

Half Truths

“God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle”

[1 Corinthians 10:13; Psalm 46: 1-2](#)

Using the book [*Half Truths*](#) by Rev. Adam Hamilton, we are examining five statements that we might call Christian clichés: Everything happens for a reason; God helps those who help themselves; God won’t give you more than you can handle; God said it, I believe it, that settles it; and Love the sinner, hate the sin.

These are things that Christians say so often that we come to assume that they are from the Bible. And at first, the statements seem to be true. You can even find scripture passages that seem to support each one of them. But, when you take the time to carefully examine them, you soon realize that they are unbiblical at their roots. They are only partial truths. As such, they can be hurtful, instead of helpful -- callous rather than comforting.

So far, we have examined the first two statements: “Everything happens for a reason” and “God helps those who help themselves.” Today, we come to the third half-truth: “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” We have all heard this phrase before. Someone has said it to you and it’s likely that you have said it to someone else. This is a phrase many devoted Christians, including pastors, often say to people who are going through a very difficult time.

When we say “God won’t give you more than you can handle” to someone in great distress, what we mean is this: “Don’t worry. No matter how difficult and challenging your situation is, you are going to make it through. You are going to be okay. You are a person of strong faith, so you can handle this.” But, what is actually communicated is this: “You should be able to get through this because God never gives you more than you can handle. And if you think you can’t handle your situation, ask yourself if you have really tried hard enough. You should pray harder and have stronger faith.”

Actually, the statement, “God won’t give you more than you can handle” is not found in the Bible. There is a scripture passage that sounds similar to it though, and it’s the first of the two texts Melinda read for us this morning. Let’s hear again the words the apostle Paul wrote to the Christian community in Corinth: “No temptation has seized you that isn’t common for people. But, God is faithful. He won’t allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out, so that you will be able to endure it.”

Did you catch that? While Paul wrote, “God won’t allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities,” through time, it somehow became “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” Paul was misquoted! Let’s look into the context of Paul’s letter, which will give us a better understanding of his words.

Corinth was a large port city in Greece. Paul went and lived there for about a year and a half as part of his mission westward. And, during his stay, he gained many Christian converts and founded a church. Corinth was a city full of pagan influences, and the newly converted Christians struggled to maintain their new Christian identity and practices. Temptation was everywhere. Even though they were on this new journey

with Jesus Christ, the immature Christians of Corinth could not resist the pull of their society and culture. They went back to their old lifestyles which included sexual immorality and idolatry.

This is the context in which Paul is writing to them. He is trying to help these people prone to waywardness by reminding them that they are not alone. They are not the first to struggle and give into such temptations. Prior to verse 13, Paul talks about the ancient Israelites, God's chosen people, the ones who had experienced deliverance from captivity and tasted freedom. And yet, these redeemed people were not above giving into temptations of idol worship and sexual immorality, suffering the consequences of their actions.

Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians: Having been redeemed does not mean that you will not be tempted. Just as the Israelites of the old covenant were tempted in the wilderness, we who Jesus Christ has brought into a new covenant with God also remain in the world and thus capable of succumbing to its ways.

It's clear that this scripture is not saying that God won't give you more than you can handle. Paul is not talking about trials and difficult circumstances that we all experience at some point in our lives. What he is talking about instead are temptations, specifically the temptations of idolatry and sexual immorality the newly converted Christians in the city of Corinth are experiencing. Through the example of the ancient Israelites, he is trying to encourage them as they face these temptations and also warn them about the consequences of their actions. Paul is trying to remind them that they will never be left alone in their struggles: God will not allow them to be tempted beyond their abilities; God will always provide for them a way out, so that they can endure temptations.

Now, some of you may be wondering, 'Even if there is no scriptural reference for the statement, God won't give you more than you can handle, isn't it still a helpful idea for people going through hardship or facing adversity? Doesn't it give them comfort and encouragement that they desperately need?'

My answer to those questions is, "No," and here is why. When we say God won't give you more than you can handle, it implies that God gave you whatever difficult and painful circumstance you are experiencing.

As with the statement, "Everything happens for a reason," which we examined a couple of weeks ago, when people say "God won't give you more than you can handle," they are inferring that God has big plans for you which require you to go through the suffering you are now experiencing.

