1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 *Christianisms: God Will Not Give You More Than You Can Handle*

***That’s Not How I Remember It***In 1991 Kevin Costner starred in a movie called *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. Today, the movie is probably best remembered for its soundtrack and the love song: *Everything I do (I do it for you)* by Bryan Adams. I remember it as a pretty good action adventure movie that I saw during my first summer of college. It’s also a movie Beth and I re-watched together on video tape (VCR’s were so cool!) while we were dating.

One of the most memorable parts of the movie, for me, was Alan Rickman who played an over-the-top bad guy as the Sheriff of Nottingham. At one point, after Robin Hood has once again bested him, he rants to his underlings that once he captures Robin Hood, he’s going to “cut his heart out with a spoon!” At this, one of his dimwitted deputies replies in confusion: “A spoon, why a spoon?” To which the exasperated Sheriff says: “Because it will hurt more you idiot!”

For some reason, that scene tickled me. And so, for the last 20 years or so, whenever Beth and I are cooking together and one of us asks the other one to grab a spoon, we’ll say to each other: “A spoon, why a spoon?” To which the other will reply: “Because it will hurt more you idiot!” As you can imagine, this has provided us with tons of laughs over the years.

So imagine our disappointment a few years ago when Beth found a DVD of the movie in the bargain bin. For one thing, the DVD was so old that you actually had to stop midway through the movie and flip the DVD over to play the second half. For another, the movie really hasn’t held up that well: we thought it was cheesy and dated. But the worst part was, when we got to our favorite scene, we found out we’d been mis-quoting it. What the deputy actually says after the Sheriff threatens to cut Robin Hood’s heart out with a spoon is: “Why a spoon, cousin? Why not an axe?” To which the Sheriff replies: “Because it's DULL, you twit. It'll hurt more.”

Personally, I prefer our version of the quote; but that’s not quite how it goes.

I went online and found a list of **popular movie quotes** that we usually get wrong. Here are some of them:

From **Apollo 13**, the line we usually say is: “Houston, we have a problem.” But the actual movie line is: **“…Ah, Houston, we’ve had a problem.”**

Or, from **Snow White and the Seven Dwarves**. The line we usually quote is: “Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who is the fairest of them all?” The actual quote, though, is **“Magic mirror, on the wall. Who is the fairest one of all?”**

**Field of Dreams**. A movie from Iowa. One that’s been quoted to promote our state: “If you build it, they will come.” But, as it turns out, the actual quote is slightly different: **“If you build it, he will come.”**

How about **Casablanca**? We love to quote Brando: “Play it again, Sam.” But the actual line of movie dialogue is: **“Play it, Sam. Play ‘As Time Goes By.’”**

And then, one more. **Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back**. Who hasn’t done their best Darth Vader voice: “Luke, I am your father!”? But here’s how it really goes: **“No, I am your father.”**

In the long run, it’s not that big of a deal. Most of the misquotes don’t change the meaning all that much. It’s just changing a word or two, and often it makes the quote easier to repeat in multiple settings. And, who really cares, it’s just the movies, right?

But what about when we do the same thing with scripture? What about when we start misquoting scripture? Do we remember the Bible saying things it really doesn’t mean to say?

I’m not talking about switching a word or two around, like saying “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth” instead of “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Different translations will often vary in word choice and word order. But I am talking about when we misremember what a verse says in such a way that we change the very meaning of that verse.

For example, **1 Corinthians 10:13** contains this line:

And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

It’s a good verse. An important verse. But a lot of us have summarized that quote—and changed it around to make it a little more memorable—**to say**:

God will not give you more than you can handle.

It’s a common saying. One I am sure you have heard. Probably one you have repeated from time to time. You can see how it sounds similar to 1 Corinthians 10:13. But it is a misquote. And, in this case, I am afraid that that it is a misquote that does more harm than good.

***Recap***We are in a series I am calling *Christianisms.* The subtitle explains what it is: “Things we think are in the Bible, but are not.” I am looking at common phrases and statements that sound scriptural, but are actually from somewhere else. My goal is for us to avoid reducing God’s timeless truth to cheap clichés.

So far, we’ve looked at two of these statements: “God helps those who help themselves” and “Time heals all wounds.” So far, I don’t think I’ve upset anyone too much. So far, I don’t think anyone has been overly attached to those statements. We may have said them, but I think as most of us have reflected on them, we’ve recognized that they don’t really square with the Bible. So far, nobody has tried to defend either of these statements.

