

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Introduction:

You may have heard the phrase, “*Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*” That quote seems to come from writer and philosopher **George Santayana**, and in its original form it read, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

I am not sure whether that statement is entirely accurate or not, but there is a certain element of truth to it. To some degree there is also a sense in which history repeats itself anyway, whether we know our history or not.

Another well-known adage is closely connected to this one. It is the truth that we need to learn from our mistakes. The idea is that when we do something dumb, or something wrong, it is not an entire loss, if we learn something that will help us to avoid failure going forward. I also remember hearing of someone who added to that adage by saying that we need to learn from other people’s mistakes because we don’t have time to make them all ourselves.

Now, you may be wondering where I am going with this. Well, in 1 Cor. 10, our text today, the Apostle Paul reviews for the Corinthian believers some of the sins and failures of the OT Jewish people. He points out in v. 6 – *read it*. Paul’s desire was that we learn from the mistakes of the Israelites of OT times, so that we are not led away into evil as they were.

Before we actually get into the text, I want to back up for a quick look at the bigger picture. It is important not to lose sight of the whole context of Paul’s discussion. Chapter 8 began with Paul’s response to a question that had come to him from the church in Corinth. That question was about the eating of meat that had been offered to idols or consecrated in a pagan temple ceremony. Paul’s response to that question led to a lengthy analysis of Christian liberty, our rights as Christians and ministers of the gospel and the surrender of those rights.

Not wanting to go back over all that we looked at in previous messages, let me try to summarize what Paul said. He was clear that, even though he had complete liberty in Christ to enjoy almost anything, including meat offered to idols, there were times when it was only right to limit that freedom so as not to offend others or cause other believers to be led to violate what their conscience dictated.

Likewise, in chapter 9, he placed the spread of the gospel far above his rights as a minister of the gospel. Even though he had a right to be supported by those he ministered to, his attitude is clearly stated in 9:12b – *read it*. Moreover, he says, even though I have complete freedom in Christ, I make myself a slave to others for the sake of the gospel – vv. 19, 23. He concludes that particular argument with a few words pointing out that the most important thing in life is to live in a way that pleases the Lord – vv. 24-27. Discipline and self-control are critical to running the race in a way that will receive the crown at the end of life.

But, he is not finished yet. Now in chapter 10, he moves on to a warning. At first glance it seems like a complete change of topic, but on further investigation it seems that Paul is concerned that his argument regarding liberty in Christ not be misunderstood. Without that self-control and discipline (vv. 24-27), liberty can quickly become license and it is easy to be carried away into sin and immoral indulgence. Our hearts can be drawn away from God into idol worship – not necessarily bowing down to a statue but allowing other things to displace God in our lives.

With all of that in mind, let’s look into this passage and try to get a picture of Paul’s argument and concern. We begin with a review of some incidents from Israel’s history...

Reminders from History vv. 1-5

Read vv. 1-5 again. There are a few significant points of clarification needed from these verses.

- Even though the congregation in Corinth was primarily Gentile, Paul did not hesitate to refer to the OT Israelites as “our fathers.” He was a descendant of ancient Israel and he calls on the Corinthian believers, and us, to look at what happened to the Israelites lest we fall into a similar trap of freedom without self-control.

- The cloud ... the sea – a clear reference to the generation of Israelites whom God miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt and brought through the Red Sea.
- Spiritual food ... spiritual drink – manna and water provided miraculously by God for their provision in the wilderness.
- Spiritual rock ... Christ – *read v. 4b*. The ESV Study Bible makes this observation: *“Rabbinic exegesis from after Paul’s time surmised that the rock followed the Israelites throughout their wanderings. This understanding of the rock may have been current in Paul’s time. If so, Paul’s claim that the Rock following them was both **spiritual** and **Christ** shows that he did not believe that a physical rock traveled with the Israelites, but that Christ (in spiritual form) was ever-present with them: he was there to supply their need for water...”* Remember Jesus words at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem – *“If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink...”* (John 7:37)

Verse 5 – Nevertheless... God was not pleased with them. In spite of all they had, and all God did for them, God was not pleased with their attitude and actions and most of them died in the wilderness – *“their bodies were scattered over the desert.”* (NIV) Israel’s history was one of rebellion and constantly wandering from God. In the next section Paul gives some specific examples of their desire for evil, for the things God forbade.

