

### **Christians, Be Careful!**

(1 Corinthians 10:1-13) 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. <sup>2</sup> They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. <sup>3</sup> They all ate the same spiritual food <sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. <sup>6</sup> Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. <sup>9</sup> We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. <sup>10</sup> And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. <sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! <sup>13</sup> 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.

In Christ Jesus our faithful Lord and Savior, dear fellow redeemed,

Do you ever look for a sign from God? When I first received the call to serve here at Mount Olive, Cindy and I were very torn between staying at Resurrection Lutheran in Rochester, MN and coming here to Appleton to be with you. More than once we said to each other, “If only God would give us a sign and show us where he wants us!” Then, one day, while working on a home repair project, we walked into an electrical supply store. As we stood at the counter, waiting our turn to be served, we both happened to look up. That’s when we saw it. In the middle of Rochester, MN, mind you, we both saw the sign on the wall that read: “Appleton Electric.” We couldn’t help but giggle. Was this our sign from God?

Of course not. I think you’d have to agree that it would have been pretty foolish of me to pack up my family and move to Appleton based on something I saw while running an errand. And yet, I submit to you that we all do something even more foolish as often as we try to determine our standing with God based on some sign we think he’s giving us, rather than on the clear words he speaks to us in Scripture. This is the truth we’ll consider today under the theme: “Christian Be Careful!” 1) Turn away from false security. 2) Turn to our faithful God.

The church that the Apostle Paul served in Corinth was a mess. Some of the Christians were getting drunk at their fellowship meals. Some were arguing about who of them had the better spiritual gifts. Apparently, all of them were content to ignore a case of incest in their midst. There was division in the congregation over which of their pastors was the best and therefore their favorite. Some members were suing other members in court. And as if all of that were not bad enough, any number of the Corinthian Christians had decided, that in addition to worshipping Christ, they could also attend services at the pagan temple in town. None of this seemed to bother any of them. How could that be? Paul knew. These people had developed a false sense of security. They had decided that they had found such favor in God’s eyes, that they couldn’t possibly do anything to ruin their relationship with him. They figured that they had the “inside track” with God. Where did they get a foolish idea like that? The signs were all around them. Look how good God had been to them, choosing them to be his own, baptizing them into his family, inviting them to his Holy Supper, giving them his Word, showering them with his gifts! What more did they need to know?

Plenty more, and Paul was just the man to tell them, “Christians, be careful! Learn a lesson from your Old Testament counterparts!” **For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our [spiritual] ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. <sup>2</sup>They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).** Through the water of Baptism, God frees us from our slavery to sin. God had showed the same kind of love to all Israel, using the waters of the Red Sea to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. Just as God watches over his baptized children in this New Testament era, so God traveled with Israel in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He gave his people a trusted leader in the person of Moses, a man appointed by God, one whose work foreshadowed the work of Christ himself.

God’s goodness to Israel didn’t stop there. **They all ate the same spiritual food <sup>4</sup>and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:3-4).** God showed his goodness to all Israel, feeding them every day with manna and giving them water to drink. On two occasions, that water came from a rock, highlighting the miraculous care God was providing. But even when the water came from a more “natural” source, it was no less miraculous. Every day God provided more than a million people with all the water they needed out in the wilderness. That wasn’t good fortune. Paul tells us that was the work of the pre-incarnate Christ, the Rock who protected and provided for his people.

There is no doubt that all Israel enjoyed God’s “most favored nation status” and yet Paul tells us: **Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. (1 Corinthians 10:5).** In the verses that follow, Paul lists some of the shameful ways that God’s people abused his love and misused his forgiveness as a license to sin, worshipping idols, including that infamous golden calf. They held drunken parties, engaged in sexual immorality, and on any number of occasions they grumbled and complained about the food God had given them or the leadership he provided. All the while they believed they could do no wrong. But how *wrong* they were. Their sin brought death. Sometimes tens of thousands of them died on a single day. But whether it was all at once or one by one, the result was the same. Did you know that only two of the men who left Egypt at the time of the exodus, entered the promised land? Only Joshua and Caleb lived to see the fulfillment of God’s promises. All the rest, age 20 and older, died in the wilderness – hundreds and hundreds of thousands of them died, their corpses scattered along the way. I wonder how many of those people, in their arrogance, thought that God somehow needed them if his church was to survive. As it turned out, he didn’t need any of them. Of course he didn’t.

