

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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[0 : 00] Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly.

I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

[1 : 06] Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

Do not be idolaters, as some of them were. As it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day 23,000 of them died.

We should not test Christ, as some of them did, and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

[2 : 17] But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. Brilliant. Thank you, Catherine.

Good morning, and let me add my welcome to Jonathan's. My name is Simon, and I'm a trainee minister here. We are diving right back in the deep end of 1 Corinthians, as I'm sure you've just realized.

And we're going to need God's help to do that. So let me pray as we begin this morning. Father, thank you that you speak through your word.

Please reveal more of the Lord Jesus to us, and by your spirit, grow us to become more like him.

We ask that as we hear your word to us from 1 Corinthians this term, that you would teach us afresh what it means to be your people, how to live in light of Christ's coming, and how to do all things to the glory of your name.

Amen. Well, welcome back to Corinth. The Corinthian church Paul has had a long relationship with, and over the course of the New Testament, you see some of that.

[3 : 34] It's a place where Paul had a remarkable ministry. When he originally arrived at Corinth, he stayed there for over a year and a half, God giving him this testimony. Do not be afraid.

Keep on speaking. And do not be silent, for I am with you. And no one is going to attack you and harm you, because I have many people in this city. So here is a city and a mission marked by God's faithfulness, a place where God had a lot of work to do for Paul.

And Corinth itself is a place a bit like Glasgow today. It was a city of parties and pleasure of business and industry, and even a city that hosted sports events.

But it was also a city that was thoroughly pagan, with temples to various Greek deities, and a serious and sometimes sleazy trade in idol worship. In the first half of this letter that we had earlier in the year, we saw that the Corinthian church had begun to compromise with the surrounding pagan culture.

The Corinthians had started well, they had started following Christ, but then they had begun to just turn away slightly. They would have still said they were Christians, but they were falling into bad habits.

[4 : 45] They know that they're united together in Christ, but they're now beginning to have a scrap every week about who's their favorite Christian speaker. They're disagreeing about what is wisdom, what signs a Christian should have, and they're just beginning to break up the unity they've been given.

Some of them had started taking other believers to court, some of them had fallen to idolatry, or serious cases of sexual immorality. And Paul, through the first half of this letter, had been reminding them that as new people in Christ, this is not the life they were called to.

They've been called to turn away from these evil and sinful divisions and turn back to the gospel that they had, the new life in Christ they have all been given. And so we're jumping right back in the middle of that entire thing.

So if it takes us a while to catch up, that is all right. But chapters 8 through 11 are one big discussion about what do you do when you live in a city full of idols, but you know they're not real as a Christian.

What do you do with the meat at the temple? How do you love one another well when your consciences differ? And Paul's showing them through this item of idol worship in the temple that actually they've lost sight of their real goal in Christ.

[5 : 59] And in this section, we're then going to see today a little bit of where he directs their eyes to. First, ahead to the prize of the Christian life, then back to their ancestors of faith, and then around to what's happening to them now.

And so with that in mind, we're going to dive right into looking ahead, keeping their eyes on the prize. Now, we've said almost, I think, seven or eight times in this service already that there is a cycling event on.

If you hadn't noticed, then you just have walked in blinkered the whole time. And it's going to be on all afternoon. It is a very exciting time. And I must confess, I'm not that big a sports fan.

And yet, even I have been thinking, this is actually quite fun, isn't it? You get to run outside. They run past the building. You run inside. It's on the TV. It's great. Each rider has been competing for the glory and honor of the rainbow jersey, the prize that proclaims you as world's best cyclist for a year.

And I was reading into this a bit this week. I wondered, what does it actually take to compete at that level? Again, I just have no clue. And according to the UCI press, the cyclists average between 18 and 22 hours a week of training off-season and between 30 and 35 hours a week of training on-season.

[7 : 14] So people training for these cycling events are training potentially up to five or six hours a day on their bike, which I can barely imagine. But on top of that, there's all the physio, there's all the nutrition, there's the management.

I mean, it's just a big business. If you want to win, if you want any shot of that rainbow jersey, you have to train like mad for years. And so with an image a little bit like that, that Paul actually opens up this section, Paul's talking about what it means to be an athlete as he starts off.

Do you not know in a race that all the runners run, but only one gets a prize? Run in a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.

Now, Corinth was famous back in its own day for holding the Isthmian Games, a kind of ancient world sports championships. And whilst there was no cycling, anyone who wanted to compete in the running or the wrestling or anything else had to undergo serious training.

