

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle

Sunday, January 13, 2018
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1st Corinthians 10:13 and Matthew 11: 28-30

Today I continue our series “Does the Bible Say That?” In this series we are taking a look at common platitudes of faith. Sometimes we see them on bumper stickers. Sometimes we hear them from well-meaning family members or friends. And perhaps some of you may say these phrases to others. Many folks think these phrases come straight from the Bible when they are nowhere to be found in scripture.

Quite often these popular phrases of faith are casually said without really thinking through what they mean. This can be damaging and hurtful to others. So we are going to take a closer look at these popular phrases of faith and test them with scripture. My hope is that this series will encourage us to think deeper about our faith. I also hope it will help us think twice before making these statements to others.

There are many popular clichés of faith that are not biblical, but most clichés suffer from having the wrong home. People are surprised to find that at no time in the movie *Casablanca* does Rick ever say, “Play it again, Sam.” It is also surprising to know that in over 79 *Star Trek* episodes and 6 movies, no one ever actually says, “Beam me up, Scotty.” But quite often people make wrong assumptions about the sources of many clichés.

It works the same with the Bible. There are all kinds of things that people *assume* the Bible says but it actually doesn't. Next week we will look at a popular one: “God helps those who help themselves.” Over 80% of Christians believe that quote is from the Bible. Well, it's not. And if you want to learn the problem with that phrase come to worship next week!

Today we take a look at another faith cliché that many people think comes from the Bible: “God won't give you more than you can handle.” Well-meaning folks often say this to others in the time of stress or suffering: “Don't worry. God won't give you more than you can handle.” They offer it as encouragement: “I know your life is hard right now, but God won't give you more than you can handle. Be encouraged!” “I know you've lost a friend (experienced adversity at work /

been sick / are financially struggling), but don't worry. God won't give you more pain and suffering than you can bear.” In other words, “Everything will be alright. God wouldn't have given you this trial if you couldn't get through it.”

I cringe when I hear people say that. I know people are trying to be helpful but it really sounds like a taunt, like we are not measuring up in life. Let's be honest. When we hear that we feel less than because we think we should be able to handle our pain and suffering. “Something must be wrong with me. If I was a good Christian I would be able to handle this. Why can't I handle it?”

People intending to encourage us with this cliché really end up discouraging us. What's worse is that this phrase can cause us to ignore our suffering and pain and believe that we can handle everything ourselves! And that's just unhealthy and the opposite of what our faith teaches us.

Adam Hamilton remembers a conversation on this subject with a woman who had this to say:

“For years this statement helped me when I was facing difficult things. I kept telling myself that God wouldn't give me more than I could handle. It reassured me that somehow I was going to make it through. Then one day I was at my therapist's office and mentioned it to him. He laughed and said, ‘Are you kidding me? Surely you don't really believe that. I can tell you plenty of stories about people who had more than they could handle. In fact, my profession consists of helping just such people.’”

Hamilton writes, “The counselor reminded the woman she had come to him because the emotional pain and difficulty she was facing had been more than she could handle. In addition, the woman's mother had committed suicide because life had become more difficult than she could handle. At first, the woman was angry that her therapist had called her belief into question. But the more she reflected on their

conversation, the more she concluded that he was right.”

The Bible never says that “God will never give you more than you can handle.” It’s not in there because it is not true. The truth is there will be times in life when you will feel like you can’t handle what life is throwing at you. That’s normal because we can’t make it on our own!

Could you imagine saying to an inmate at Auschwitz, “Don’t worry; God never gives you more than you can handle”? Or what about a woman whose children are killed in a car accident or someone who has just been diagnosed with cancer or someone who is suffering from depression or an anxiety disorder? Like a friend of mine likes to say about this tired old phrase, “Those who have suffered nervous breakdowns didn’t get the memo that God never gives you more than you can handle.”

So if this phrase does not come from the Bible then where does it come from? Well, I know some of you will be shocked to hear that more than likely this phrase comes from folks who have misunderstood the Bible and taken scripture out of context. People who use this phrase will often reference a passage in 1st Corinthians:

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. -1st Corinthians 10:13

Paul is talking about temptation here, not suffering, pain, tragedy or burdens. He’s basically saying that we will never face a temptation we cannot resist. God will always give us strength to resist temptation. God will always provide an exit, a way out. The problem is we don’t always look very hard for an exit!

I’ve been trying to lose weight after the holidays and it’s not easy. That’s why my robe is black. It’s slimming! The last few days I was doing pretty well. Eating more salad and fruit and watching my calories. Then on Saturday me and my family walked into the Gathering Room for my father in law’s funeral reception and the hospitality team had put together an amazing spread of food – cookies, brownies, sandwiches, chips, cheese, candy, etc. And what did I do? I followed the advice of Oscar Wilde, “The easiest way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.” There was plenty of healthy food at home that I could’ve eaten later. But I chose a different path instead of taking the exit!

I was reminded that when we are tempted God will provide an exit. I just didn’t take it! But this is a far cry from saying that we will never suffer a burden that we can’t handle on your own. In fact, the Bible tells us the exact opposite! The Bible tells us that we will suffer burdens in life that we can’t handle on our own. Take a look at something else Paul says in 2nd Corinthians:

“Brothers and sisters, we don’t want you to be unaware of the troubles that we went through in Asia. We were weighed down with a load of suffering that was so far beyond our strength that we were afraid we might not survive.” -2 Corinthians 1:8

I don’t hear Paul saying, “God will never give you more than you can handle” in that verse, do you?