So why an ancient history lesson for the Corinthians and for us? What better way to teach us Christians to be careful! Paul explains: **Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did...These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us... (1 Corinthians 10:6).** Times may change, but sin and sinners don’t. Christians in Corinth faced the same temptations as the people of Israel did who lived 1500 years before them. Now here we are, dealing with the exact same temptations as the Corinthians who lived 2000 years before us. Like them, we may suffer from a false sense of security. **So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! (1 Corinthians 10:12).**

Wait a minute! I thought God wanted us to be confident in our relationship with him. He does! But that confidence must be founded on him and his truth, rather than on the convenient lies we often tell ourselves. When it comes to our relationship with God, too often we look for signs to help us try to gauge his feelings for us—like those people in our gospel reading today—the ones who told Jesus about the “Galileans” whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus knew what they were thinking. They had wrongly concluded that those who died such a gruesome

death had to have been worse sinners than they. Those Galileans must have deserved to experience God's anger, while they, obviously were in a "good place" with God. After all, nothing so terrible had happened to them. You heard what Jesus told them: Be careful! **"...unless you repent, you too will perish."** (Luke 13:5).

I suppose it would be easy to read Jesus' words as mean-spirited threat. Nothing could be further from the truth. Repentance is the gracious work that God's Spirit does in the hearts of lost sinners as he turns us from sin and unbelief to faith and forgiveness in Christ. Repentance is not a one-time activity. It's something that happens every day in the Christian's life as the Spirit uses God's Word to enable us see and acknowledge the sin that is in us and that comes spewing from us in words and actions. We see this sin for the damning thing it is, and we turn to God pleading for his mercy. For the new man in us Christians, repentance is as natural as breathing. But the old Adam in us just won't have it. He wants to suffocate the new man right out of us.

You know what I'm talking about. Rather than letting God's Word go to work on our hearts every day, the sinful nature tries to convince us that life's too busy and too short for all that Bible thumping. If you want to be on God's good side, get yourself to church once in a while. Better yet, go on a communion Sunday – that counts extra. I know that sounds crazy, but if your sinful nature is anything like mine, and I'm pretty sure it's exactly like mine, it's always looking for ways to score points with God. Our sinful nature would have us believe that if we can build up a high enough credit score with God, then he won't penalize us when we cave to temptation and fall into sin. After all, everyone sins.

That is so true—everyone sins—but we dare never offer that to God as our excuse. In fact, Paul flips that thinking on its head: **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.** (1 Corinthians 10:13). In the actions he took with Israel, in the words he inspired Paul to write to the Corinthians and to us, God says, "Be careful!" He makes it so clear that instead of excusing sin, he's with us to deliver us from it. He gives us weapons with which to battle temptation: He invites us to pray. He gives us his Word as a shield. He surrounds us with fellow believers to counsel and encourage us that we may avoid sin. God always makes for us a way out of temptation. But still, we sin every day in so many ways. What can we do? Christians, we can be careful.

We can put away our excuses and all our foolish thinking. We can turn from the lies we tell ourselves and from the false sense of security they create. We can acknowledge our sin before God and turn to his faithful love. It's true—God does not excuse sin. He does something so much better. He fully forgives our sin and freely pardons us sinners in the name of Jesus. God, who doesn't want any of us to perish, sent his own Son to earn a place for us in heaven by being holy and living holy in our place. Jesus lived his perfect life in your name. Then, he offered that holy life on the cross as payment in full for your all your sins, for the sins of the whole world. All who trust in Jesus live forgiven and holy in God's sight.

Are you still looking for a sign of your good standing with God? Here's one for you – the sign of the cross, the very sign that was placed on your head and heart at the time of your baptism. That sign is with you every day, always marking you as God's precious, blood-bought child. Are you craving peace to quiet a guilty conscience? Come to the Savior's Holy Supper – not as an obligation, but by Christ's gracious invitation. There he will always place on your lips, spiritual food and drink—the very body and blood that he gave and shed for you. In the Supper, by your Baptism, through his Word, God is at work in you, turning you from your sin to his forgiveness, and giving you everything you need to be and remain his child for time and eternity. This you can be sure of, for Jesus' sake. Amen.