

Christian Cliché Series: “God Never Gives You More Than You Can Handle”
June 23, 2019

Some of you know that I preached a series of sermons during Lent on letting go: letting go of resentments, letting go of fear, letting go of stuff. But the one that *I* really needed to talk about was letting go of the illusion of control. Maybe you don't have this challenge, but I like to think I have some control in life. I sometimes try to control relationships; I want to try to control outcomes; I want to try to control life. As friend of mine likes to say, How's that workin' for you? Not very well.

And honestly, as people of faith, when we try to control things, aren't we running in the opposite direction of faith? If I really believe that there is a loving God working all things together for good, then why do I need to try to be in control? My job is to do all I can do, and then leave the results up to God.

But because we like to try to be in control, we come up with handy Christian clichés like the ones I am preaching on in this series. Last week was- Everything happens for a reason. Maybe we say that because it feels like somebody is in control. If everything happens for a reason, then at least life isn't random. Maybe God at least has some big plan going on. Stuff isn't just coming at me. I suggested to you last week that life happens, and that God can take anything that happens and make good come out of it. But that is different than saying, God caused this to happen so that you could learn this lesson. If that's what everything happens for a reason means, then I don't believe that.

Today's cliché is: “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Maybe you have said that, or heard someone say that. It's supposed to make us feel better, when life is turned upside down, and things keep coming at us, it's nice to think, Well, God never gives me more than I can handle, so I guess I can handle this. We want to believe that God is in charge of the faucet of challenges, and God will turn off the spigot when we've had enough. God knows how much we can handle; God knows when enough is enough.

It's a compelling idea, but I don't see much in the biblical story to back it up. The passage we read today from 1 Corinthians is probably what people might point to who use this cliché, but I think that's a misunderstanding of

this passage. Paul is sharing his thoughts on meat offered to idols earlier in chapter 8. He says to these Christians in first century Greco-Roman culture, You have the freedom to eat meat offered to idols, but don't offend your Christian neighbor who doesn't believe you should do that.

So he comes back to this theme, and says, Be careful of your lifestyle. Watch out for temptations. He gives examples from the people of Israel, who committed adultery with each other in the wilderness, and they worshiped idols, and there were consequences for that.

Here's the text again: "Now 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; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. 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 also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

Let me say that the Israelites and Paul have an understanding of cause and effect here: when the Israelites sinned, God brought physical consequences. That's another topic for a sermon. We do know that Jesus takes away some of this cause and effect in his teaching. He says that God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the good and the evil (Matthew 5:45). There is mystery to sin and its consequences, and when suffering happens, we ought not to back up and say, What did I do wrong?

But I believe this is where people come up with the phrase: God will never give you more than you can handle. What the text says, though, is, God will not let you be *tested* beyond your strength. This is about *temptation*, this not about the challenges of life. God will not allow you to be *tempted* beyond your strength, and with the temptation God will provide a way of escape.

If you are married, and meet somebody at work or at the gym or at the cafe, and you start to feel an attraction for that person, this verse might be relevant

for you: God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but God will provide a way of escape. So don't leave it all to God! You have some work to do. You need to be aware of those feelings. You want get closer to your spouse. Maybe it's a season in life where you both have gotten busy. Find a way to connect again. That's being proactive.

Take control of your thought life. You have a choice as to what you think about. If you find yourself thinking about someone, and fantasizing what might happen, realize that you have a choice with what you think about. Take responsibility for where you go with your thought life, where you go on your computer, what you look at, what you read.

Yes, God will never let you be tested beyond your strength, and God will provide a way of escape, and God asks you to take it! God asks us to be partners, to do some work in this. Paul uses the image of athletic training. "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified."

When I go backpacking in the summer, I jump on the treadmill about two months in advance and get into some kind of shape, because I don't want those mountains to conquer me.