Now, as I looked into this, it turns out the prize that they would win, the thing that Paul describes as a crown that will not last, was in fact a wreath of wild celery. Compete in the games, win a crown of salad.

[8 : 27] It's a bit strange, isn't it? But it's not really about that crown. It's about the glory that people get. But Paul's saying even that glory, it fades. You win in the games, well, that's great.

Until someone else beats you in the future, or until you become old enough that you can't really compete anymore. But when we look down at verse 25, Paul says, They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it for a crown that will last forever.

Paul says the Christian life, the training of our life for Christ, is one that pursues an eternal glory, an eternal crown. The Christian life is one of focusing, keeping your eyes on the prize.

And the goal of the Christian life isn't a literal crown, but the crown of eternal life, the reward of a faithful life, live for God. If that's the goal, says Paul, then that sets the direction and purpose for all of our days.

In verse 26, we're not like to be someone, not like a person running aimlessly, or a shadow boxer. No, we are to live a life of discipline, with purpose and focus, that we can receive that crown as our goal.

[9 : 42] And in verse 27, Paul says that even he, the preacher and apostle to this church, undergoes the same training. He says he strikes a blow to his body, and makes it his slave.

Now, we're not to imagine Paul is physically beating himself, but more that he is keeping his body, and its desires, in check. He doesn't want to be disqualified, for that amazing prize.

Knowing how good he is, he is going to live a life, that makes sense of that goal. Now, Paul's going to expand on that, as he continues in this section, on what it would mean to be disqualified.

That's a bit of a question mark there. But let's just think about, what Paul sets up initially. The Christian life, is one of keeping your eyes on the prize. The goal of eternal life with Jesus.

Anyone who seeks that goal, has to live a life of self-control, and discipline. The life fits the prize, that it gets given. The question of then, what is my purpose in life?

[10 : 43] What is my goal? It's quite a contemporary question. It's a question that's impossible, to avoid at most stages of life. I kind of thought, you know, now my 20s are past, I'd stop asking that question, I would just know.

Not true. That question goes on forever. You never stop asking, what is the purpose of my days? But Paul really clearly says, the true purpose of life, is the pursuit of eternal life in Christ.

That's our destination, and that shapes how we live now. The Christian life, is absolutely one of grace. Eternal life is only possible, because God offers it to us, in Christ.

Yet it's also one of perseverance, and discipline, living God's way, in the pursuit of God's prize. The call Paul issues, is one, away from spiritual apathy, to being a spiritual athlete, to train ourselves for godliness.

Our lives are meant to pursue this discipline, and the effort we put in, gives us a sense of, how much we've understood, the goal at the end. But what happens, if you're a person, who loses sight of that goal?

[11 : 51] Well it's for that thought, that we turn on to our, second point, looking back, looking at the people, who lost sight of the prize. So as Paul launches, into this next section, he gets the Corinthians, to think through, a number of examples, from the Old Testament, to teach them.

Now I wonder, what your gut reaction is, to the Old Testament. Now maybe you're here, and you're completely new, to Christianity, maybe you haven't heard very much. When we talk about the Old Testament, we just mean the story, of God's dealings, with his people Israel, before the coming of Jesus.

Simple as that. Some of you, have maybe been a Christian, for a long time, and you're very familiar, with the Old Testament stories, you know instinctively, how they connect to Jesus, and you can make sense of that, and that's a wonderful gift.

I think for many of us though, and especially when we're relatively, new to the Christian life, it can be a bit unsure, we don't quite know, how some of the stories, teach us. And wonderfully, Paul basically just tells, the Corinthians, how to understand, some of these things.

If we look at verses, 1 and 6 and 11, of chapter 10, we see a bit of, Paul speaking to us, on how to understand, these stories. So verse 1, I do not want you to be, ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were, okay, he's going to go on from there, but, Paul says, these things are important, you need to not ignore them, and something about these ancestors, is a message for you.

[13 : 21] Now Israel, aren't the, Corinthians literal ancestors, unless they were Jewish, but they are the ancestors, of them spiritually, the people of God, in a previous generation.

So next, verse 6, these things occurred, as examples, to keep us from setting, our hearts on evil things, as they did. And verse 11, these things happened to them, as examples, and were written down, as warnings for us, on whom the culmination, of ages has come.

Examples, that we do not set, our hearts, on the evil things, that they did, and warnings for us. Now, that phrase, culmination of the ages, it sounds pretty, kind of excellent, doesn't it?

It's, as Paul understands it, the fact that we live, after the time of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, but before he comes again, to bring about, a final judgment, and to bring his people, to that crown of life.

