give my best friend cancer. I could go on, but you get the idea.”

God doesn’t send us this stuff, taking us right to the edge of what we can handle. These are part of what happens in life...yes, sometimes we’ll face things that are absolutely more than we can handle. This is why we need God and the church and the support of our church family.

The promise isn't that God won't give us more than we can handle. Let's try to scrub that from our vocabulary. A promise that is more accurate, and more scriptural is:

God will help you handle all that you've been given.

Listen, with the help of God, you can endure whatever comes your way. This is one of the great lessons I've learned as a pastor. I've walked with people through the most horrible of situations; with God's help you can make it through the difficult and horrible things life gives you. You can and will survive them. You can't do it by yourself though.

So you trust in God in the midst of it, you trust that God is, that there is a God in the heavens, you trust that God is there and you talk to him even if you can't feel him. You listen for what the Psalmist and other scripture writers share about their hope in the face of the most dark circumstances. You believe that God is going to walk with you through this and won't abandon you and that he is as close as the air you breathe. You trust that God has a way of forcing evil to accomplish good. And that somehow he will bring you through this dark place and while you might experience the pain of it for the rest of your life, joy is going to overshadow that pain and this horrible thing or the worst thing you can imagine will not have the final word in your life.

You say it until you begin to believe it, you believe it and you find that God begins to sustain you through it. God brings people to carry you and you make it through.

There are times when all we can do is to trust that God is, that God will see us through the dark place we find ourselves in....the prophet Zechariah once called his fellow Israelites "prisoners of hope." I love that, for this is what we are as people who trust in God. We believe with the Apostle Paul who wrote these words of encouragement from the end of Romans 8:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The woman who wrote that note, noting she would lose it if one more person said, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” who had been physically abused by her husband, lost her brother to suicide, whose nephew is losing his leg due to an IED, whose best friend has cancer, went on to write that while she doesn’t believe God gives us these things, “What I do know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is that He is helping me cope. It's not easy...but I know that I am not alone, even if it feels that way sometimes. I know I can turn to Him and cry and kick and scream, and He will comfort me. I can thank Him for connecting me with the attorney who helped me out of an abusive marriage. I can thank Him for giving me the strength to talk about my brother's suicide in the hopes that someone else is helped. I can thank Him for allowing my nephew to live instead of die. God is turning the challenges and using them for good”.

God doesn’t give us things to handle, but he will help you handle all that you’ve been given. I’d like you to join me in reading once more the words of the Psalmist:

“God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart.”

1 Corinthians 10:13

Common English Bible

No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it.

Psalm 46:1-2

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