The Desire for Evil vv. 6-10

These examples all come from the 40 years between their exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the Promised Land. They represent four major sins that characterized them as a nation during that time – idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and grumbling (ingratitude).

- v. 7 – Idolatry – a reference to the golden calf at Mount Sinai – Exodus 32. By the time the mess was cleared up, thousands had died.
- v. 8 – sexual immorality – their immorality at Baal-Peor – Numbers 25. A plague that destroyed thousands – Numbers 25:9 says 24,000, Paul says 23,000 in one day – *discuss the explanation*.
- v. 9 – testing God – destroyed by serpents – Numbers 21. They questioned God’s motives and purpose. God sent serpents to

punish them and many died before God provided a means of deliverance – the bronze serpent.

- v. 10 – grumbling, resulting in destruction. This was not a specific incident but was an ongoing issue. We find it throughout the book of Numbers – 11:1; 14:2ff; 16. Their grumbling always ended with the Lord’s judgment and the loss of life.

Idolatry, immorality, testing or questioning God, grumbling and complaining – four distinct areas of sin, all of which brought God’s judgment on the Israelites in the wilderness. But Paul makes it clear that the lesson is not only for them. As we look at vv. 11-13, we see that there is a lesson in this for us as well.

The Lesson from their Failure vv. 11-13

Read v. 11 – Paul clearly affirms the authority and the truth of the OT accounts, saying that these things really happened. They were not just stories, but actual historical events. And they were recorded and passed down to us for our instruction. Those of us, like the Corinthians, living in the “end of the ages” are to learn from what happened to the Israelites.

What is it that we are to learn from this? Look at v. 12 – *read it*. Already in the first century of the early church, there was a growing problem with what later became known as Gnosticism. It was, in simple terms, the idea that man can attain a mystical form of knowledge through a special connection with God. There was an element of pride among those who felt they had a superior knowledge of God.

In the Corinthian church we see the seeds of this kind of thinking. In the first two chapters of this letter, Paul points out the foolishness of human wisdom, and the pride that is involved in their division over who was the best teacher or leader. In chapter 5 Paul addresses their arrogance and addresses the way they boasted of their tolerance and acceptance of sin.

Several places in this letter he uses the phrase, *“Do you not know...?”* They boasted of their knowledge, yet they did not know the things they ought to know. The problem was that their pride put them in a dangerous and vulnerable position – v. 12.

It appears that the belief that they had special knowledge about spiritual things was leading these Corinthian believers into areas of sin, like the Israelites in the wilderness. Immorality was a problem, according to chapter 5. Their “knowledge” regarding meat offered to idols seems to have been a problem leading to forms of idolatry, as we will see as we continue in this passage next time.

So, Paul reminds them, and us, that pride and a sense of superiority can lead to spiritual failure. So what is the answer?

Conclusion

Look at verse 13 – *read it*. This is an often misquoted and misapplied verse of Scripture. I have heard many people use this verse speak about troubles and trials, saying, “God will never give you more than you can handle.” That simply isn’t true. It is when we face things we can’t handle, that we learn to lean on God and trust him.

This verse is speaking about temptation. Paul has just warned about overestimating our own ability and knowledge. Now he wants his readers to realize that when faced with temptations that would lead us into sin, we have a faithful God, who will always provide a way out.

We sometimes talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place, and the need to choose the lesser of two evils. But what we need to understand is that when faced with temptation, and even opposition, there will always be a morally right option available to us. God will make a way of escape from sin. It may not be easy. For some it may even cost their life. But there will be a way to spiritual victory.

In v. 14 Paul admonishes us – *read it*. We will go on to look at the following verses next time. But let me close with this lesson from the Israelites and the Corinthians.

It is easy to look back on the Israelites and consider ourselves better and more knowledgeable than them. Yet that is exactly the problem the Corinthians had. Let us avoid the idolatry, immorality, the complaints against God demonstrated by the Israelites. But let us also beware of the danger of pride and superiority shown by the Corinthians – *read v. 12 again*.