A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“Finding the Light”*

1 Corinthians 10.1-13

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The Christians, so graced in those early days, were headed for a fall. Confident in the knowledge of the one true God, guaranteed by the sacraments and their spiritual experiences, they were prideful in their ability to navigate the complexities of life. They were confident they could test the limits of their Christian identity and everything would always--as it had been, as it must be forever--be just fine.

It is to them, and to people like them in every generation, that St. Paul writes, “If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

1 Corinthians 10 is a call for vigilance in the Christian life. We can walk with confidence in our faith, but we cannot glide through with complacency. We can have assurance in God’s enduring faithfulness, but not self-confidence in our enduring capacity to be faithful. The Christian life requires renewed commitment all the time, the renewal of our minds, the confession of sins, the study of scripture and prayer, and daily recommitment to the way of God in Christ. The danger is that step by step, small decision by small decision, compromise by compromise you can end up somewhere you didn’t want to be and didn’t intend to go. And not realize it until you’re there and you’re stuck.

The Corinthian Christian were people especially in need of constant vigilance of their Christian identity, and they weren’t even totally sure what Christian identity was. They were the 1st generation of Christian converts in a city that was not Christian at all. How do you live as Christians in a pluralistic, thoroughly pagan city? How would I know? Growing up in the south, I lived in a city that was very church-friendly. Stores were closed on Sundays, I remember when I was young. Neither school activities nor local sports were held on Sunday mornings. The rhythms of life were organized for church to happen without conflict. I guess the church advertisements wrote themselves: “Church, what else are you gonna do?” Even Wednesday nights were held open for church activities. It was definitely a Baptist-friendly place to live.

Fewer and fewer places in the world still are organized in the same church-centric way. I pastored a church in Virginia right across the road from the city park which was filled on Sunday mornings with young families watching their children play soccer on the fields. Parents had to choose, if they even considered such a choice an actual decision to make—whether to go to Sunday morning church or play soccer. Even everywhere nowadays select sports teams play every weekend, forcing parents to make the same decision. Yesterday’s Bearathon half-marathon is one of the few races that’s not on a Sunday morning. Every other marathon I’m aware of in every city is on Sunday. But this is just a very pale version of what it’s like to really live in a time and place like 1st century Corinth where Christians are in the decided, extreme minority.

NT Wright offers insights about Corinth, Greece, saying that everywhere you look everything you see, hear, smell, and encounter is dedicated to deities or some worldly meaning of life other than the God of divine transcendence. I think of standing in Times Square in New York City. The first century world had many gods to consider and appease. They were everywhere you looked. Wright says “Corinth was a thoroughly pagan city, typical of many in the ancient world. This did not, of course, mean merely that most of the inhabitants went from time to time to worship at pagan shrines and temples. It meant that the world view of the entire town was dominated by pagan assumptions, that the visual experience of the town was dominated by pagan symbolism, that the normal mind set of the average Corinthian was dominated by pagan ideas, pagan hopes, and pagan motivations, and that the normal life style was dominated by pagan practices.” (NT Wright, “One God, One Lord, One People: Incarnational Christology for a Church in a Pagan Environment,” *Ex Audito*).

This is the context of the early church. These early Christians were trying to figure out: when you live as a Christian in an environment totally foreign to your practices and beliefs, how do you do it? One way would be to build a compound, to wall yourself in and wall everything else out, creating a mini-sub-culture for you and your children to live out your faith without threats or influences from the outside. This way is a way of rejecting the world around you. Everything in the world is bad. You don’t associate with others as much as possible, you don’t play their games, you don’t run their races, you don’t eat their food. That’s one way: the way of isolation.

The other way would be assimilation. You know you worship the one true God. You know the other gods are just inert idols. You know their ceremonies have no spiritual reality to them. In other words: those gods aren’t real. With the confidence of this knowledge, you can simply live like everyone else. Everything in the world is good. Or at least just fine. Nothing is at stake in going along with the religious or non-religious symbolism and practices of the wider culture. This is the way the Corinthians are thinking makes the most sense to them. They say, “We know that God is our God. We know the idols have no power. Because we have this knowledge, as long as we go to church on Sundays, we have freedom to do whatever we want.”