Or what about these verses from the book of Psalms:

“I’m worn out, completely crushed; I groan because of my miserable heart.” –Psalm 38:8

“My wrongdoings are stacked higher than my head; they are a weight that’s way too heavy for me.” – Psalm 38:4

Or what about what the angel had to say to the prophet Elijah:

“Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” -1 Kings 19:7

Throughout the Bible we find people who suffered burdens that were overwhelming and too much for them to handle on their own. This phrase is untrue, unbiblical and can be extremely cruel.

Let’s just take a look at the first four words of this phrase: “God won’t give you. . . .” When we say those words, we are implying that whatever difficult or painful things are happening in your life, God gave them to you. And I don’t believe that. Otherwise, the implication of this phrase is that God gives us awful pain in life, but he’ll stop short of our breaking point. Really?

I recall reading someone’s response to this cliché: “If someone tells me this one more time, I may lose it. First of all, God didn’t cause my husband to beat me, he didn’t make my brother commit suicide, he didn’t plant the IED that my nephew hit, which will result in him losing his leg, and he didn’t give my best friend cancer. I could go on, but you get the idea.”

Adam Hamilton responds to this lady’s statement by saying, “She was right. When people had

tried to encourage her with this phrase, she heard them saying that God had given her all these things, but he would likely stop now because he knew she couldn't handle any more."

I don't believe in that kind of God, and I hope you don't either. This is not the kind of God we have a relationship with. This is not the God revealed in Jesus Christ who came to redeem our suffering and makes us whole. What's more is that it's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that we will suffer in life, but God is not the source of it. Instead, God is our strength in midst of it.

So, if you feel compelled to offer a platitude to someone who is suffering, let me suggest something other than "God won't give you more than you can handle." Now, before I give you this alternative, let me say that most of the time offering a platitude to someone who is suffering is usually not the best way to go. More often than not, when we are suffering we need a listening and understanding ear instead of someone throwing out platitudes. However, if you must offer one, try this instead: **It's not that God won't give you more than you can handle, but that God will help you handle all that life throws at you.**

This scriptural truth is expressed beautifully by the psalmist: **"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me" (Psalm 23: 4 KJV)**. David was expressing that he could get through the valley by the strength and presence of God. Also notice that David says "through the valley." In other words, we won't stay in the valley. Because of God's strength we will come out of it. This means that with God the worst thing will not be the last thing. Even the thing we fear the most will not be the last thing. It will not destroy us. It will not shake us. It will not overcome us. God will guide us to the other side. There will be a tomorrow.

I recall coming home from the doctor one day after being told that I might have melanoma. The doctor removed a large spot on my leg and was very concerned about it. He told me they would get a biopsy and let me know. I was afraid. I had friends who died from melanoma. I recall a few days later I was lying in my bed looking at the ceiling, worried sick. I can honestly tell you I couldn't handle it. I finally said, "God, I can't do this. I can't handle this. I need you to take it from me. I need your strength right now." Somehow, at that moment, I experienced a peace that passes all understanding. A few hours later the doctor's office called and said, "We have good news..." I was so relieved. But I have to tell you that even if it had been bad news, I would still have the peace that comes from knowing that God will never let me go.

I am reminded of the hymn Gloria Gaither wrote when she had her first child in the midst of the Vietnam War. She was lamenting about bringing a child into such awful world. As she prayed to God about it, she was inspired to write these words: "Because He lives I can face tomorrow. Because He lives all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future. And life is worth the living just because he lives."

At my father in laws funeral yesterday we sang that hymn. Family, friends, and members of the church all sang it together and it reminded me that we need God and the church precisely because we can't handle life on our own. We need each other and we need the God who created us. Paul reminds us of this:

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. –Galatians 6:2

So folks don't ever tell people, "God won't give you more than you can handle." If you have said it, please stop saying it. And those of you who have been told this and your faith is broken because of it, please hear this: God did not give you your pain and suffering. God loves you and would never do that. I also want you to know that you are not supposed to handle life on your own. That's why all of us need God.

Think about it. If this platitude is true, then why do we need God? Why do we need the church? Try saying this platitude to someone in AA. They will laugh in your face. The whole premise of the 12 Steps is that life can't be handled on our own. Rather, we need a "higher power" to give us the strength to manage our lives. And this is the basis of the Christian faith too! C.S. Lewis said, "All genuine religious conversions are blessed defeats." We don't truly have faith until we figure out that we can't handle life by ourselves and realize that the only wise thing to do is to surrender our lives to God and his power and strength.

Today, Jesus gives all of us this invitation:

"Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light." –Matthew 11:28-30

Listen to what David says in Psalm 55:22:

Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you. He will never let you be shaken.

The word "cast" can also mean, "chuck it!" Just chuck it to God! Do you have a burden you can't carry? Just chuck it to God. He will take care of you.

Annie Johnson Flint was a poet who lived over a century ago. She 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.*

I don't know what burdens you are carrying in your life right now but I do know this: **It's not that God won't give you more than you can handle, but that God will help you handle all that life throws at you.** Don't ever forget it.

Sources and Bibliography:

- "Half-Truths" by Adam Hamilton
- C.S. Lewis, "Mere Christianity"
- "Yes, God Will Give You More Than You Can Handle," Relevant Magazine
- "9 Lies You Hear in Church," Rev. Mark Schaefer

Questions for discussion/reflection:

1. Has someone ever told you, "God won't give you more than you can handle"? How did it make you feel? Did the idea that God "gave you" your pain and suffering comfort you or disgust you? Why?
2. Why do you think we often feel compelled to offer platitudes when people are suffering? When you are suffering, do platitudes help you? Think of a time when a friend helped you during a difficult time? What was it that you found helpful?
3. Do you find the following alternative phrase helpful: "It's not that God won't give you more than you can handle, but that God will help handle all that life throws at you"? If so, why do you find it helpful or useful?



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