I know there will be a test later in the summer, so I want to be ready for it. Just so with temptation. If my mind is softened with things that pull me away from God, then when the temptation comes along, I may fail the test. Again, God will not let us be tested beyond our strength, but we have a job to do. God will provide a way out, and we need to have the strength to take it.

But let's go back to the original cliché. "God never gives us more than we can handle." I officiated at a funeral last week for a man who took his life. His brother walked into the sanctuary, and I gave him a hug, and he said, Not only have I lost my brother suddenly, but two months ago my wife died of cancer. Was I supposed to say, Well, God never gives us more than we

can handle, so I guess your doing ok? He was suffering terribly, because life had thrown him two difficult challenges, and life doesn't particularly care what we can handle.

Paul gives us an incredible list of challenges he went through in the next chapter. Paul doesn't speak as if God measured these things out for Paul. Paul was charged by God to share the gospel, and these things happened to him as he journeyed around the Mediterranean: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (1 Corinthians 11)

I don't believe God was at the spigot of suffering, measuring out these things until just before Paul's strength gave out. But what was God's promise through all this? "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

Here's what he tells the Corinthian Christian in his second letter: "We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death *so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

That's what God can do through suffering, that's what God can do through the things that cause us to despair, when we think, How much can I handle? Paul says, That's when we really had to rely not on ourselves, but on the God who raises from the dead.

Our suffering gives us a chance to really trust the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Somebody I just met last week was in the office the other day handing in a room request, and saw the bulletin with my sermon title. I

wasn't there, so he decided to send me a blog about clichés and his own experience of suffering. He's fighting cancer. So I'm going to close this sermon with the story he shared with me. His name is Curt.

“In January I scheduled a meeting to discuss stem cell transplants with an oncologist who performs them. Jenny dropped me off at the entrance of the clinic where the doctor worked. Did I want the walker, she asked? I thought to myself, are you kidding, I'm going in to discuss transplants. Part of the qualification process is a treadmill test. I can't go in with a walker.

Moments later as I made my way to the door, I lost my balance and passed out. I found myself being helped up and cared for by staff members of the clinic. Was I able to handle this situation? – No. I was out of control, in over my head. Was I able to discern the window God was providing as the door closed? – Are you kidding, I wasn't even conscious. Was I safe? – Not exactly.

I can say I was embarrassed. And, I was forced to face the fact that I was not a candidate for a transplant. That was hard for me since everything I had been doing was for this purpose. I was definitely not in control, and I really wanted to be. Adversity and suffering strips our notion of being in control. In fact, it's often the catalyst for change and transformation.

I remember watching a movie years ago titled *The Doctor*. The film tells the story of an arrogant heart surgeon whose life is turned upside down after the discovery of a malignant tumor. The once in charge but relationally disconnected doctor is now a patient himself. Immediately he finds himself on the other side of the profession that previously afforded him a comfortable lifestyle and carefree life. For the first time he is associating and relating to fellow sufferers. He begins to experience empathy. His harsh circumstances lead to a transformation. He becomes more like the human being God intended.

The adversity and suffering.... was the key that brought about change. This change could not have occurred any other way. When adversity and suffering intrudes into our lives, it ideally leads us to God.

While some “Christian” TV personalities suggest that if you admit how bad things are (a negative confession) you will not experience God’s blessing and deliverance. Well, you might not experience God’s deliverance regardless of what you do or say. But, denial is not the doorway to God’s blessing. Confession of how things really are is. Read the rest of 2nd Corinthians. Read the Psalms.

So what’s ahead for me? On Friday of this week I’ll be getting some blood work done. I’ll also be meeting with my oncologist to plan out the next phase of chemotherapy to keep me in remission. Not happy about this, but I don’t know of any other options if I want to stay in remission.

I’ll keep updating as I am able. Thanks for reading!” Let’s pray for Curt this morning and all who are experiencing suffering in mind or body. Life throws things at us. God doesn’t “turn off the tap” at a certain point. God just reminds us that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Amen.