Yes, Paul agrees, yes, that’s right, to a point. We do know there is only one God, one thing that matters. We know that the so called-gods have no real existence. We know that the things that govern the lives of other people are not really gods, so Christians could do all the same things, as long as we remember the one true God. Yes, that’s right; but also, be careful.

Be careful that you are not a stumbling block to other Christians. That’s what he tells them in chapter 8. Some Christians are still just now coming to Christian faith from their own worship of idols and haven’t fully committed to the way of Jesus and the one true God. Be careful how you set an example for them.

Be careful that you are a good witness to people who do not yet know Jesus. If you join them in their feasts in their temples you may be communicating that your God is also just one of many idols, when what you hope for is the opportunity to share your faith in the Creator of all. So be careful for that reason as well.

Two cautions: Be careful what you do as it affects other Christians. Be careful what you do as it affects your witness to non-Christians. Love in Christ for your brothers and sisters and your neighbor is more important than your freedom to do what you want so be careful how you live with others.

But mostly, be careful for yourselves. You are not as strong as you think you are. You know their way of life is not the best way, not God’s way, but you should also know how susceptible people are to ways that are not God’s ways. Always have been. If you think you are standing, watch out lest you fall. Rich Mullins penned a powerful song about our humanness, saying, in part:

*We are frail, we are fearfully and wonderfully made…*

*With these our hells and our heavens so few inches apart*

*We must be awfully small and not as strong as we think we are.*

*When you love, you walk on the water   
Just don't stumble on the waves   
We are not as strong as we think we are.*

To make the same point to the Corinthians, St. Paul looks back to the Old Testament Exodus, where the Israelites were freed from slavery and set free under God’s grace: he says, look, your situation is just as theirs in the wilderness, wandering between the lives they left behind in Egypt and the lives they longed for in the promised land.

In the wilderness, our ancestors had powerful manifestations of the grace and presence of God. In the wilderness, they had the cloud of God’s assurance and protection. They all passed through the sea like a baptism. They ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. Their manna and miraculous water in the desert are a lot like your bread and wine at the communion feast. They had everything to make a faithful life. But, even with everything anyone could hope for to assure them of God’s provision and care, with everything around them crafted to make their life of faith possible, it went tragically wrong. Idolatry, immorality, testing God, constant grumbling. One decision after another, one act of turning away from God after another, and these people lost what they had. It slipped through their fingers like the desert sands. They had a chance to live with trust in God, but they turned inward and they turned to idols. Paul has in mind the tragedy of the golden calf. At just the moment Moses was on top of the mountain, hidden in the cloud, communing with God and receiving instruction for their life together, all the other people are down below at the bottom of the mountain forgetting Moses, renouncing God, making a golden calf, and falling down to worship it like that gold calf was everything.

If you think that can’t happen to you, to turn your life over to your own golden calf, watch out. It can happen to anyone.

It sounds kind of absurd really. Most of us think about that golden calf story with a feeling of bewilderment. How could they do that? We are incredulous. It’s all so obvious what they are doing is wrong. They are so very selfish, hateful, fearful . . .something . . .they are something we are not. That’s why we would never do that. That’s what we say. That’s basically what the Corinthians said too. We know better. And because we know better, we will do better. Nothing will get in the way of our worship and dedication to God.

Paul’s not convinced.

I don’t think he’s skeptical because these people in Corinth were particularly bad people or because the idol worship in Corinth was particularly persuasive. I think Paul just knows human nature. He has an intuitive sense for what people are like. Maybe he got it from Jesus who sometimes pictured people as sheep, who munch on a little clover here, and a little sweet grass there, not realizing how lost they are getting with each step they take away from the shepherd.