Today might be a little different. Today’s statement is not just one that most of us have said, I think it might also be one that many of us truly believe. It sounds like Biblical teaching that we’ve heard before. “God will not give you more than you can handle.” More than that, it is something we want to be true. Today, it might sound like I am challenging one of your core convictions.

If that is the case, I hope you’ll hang in there with me. I’m not saying that this statement is completely wrong, but I am saying that we need to look carefully at it. And, as we’ll see, there are some implications of this saying that are not at all helpful.

As with the past two weeks, the sermon will have three parts: 1) Is there any Biblical truth in the statement? 2) What’s wrong with the statement? And 3) Is there better news in the gospel?

***What Happens in Corinth***So, first: **Is there any Biblical truth?** As we’ve already seen, “God will not give you more than you can handle” sounds like a pretty close approximation of 1 Corinthians 10:13. Let’s look a little **bit more closely at the whole 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.

You can see how we might get “God will not give you more than you can handle” out of this verse. In fact, many of our English translations have a footnote by the word “tempted” that tells us the original Greek word could also be translated as “tested.” So the verse seems to be saying that no matter what comes your way—whether it’s a temptation or a trial or a bit of suffering or a time of tragedy in your life—we can take comfort from the fact that God is not going to overload us. He won’t allow us to be tested beyond what we can bear. He won’t give us more than we can handle.

It’s a hopeful idea. And you can see why we say this phrase to one another. When someone is experiencing a particularly bad stretch, when they have received a succession of bad news, we say to them: “Hang in there. I know it’s rough right now, but God won’t give you more than you can handle. There’s an end point. He’s going to provide a way out so that you can endure it. You can get through this.” It’s the “light at the end of the tunnel” approach. It’s the promise that things won’t get so bad that they become utterly hopeless.

That looks and sounds biblical, right? This seems like good application of God’s Word.

But let’s look a little more closely at the verse and its context, there is a reason most of the English translations use the word “temptation” and not “testing” here.

This book is called 1 Corinthians, and that means it is a letter written by Paul to the church in the Greek city of Corinth. Corinth was a large port city, and Paul started the church there around A.D. 51. Like many port cities, Corinth had a cosmopolitan and international feel. There were pagan shrines and different religious expressions everywhere. In fact, sacrifice at pagan temples was big business. If you purchased meat in the local marketplace, chances were good that it came from an animal that had been sacrificed to a pagan god.

More than that, Corinth was known for being a very permissive place. In the Roman world they had a saying--“to live like a Corinthian”—which was a code for drunkenness and partying. It was sort of the Roman world equivalent of “what happens in Vegas.”

Most of the Christians that Paul was writing to had come out of this world and they still lived in the midst of this world. And so, now, as followers of Christ, they were trying to live differently. They no longer wanted to get caught up in the idol worship or temple rituals that they had left behind. They didn’t want to participate in the sexual immorality that was involved in the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love.

But it was all around them. It was constantly in their face. They couldn’t buy meat without feeling like they were participating in pagan worship. They couldn’t walk down the street without being propositioned by one of Aphrodite’s temple servants.

That’s the context for this verse. Paul is specifically trying to help them stand up in the face of temptation. He’s warning them not to let down their guard, not to think that they are above all this temptation. But he’s also encouraging them that they have the resources to avoid falling into these old patterns of sin. God is faithful! God is not going to let any temptation come their way that they cannot stand up under it. It is not inevitable that they will go back to their old way of life.

The verse really is about temptation, and it is incredibly encouraging! When you are tempted to fall into some old habit; when that old pattern of sin that you thought would go away once you gave your life to Jesus starts to creep back in; take heart, you are not helpless against temptation. You can stand up to it, God will provide a way out! God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

In that way, the phrase “God will not give you more than you can handle” does ring true. As a follower of Christ, you are not a helpless victim of sin.

***Errors***But if we are using this verse to tell someone that God will not give them more suffering than they can handle, we may be asking the verse to say more than it really does. So now, let’s move to our second question: **what’s wrong with this phrase?** Where does “God will not give us more than we can handle” run counter to Biblical teaching?

My answer comes in three parts. For one thing, this phrase **relies on a mistaken expectation of fairness.**

Think of it this way: imagine that you are moving and you have two children. One is a strapping sixteen-year-old football player who is dedicated to getting into the weight room, and the other is a two-year old toddler who has just figured out how to walk. Now, let’s say both are eager to help you move your stuff into the new house, and you are standing at the bed of the pick-up distributing the boxes. How are you going to do it? You’re going to give the heavy stuff to the sixteen-year-old, right? And you’re going to give the light stuff to the toddler. Like, you’re going to give a heavy box of books to the 16 year old, and you’re going to open up the box and give one book to the toddler. You don’t want to give the little one more than she can handle.