The culmination of the ages, is here, is the age we live in. There is not, something big, a new coming, as a next stage, before the end. The only thing coming now, is the end. And so, Paul says, that these Old Testament stories, are here to teach us, about life, before the end comes.

[14:35] So that we don't set, our hearts on evil things, as they did. So what disqualified, these people? Well, in the first four verses, of chapter 10, Paul is slowly, and carefully, telling the story, of the exodus generation, of Israel's history.

And notice, what he repeats, and what he puts the stress on, in these stories. So look with me, from the middle of verse 1. Our ancestors, were all under the cloud, and they all, passed through the sea, and they all, baptized into Moses, in the cloud, and in the sea.

They all ate, the same spiritual food, and they drank, the same spiritual drink. All of them, the same. This entire group of people, had had the same blessings, from God.

They'd all experienced, the same deliverance, the same miraculous rescue, through the Red Sea. All led by the pillar of cloud, by God in the wilderness. All fed manna by God, and provided for by him.

And then, the punch in verse 5. Nevertheless, God was not pleased, with most of them. Their bodies were scattered, in the wilderness.

[15:42] Most of that generation, lost sight of the prize, lost sight of the promised land, God had for them, and died, in the wilderness, having not received, the things that God had for them.

These people, had received blessing, after blessing from God, and yet, they didn't reach their goal, and ended up wandering, aimlessly, and dying, in the wilderness. And the clear warning, through all of those verses is, don't be like them.

Don't be like those people, who had all of the good things, and lost them. But why did people, who experienced such a blessing, fail to receive the prize?

What distracted them, from their goal? What were those, evil things, they set their hearts on?

Because if we've been given a warning, we want to know, what to avoid. Well, let's see what Paul says.

In verse 7, through to 10, Paul, gives some examples, of what happened, in Israel's history, that meant that they died, in the wilderness. In verse 7, alludes to, and quotes from, the episode of the golden calf, in Exodus chapter 32.

[16:53] Israel, were waiting for their leader, Moses, to come down, from the mountain, of the glory of God, to bring word. But they had to wait, 40 days. And at some point, in the middle of that, Israel just went, it's taking a while, isn't it?

Maybe, we could just, make a big golden calf, and worship that instead. Wouldn't that be great?

Fantastic, let's do that. Impatience, that led to them, breaking the direct command of God, that they had just been given.

Ignoring all the blessings, that they had been given. Leading to the death, of so many of Israel.

Next, Paul, in verse 8, alludes to the situation, in the book of Numbers, chapter 25, where the men of Israel, were sleeping with, pagan Moabite women, worshipping their gods.

Something else, God had prohibited. And these sins, led to a plague, in which 23,000 Israelites died. The next two examples, in 9 and 10, testing God, grumbling against him.

There are specific allusions, but actually, go back and read the story of Israel. Testing God, and grumbling against him, is the whole story, of the Exodus generation, over and over, and over again.

[18:13] It is a story, of God's patience, with incredibly, impatient people. They're being offered life, and on the way, they say, why aren't you giving us more? What are you doing? Where are you taking us?

Though God is patient, he is provoked to anger, by his people, and their sin, and every single time, more and more Israelites, die in the desert.

The Exodus generation, may have been blessed, but they set their hearts, on evil, and not on God. And so they died, without receiving the prize, that he had for them. And that should make, anyone reading this letter, just, take a breath.

Because the Corinthians, as we've heard already, are people, who are setting their hearts, on similar things. This letter, has already said, that they are compromising, with idols.

This letter, has already said, that they are compromising, with sexual morality. Testing God, grumbling against him, they are, just like, the Exodus generation. They're in danger, of being people, who were blessed by God, and yet just turned, from him, and end up, in the spiritual wilderness, dying without the prize, God has for them.

[19 : 29] And look through verses, one to four again, how closely, Paul is identifying, the Exodus generation, with the Corinthians. They have also been people, who were led, and fed by God. People who were, according to Paul, baptized into Moses.

Those people, who are united together, having gone under, a symbol of judgment, but being God's people. True of the Exodus generation, true of any, any Corinthian Christian. Verse four says, they drank from the spiritual rock, that accompanied them, and that rock, was Christ.

Which for us, might seem quite, astounding and amazing, because people, in the Old Testament, couldn't have named Jesus, as the coming Messiah yet. But consistently, God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

The provision, came from God, therefore it came from Christ then. So the Corinthians again, are just like, the people of the Exodus generation. They have their provision, from Christ. And as we said, in seven to ten, Paul names these evil things, that Israel did, that the Corinthians, have also fallen prey to.