Brent Bill (*Sacred Compass*, 96-97) tells a story that will haunt the nightmares of anyone afraid of the dark, or being lost, or being claustrophobic, or anyone who knows what human nature is like. Bill’s friend Maura attended a conference at an old church in an unfamiliar city. After an evening session, Maura returned to the hotel and then realized she left her purse on the floor of the church sanctuary eight blocks away. So, she turned back to the church accompanied by a friend, an extremely hard of hearing older man.

When they arrived, the front doors were locked, so they went around the block to the back of the church. The basement door was unlocked so they went in. Her friend waited in the basement while she ran up the stairs to the sanctuary to retrieve her purse. She entered the empty sanctuary and found her purse, but when she tried to retrace her steps to meet her friend in the basement, she found the door she entered through locked behind her. She thought about yelling but her hard of hearing friend wouldn’t of heard her.

So, she decided to try to exit through the back of the sanctuary through the foyer and out to the street. She went through two sets of glass doors to the foyer. But when she tried to push open the church’s old wooden doors to the street, she found them locked.

So now nothing to do but retrace her steps. But now, the glass doors were locked behind her, too. She was trapped in a small section of the church’s foyer, engulfed in darkness, surrounded by locked doors. Trapped and alone, she sat down on the floor and thought through her options. It was possible she would have to spend the night on the floor of the foyer of an old church in a strange city.

We’ll come back to Maura’s predicament in a moment. But it seems right that we have to leave her there for a little while to get the full force of this story. I want to pause there for us to be sure we’re connecting this story with Paul’s concerns for us. Be careful if you think you stand lest you fall. Be careful if you think you’re in the light to not end up in the dark. Be careful if you think you know the way that the door doesn’t lock behind you on the path you’re taking. Like a lot of people, the Corinthians are a people who cannot see the dangers of their actions, but hopefully they will listen to their founder who is giving them good wisdom here: just be careful. Paths to darkness aren’t marked “Path to Darkness”.

What would he say to us? Paths to darkness are everywhere? I suppose. He certainly could say that to us. I think he could assure us at least his warnings are not for bad people that they stop being bad, or evil people that they stop being evil or people who reject Jesus to stop rejecting Jesus. He’s talking here to self-assured people to be awake to the path their actions take them on. You’re not in the promised land yet he reminds them; you’re in a wilderness and if you’re not nurturing your spiritual health and relationship with God, if you’re not prioritizing love of neighbor and brothers and sisters, if you’re not discerning the way of the Spirit, you too can find yourself in the darkness, when you can’t go back and there’s no way forward, and you feel all alone and you can’t believe you got to where you are.

We left Maura on the floor of the foyer of that old church in that strange city. Maura didn’t give up, to her immense credit. Like the gardener in Jesus’ parable who begs the master for one more chance to help the fig tree produce fruit and survive, Maura didn’t give up.

Paul says something about this too. He may be skeptical of human nature, but he’s nothing but hopeful about God’s grace. It’s a sign of the measure of God’s grace that, even with the seriousness of all these warnings we’re given, that also for everyone, all the time, in whatever testing you face, there is always a way of escape. We will never be tested beyond our ability with God’s help to find a way to escape or a way to endure. This is grace.

Maura felt along the floor until she touched the wooden doors that led to the street. She worked her hands up the doors, searching for locks and latches, trying every knob and latch. None budged. Finally, she pushed against a door with everything she had. The next thing she knew, she had tumbled out the door and was lying on the sidewalk next to a snoozing homeless man. Shaking herself off, she went back around the church found her friend, and they made their way home.

May you have wisdom to know where you’re going. May you have divine light to lead you on the way. May you have the courage to turn what needs to be turned, the strength to say holy no when you’re tempted say easy yeses. May you know wherever you are, however you got there, how alone you feel, you are not alone and you are not hopeless. With God’s faithful help, you can endure and find a way to the light.

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