Well, instinctively, I think that’s what we have in mind when we say that God will not give us more than we can handle. We assume that God is making some sort of evaluation about how strong we are and then assigning our trials accordingly. We like the idea that there must be some sort of cosmic scale, and God is measuring out our assignments in a way that measures up to our strength. You’re not going to overload your child’s arms and then watch them crash to the ground with stuff splayed everywhere. That wouldn’t be fair. We assume God works the same way.

But, here’s the thing, there’s nothing in the Bible that says that God is fair in this way. In fact, God is decidedly unfair, and it is a good thing. He doesn’t deal with us as our sins deserve. He is longsuffering, forbearing, gracious and abounding in love. If He were absolutely fair, none of us would be able to draw our next breath. More than that, God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matt. 5:45) “God transcends the categories of fair and unfair to such a degree that we have no position to evaluate his actions or weigh his will. His ways aren’t subject to our culture’s standard of fairness**.**” (This quote, as well as the box analogy, comes from Mitch Chase, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/god-will-give-you-more-than-you-can-handle/>)

God’s unfairness can be a good thing. But, at the same time, we still live in a fallen world, and this fallen world is not fair either. Andy Stanley likes to say: “Fairness died in the Garden of Eden;” and it’s true. Because of the fallen nature of our world, suffering comes in ways that are not predictable or fair. Some people live in mansions and seem to have success with whatever they do, while others die in the horrors of the holocaust. Suffering does not get measured out in ways that are rational or fair. And there is no Biblical promise of a cosmic scale that will balance everything out in the end.

Or, here’s another thing that’s wrong with his phrase: **2) It implies that enduring suffering is about our strength**. When we say “God won’t give you more than you can handle” we’re saying to that person that they are strong enough to get through this. They are tough. They are fighters.

In fact, the statement is a sort of backhanded compliment. We’re saying something along the lines of: “God must really think you are something to give you such hard trials.” There’s even a famous quote attributed to Mother Theresa along these lines. She says:

"I know that God won't give me more trouble than I can handle ... but sometimes I wish he wouldn't trust me so much."

It’s almost a humble brag. It’s a way of saying: “Boy, things are tough for me now…my circumstances are awful… but you know God wouldn’t give me all this junk if He didn’t think I could handle it.”

I even learned a new phrase this week. There are whole Pinterest pages dedicated to it. I guess it’s popular as a tattoo. It goes: “God gives his hardest battles to his strongest soldiers.”

Again, I can see how all this can help you get through tough times. Sometimes you need a little pep talk that says you are tough enough, strong enough, and resilient enough to survive even the most heartbreaking of tragedies. It’s nice to think that God believes in you enough to allow you to go through something like that.

But there’s a problem with this: at the point of tragedy when we feel most down and depleted, this Christianism is pointing us inward and telling us to find our strength in ourselves. This is really just a self-help message dressed up in God language. Instead of directing us to find our strength in Jesus, this proverb just tells us to dig deeper inside ourselves.

And if we find that we can’t dig any deeper, then what?

And then, the third thing wrong with this statement is that it **contradicts examples in scripture**. The truth is, you can find example after example of people in the Bible who were given far more than they could handle.

Take David for example. After his sin with Bathsheba and the family tragedies that followed it, David found that he’d come to the end of his rope. **Psalm 38:4, 8:**

**4**My guilt has overwhelmed me  
    like a burden too heavy to bear.

**8**I am feeble and utterly crushed;  
    I groan in anguish of heart.

And what about Job. You say to me: “Ah, Pastor Russell, doesn’t Job prove you wrong? Isn’t the whole point of Job that he was strong enough to handle whatever came his way? Wasn’t that the whole point of the bet between Satan and God?” But that’s not the question that Job seeks to answer. It wasn’t whether Job was strong enough, the question was whether he would continue to trust God even if his suffering became too much to bear. And believe me, it became too much to bear. **Job 3:26:**

**26**I have no peace, no quietness;  
    I have no rest, but only turmoil.”

And then there is the example of Jesus Himself. The night before the cross, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus found that the cup of wrath He was about to drink was too awful to contemplate. **Mark 14:33-34:**

**33**He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. **34**“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”

There are all kinds of examples in scripture of people who face suffering far beyond their ability to handle it. In fact, it rarely appears that a person’s strength or “ability to handle” things is the determining factor in God’s decision to call them. As cool as it sounds to say that “God gives his hardest battles to his strongest soldiers,” the reality seems to be the opposite:

* Moses, who had the assignment of leading God’s people out of slavery, made excuses and tried to hide behind his stutter.
* Gideon, who led the fight against the Midianites, was a coward that God found hiding in a wine press.
* Mary, who had the privilege of bringing Jesus into the world, was a peasant girl barely into her teens.