Even verse nine, saying that Israel, tested Christ, in the wilderness. The Corinthians, are falling to the same things. They may have been blessed, with the gospel, with Paul's ministry, with the explosive miracles, in Corinth.

[20 : 44] And yet, they're taking their eyes, off the prize, setting their hearts, on evil, and losing out, on eternal life, that God has offered them. The crown, is beginning to fade from view. These Old Testament warnings, are clear, for us, when we take our eyes, off the prize, our hearts, don't go nowhere, they just turn to evil things, instead.

Things that tempt us away, from the reward, that God has for us. And that is not, what God wants, for his people. God wants us, with him, to receive the prize, that we have in Christ, of eternal life. The ancient warnings, are of a timeless problem. The purpose of life, is not to receive, temporary blessing, but eternal life, with God. So think about your life, maybe you're a person, who can count many blessings.

Brought up in, a Christian home, or in a supportive, Christian community, with a good history, of Bible study, and prayer, and service. Maybe you're here, at St. Silas, and you're regularly, on a rota, you're maybe even, taking part, in the preaching team.

Friends, those are great things, but, they are not the goal. They are, joyful gifts of service, we get on the way, but they are things, that are part of, Christian life, not the goal, in the end.

[22 : 00] Because we, have to be careful, that we do not, become people, who received, all these good things, and yet, in the end, traded them in, for pursuing evil. A good start, to the Christian life, doesn't guarantee, a good end to it.

Without that clear goal, of eternal life, and the daily discipline, of pursuing it, we will fail, and fall, as the Israelites did. These warnings, are for us, so don't, run, aimlessly.

Don't miss out, on the goal, that God has for us, of eternal life. The warnings, are clear. I wonder, if, when the warning light, comes on in your car, you're the person, who just says, oh no, I need to get this, fixed immediately, I'm going to take it, to the garage.

I think there's probably, about four of those people here. Maybe you're the person, who just says, I'll get around to it, and then the week, before the MOT, you panic, and pay more money, than you should have done, to get it fixed. Or maybe you're the person, who just thinks, do you know what, that's an idea, it's a nice idea, but the car runs just fine, we're going to see, how long we can let, that warning light go, it'll probably not be a problem, it's probably wrong.

The trouble is, when we leave, those warning lights, unattended, it's likely, that fault is going, to get worse. We don't know, what's going wrong, with the car, but in the end, something far worse, might happen. It breaks, the car is written off, so better to be a person, that heeded the warnings.

[23 : 30] And that's where, the Corinthians are at, the warning lights are on, Paul is signaling, that there's a dangerous, fault in this church, and needs dealt with, before the whole thing, falls apart. But Paul ends this section, with three instructions, and this is our final point, to look around, so that they aren't, distracted from the goal.

So the first, of these instructions, is in verse 12. If you think, you are standing firm, be careful, that you do not fall. So, very clear instruction.

Now Paul is giving, a warning against, spiritual complacency. He isn't trying, to drive the Corinthians, into a panic. We're not meant, to read this, and immediately, worry that, we just won't get, to the end, and to panic, about where we're going.

But simply, to be clear, that sin and temptation, aren't things, that we can just, mess around with. If we think, Christian life is going well, we must not be complacent. And actually, that's a warning, that Paul gives, out of love, for these Corinthians.

How do you hear, a warning as a Christian? It's actually, not a thing, to berate us, but to keep us, in Christ, following him. To keep us, in the right place, enjoying him, and to keep us, straightforward, on that goal.

[24 : 44] Paul isn't trying, to strip these people, of their assurance, of their salvation, in Jesus. But he warns them, out of love, for sake of real danger. So we have to be careful, that we aren't, patting ourselves, on the back, as Christians, but being thankful to God, and continuing to pursue him, every day.

Not because life, is definitely going wrong, not because we've, committed some sort of, great and decent act, but because, we must all be alert, to sin's influence, in our life, all the time.

We are always facing, a battle with sin, and temptation, that in this life, will not go away. We must not let, our guard down, against that. But the good news is, we never, ever, do that alone.

Look down with me, at verse 13. No temptation, has overtaken you, except what is common, to mankind. And God, is faithful. He will not let you, be tempted, beyond what you can bear.

But when you are tempted, he will also provide, a way out, so that you can endure it. Corinthians, you are not lost. Any of you, can turn back, to God, for free, in Christ.

[25 : 54] Because that is what, his salvation, and grace are all about. He is faithful, you are not overtaken. The temptation, that you face, it is common, to everyone.