According to such a logic, God needed this child to get sick or that parent to die young; this person to be mentally ill or that person to become a drug addict; this woman to lose her job or that man to take his own life; God needed to cause pain, tremendous suffering in order to bring about some greater purpose for them or reveal through their hardship some profound truth for others to grasp.

Really? Is this why 2 high school students lost their lives and 16 others were seriously injured in the shooting in Kentucky last week? Is that why the 13 children in Texas were tortured by their own parents for many years? Is this why the gay college student in southern California was killed by his high school classmate?

I said this two weeks ago, and I am going to say it again: God does not cause or allow bad things to happen to us. Terrible and horrible things happen for many different reasons, and they happen in the world every day. And, sometimes, terrible and horrible things just happen without any reason. Whether these things happen with or without a determinable cause, they do not happen because God willed it or God wants to teach us something through them. God is not in the business of hurting us in order to fulfil something great for us, or to teach us something profound. It is not God's will or desire to see God's children suffer. God does not cause tragedy. This is simply not true!

It is not because God causes or allows suffering to exist, but more that we are just finite human beings who experience hardships or face adversity in our lives. We may suffer from natural disasters. We may struggle with depression or addiction. We may wrestle with grief and loneliness. We may find ourselves in financial ruin. We or someone we love may face serious or terminal illness. Sometimes, people do things that hurt us; and sometimes, we do things that hurt ourselves and those closest to us. These are not a part of God's greater plan or teaching opportunities, but all a part of human experiences.

And, at some point in our lives, we will face things that go beyond our capacity to handle for ourselves. When we, Christians, find ourselves in those situations, we trust that God walks with us. We believe that God will walk us through such unbearable times. The biblical truth and promise for us is not that God won't give you more than you can handle, not that you can handle everything by yourself, but that God will help you handle all you have been given.

This statement that "God will help you handle all you have been given," does not suggest that suffering is given by God. Instead, it acknowledges adversity and suffering as human experiences, as life sometimes feels overwhelming. The statement, "God will help you handle all you have been given" also promises us God's presence and help in the midst of the chaos. And, this promise is beautifully expressed by the psalmist whose song we heard earlier.

"God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart."
(Psalm 46:1-2)

By the end of June, I will have served in ordained ministry for 25 years. During this time, I have walked through many difficult times with people in the churches I have served. Untimely deaths, serious illnesses, comas, stillborn babies, divorces, suicides, mental illnesses, and natural disasters. In these unspeakable moments, I wondered how the people going through such trauma would make it. But, I have witnessed people go through hell on earth and come out the other side. My experiences of pastoral ministry have taught me that people of faith find strength to overcome the adversity in life and survive the worst times and experiences. They do so through their faith in God, their trust in God, and by the help of God.

Annie John Flint was born in 1866 in a small town in New Jersey. Her mother died when she was only three years old, and soon after, her father became so ill that he had to give up his children for adoption. Fortunately, Annie was adopted by a loving family named Flint. But, before she finished high school, her adoptive parents died as well. She studied hard and became a teacher as she had dreamed. But, shortly after

she became a teacher, she was diagnosed with a degenerative bone disease that left her unable to walk or to live independently, leaving her bound to a wheelchair.

Unable to teach, Annie began to write poetry. When she could no longer even write, she began to dictate her poems. What Annie is best remembered for is her poem, "What God Hath Promised." I am going to share with you a part of it.

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.

When you face temptation, 1 Corinthians 10:13 is a good scripture to turn to. Remember that God will help you find a way through the temptation, if you allow God to do so. But, when you are walking through hard times, stop pretending everything is okay. Stop believing you can handle it all by yourself. It's okay to admit that you can't do it alone. It's okay to admit that you need help.

In fact, this is a truth that is not a partial or half truth. No person is an island. We are only here because of the love and nurture of others. And we need the presence and help of others in our lives. We need professionals to help us. We need our families and our friends and neighbors to help us. We need our sisters and brothers in our church family to help us. And last but certainly not least, we need God to help us.

When we turn to God, trusting that God will walk with us, God will sustain us and see us through. This is the scriptural witness that we inherit and the reality that we experience if we are willing to walk by faith. God will help you handle all you have been given.

Thanks be to God! Amen.