God doesn’t always look for the toughest or strongest, but He seems to delight in using those the world tends to overlook. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, God likes to use the weak things of the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). He hides his treasure in jars of clay to show that the strength at work comes not from us, but from Him. (2 Cor. 4:7)

***Rely On God***Which leads directly to our third question: **Is there better news in the gospel?** Instead of going through life believing God will never give us more than we can handle, can we actually find better news in the notion that sometimes God will allow us to face trials beyond our ability to bear? I think so.

In **2 Corinthians 1:8 and 9** Paul writes this:

**8**We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. **9**Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.

Here is another example of God allowing someone to face problems beyond their strength. This is Paul, the some person who wrote that God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear—writing to the same people, in fact—now saying that he was under great pressure, far beyond His ability to endure.

We’re not sure exactly which incident in his life this verse is referring to—there were many—but Paul tells us that he believed he was going to die. He despaired of life itself. This was far more than he could handle.

Then he provides a crucial insight into his despair. Why were he and his companions given more than they could handle? The last phrase **in verse 9**:

 But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

From Paul’s perspective, suffering and trials came his way not so he could test his mettle and prove that he had what it takes, but so that he would turn his attention away from himself and on to God. Instead of telling himself that he was a strong soldier, and that he would get through this if he just gritted his teeth and held on, Paul turned to the One who is so much stronger than him, the One who has the power to raise the dead.

Pastor Mitch Chase writes this in a Gospel Coalition blog:

Trials come in all shapes and sizes, but they don’t come to show how much we can take or how we have it all together. Overwhelming suffering will come our way because we live in a broken world with broken people. And when it comes, let’s be clear ahead of time that we don’t have what it takes. God will give us more than we can handle—but not more than he can. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/god-will-give-you-more-than-you-can-handle/>

That’s the good news in this. And that’s the message. When suffering comes your way—and it probably will—it’s not up to you to find the strength to handle it. The truth is there is overwhelming suffering and sorrow in this world, far more than any of us would want or be capable of enduring. But God is bigger than any sorrow. How does the song put it? “In all my sorrows, Jesus is better. Make my heart believe.” God is bigger than any sorrow, and He wants us to rely on Him.

Your suffering might not end in this life. Things might not get better. But if you keep trusting in Him you will find He gives you the strength to endure whatever comes your way, and that there is an eternal weight of glory waiting for you at the end.

***What God Has Promised***

This was the same conclusion reached by a woman named Annie Johnson Flint more than a century ago. Annie was born on Christmas Eve 1866 in a small New Jersey town. At the age of three she lost her mother. Soon after that, her father became so ill that he could no longer take care of his children and was forced to give them up for adoption.

Annie was fortunate to be taken in by a wonderful, loving family named Flint. But before she finished high school, both her adoptive parents had died as well. Imagine losing not just one set but two sets of parents as a child.

Annie longed to be a teacher, continued her education, and achieved her goal. But not long after she began teaching, she was diagnosed with a degenerative disease that left her unable to walk or to live independently. She spent the rest of her life, roughly another forty years, bound to a wheelchair and living in a sanitarium where others could provide for her physical needs.

Annie’s condition meant the end of her teaching career. Instead, she began writing poetry, an interest she had developed during her childhood with the Flints. Over the years she wrote a number of popular religious poems. As time went by, her illness caused the joints in her hands to swell so painfully that it was difficult to write, so she began dictating her poems.

She noted that she wrote not to fulfill her own need to express ideas but in the hope of helping others who were undergoing the kind of challenges with which she was so familiar. Annie is perhaps best remembered for a poem she wrote called **“What God Hath Promised.”**

God hath not promised skies always blue,  
Flower strewn pathways all our lives through;   
God hath not promised sun without rain,   
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.

But God hath promised strength for the day,   
Rest for the labor, light for the way,   
Grace for the trials, help from above,   
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.

(Hamilton, Adam. Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say (Kindle Locations 844-847). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.)

The phrase “God will not give you more than you can handle” is not in the Bible. And it is not something that God has promised us either. The hard truth is: sometimes you will find yourself in circumstances beyond what you can bear.

But God has promised us His strength. He invites us to rely on Him. Stop asking yourself if you are strong enough, and remember that He is.