If you sit there, thinking, I am a person, who has failed so badly, this temptation is so strong, it is not overtaking you. And if you failed, repent and come back. Get your eyes, focus back on the prize.

We have a God, who faithfully, is leading us, home to him, to that prize, of eternal life, that he won, for his people, through Jesus' death, on the cross. Another part, of the New Testament, would say that, the people of God, are Christ's reward, for his sacrifice, on the cross.

And so Jesus, wants us to be with him, and therefore, we need not panic. God is faithful, and we will never be tempted, beyond what we can bear.

And what a wonderfully, direct promise for us, in our struggle, with sin and temptation. No matter how strong, temptation feels, no matter how much, your desires, strain towards it, there will never be, a single situation, in your whole life, where God will not, provide an exit, in your temptation.

[27 : 05] That will, never happen. It's an absolute promise. When temptation comes, you are never forced, to comply. God simply won't, let that happen to you, because he is faithful.

But there is another side, to that, isn't there? It's quite confronting. Because if that's true, when temptation comes, and I fall to sin, that's because I chose it, not because there was, no way out.

How easy it is, to convince ourselves, oh I couldn't have not done it, I had to do it, it's too hard, I can't fight that battle. Yes, you can, says Paul. The Corinthians need to know, that they are not bound, to continue in their idolatry, and sin, they are not being forced to, they are participating, voluntarily.

In the face of every temptation, we are never being forced, to participate, we are always choosing it, setting our hearts on evil, turning from God, and away from that crown of life. When it comes to temptation, you may be under pressure, but you are always in control.

An old Christian friend, once said to me, when it comes to resisting temptation, there is never can't, there is only won't. And I think that's a real challenge for us, because our hearts want to disagree, but Paul just tells us plainly, that is how things are.

[28 : 25] Like our ancestors, in the garden, the people in the Exodus, and the Corinthians back then, we actually must be people, who accept responsibility, for our sin. If we think we are standing

firm, we must be careful, that we do not fall.

But we put our faith, in a trust, in a God, who is absolutely, wonderfully, and fantastically faithful, and will always provide a way out, because he wants us to receive, that crown of life.

And therefore, the very last instruction, he gives in verse 14, linking to next week's passage, is therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. When temptation comes, what do you do?

Run from it, as fast, and as far as you can. And there will always be a way, to do that. God will never put you, in a situation, where you cannot run, from temptation. To use an old example, and you've probably heard it before, the good sailor, isn't the one, who proves that he can, sail the boat, as close to the rocks, as possible, to prove how amazing he is.

The good sailor, is the one, who avoids the rocks entirely. And that's just true, of temptation isn't it? It's not about, seeing how close, we can get to the, tempting sinful thing, and avoid it.

[29 : 36] It's just, fleeing from it. Staying away from it. In the Christian life, there may well be, for you places, you can't go, websites, you cannot click on, relationships, that are not wise to maintain.

Whatever it is, God will always, provide a way out. And always provide a way, to flee from temptation, towards him, and back towards that crown. And so as we finish, I hope that we just see, that these warnings, though they are heavy, are coming, from Paul in a loving way, and ultimately, from a loving God.

Paul isn't just venting, his frustrations with Corinth, but he calls them, dear friends. Wanting them to share, in that prize of eternal life, that he knows is coming. He doesn't want them, to get distracted, by sin and temptation, and to fall on the way.

And when we fail, we can be sure, that repentance, is possible, because of Christ, and the grace of God. So that we can, stand up again, pursue that goal, and keep our eyes, on the prize, and run the race, for Christ.

So whether, you have been a Christian, your whole life, and actually, every single day, is a step forward, to that goal, and even for some of you, it's closer, than it's ever been. Or you're a Christian, that's young, and the race is going, to be long.

[30 : 51] Or maybe you're someone, who's not yet sure, about Christ. Well the answer, for all of us, is to keep our eyes, on the prize. Knowing that God, will be faithful, to take us home. And in doing so, we can take great joy, as we live a life for him.

Let's pray. Father, thank you, that you call us home, to that crown, of eternal life. That one day, we will see you, as you are.

Take great joy, in meeting you, face to face. So Father, keep us, on that track. Help us to live, a life of discipline, so that we may, one day see you, face to face.

Help us not fall, to the evil things, of this world, and to know, in every temptation, that you are faithful, and that you will never, put us in a position, where we cannot, flee from it. So we thank you, for your faithfulness, and pray that you would, show us the way home, in Jesus name.

Amen.