

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The word of God that we consider today is from 1 Corinthians: *“Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”*

I am realizing now in my 30s that throughout my childhood, my dad sprinkled some great nuggets of advice. One of them was, “Watch your footing.” One of the father-son things we loved to do together was hiking trails in the Adirondacks and New England. While we were on the trails, he would often...very often...over and over...relentlessly remind me to watch my footing. “Make sure your foot is on firm ground before you take each step.” At the time, I thought it was annoying but you know what? I never got injured while scrambling up rocky slopes, or sidling along steep ledges. Did I have some falls and scrapes? Yeah. But that’s because I was too confident, moving too fast, and not listening to my dad. Watch your footing! This is good advice for life in general and it squares with what the Apostle Paul said to the church in Corinth. This congregation was full of over-confident believers boasting about their spiritual gifts. They needed to be constantly reminded, “If you think you’re standing securely, watch out or you’ll fall. Watch your footing.”

In order to unpack this bit of advice, Paul uses a series of five illustrations from the Old Testament – specifically from the period of Israel’s wilderness wandering prior to entering the Promised Land. He introduces the series by saying, *“Our fathers were...all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.”* His point is this – the children of Israel were all “baptized” in a manner of speaking. They believed in the true God and God saved them from Egypt. However, that did not make them immune to sin and unbelief. In the same way, baptized Christians are not somehow immune to falling into Satan’s traps. [Sorry Emmett, I wish that were true!] We should not think we are standing on such firm footing that we could never possibly stumble into the sins of our ancestors. After we are baptized, we continue to sin and so we continue to need our Savior every single day. As we move through Paul’s five illustrations, I think we’ll find that not much has changed. Christians in Dubuque Iowa in 2022 are prone to the same kinds of sins.

First he admonished them in verse 6 not to **desire evil things** as Israel did. The Israelites desired to go back to the food they had while they were in Egypt. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to eat good food. The problem was by desiring that food, they were essentially wishing God never rescued them. “Yeah life was tough when we were living in bitter slavery – but hey, at least the food would be better than this!” Do you ever desire evil things? And yes, God does care about our desires. Even if we never act on them, having misdirected desires is sinful. When we desire less than what God gives and intends for us, we are settling for a life of bitter slavery under Satan – simply because he offers better snacks. Even though we are baptized; even though we

believe; even though we have confessed our sins, our desires do still sometimes pull us backwards toward the things we know are bad for us; the things we know we ought to leave behind. Watch your footing. It's easy to desire evil things.

The second warning comes in verse 7 where he says, "***And do not be idolaters as some of them were.***" The Israelites' idolatry was crass. They literally made a golden calf idol to worship. The Corinthians' idolatry was a little more subtle. They were participating in eating and drinking in the temples of idols. Perhaps our idolatry is subtler still. It is evident when we divide our loyalty to God; when the impression we give others is that even though we believe in Jesus, we aren't radical about it! Anything and everything can become an idol to us. As Luther says in the large catechism, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God." Who are your gods? Often we will find the face of our god right above our bathroom sink. Watch your footing. It's easy to become an idolater.

The third admonition is that we **not fall into sexual immorality**. The Israelites participated in Moabite fertility rituals; having relations with Moabite women, which was forbidden. The norms of sexual behavior in Corinth were in some ways similar to ours today. Almost everything was permissible, including incest and prostitution. Members of the church were not innocent either; they were more driven by the standards of their society than God's standards. We find ourselves in the same boat today. Consuming "adult entertainment" has become commonplace and accepted. Living together before marriage is not just permissible, it is the norm. When we look inside ourselves, we realize that we all have desires and expectations that are not in line with God's will for us. Christians are not doing any better in this department than our non-Christian neighbors. Watch your footing. It's easy to fall prey to sexual sin.

Fourth, Paul warns against **putting Christ to the test**. The Israelites did this when they complained about the manna God gave them to eat, calling it worthless and detestable. They put Christ to the test by belittling the gifts he provided. The Corinthians did this by treating the Lord's Supper disrespectfully. We do the same when we think too little of God's gifts, and particularly what we call the means of grace: God's Word and the Sacraments of Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. If our attitude towards these things is, "Is that all, God?" we put Christ to the test. If we expect more - as though there could be more than the flesh and blood of God's only Son, we are rejecting the very things God is giving to save us. Watch your footing. It's easy to put Christ to the test.

Finally, Paul warns against **grumbling**. The Israelites grumbled against Moses several times. They did not trust him and so they did not trust that God was working through him. Some of the Corinthians grumbled against the authority of Paul and his colleagues. The equivalent for the church today is when we question or

rebel against the Scriptures or the church's ministers who faithfully proclaim and live by them. Watch your footing. It is easy to grumble!

And we you find ourselves thinking, "I would *never!*" to any of this, we are completely missing the point. Watch out! When our reaction to someone else's sin is "Wow. I would *never!*" that is when we are at the greatest risk of falling...because when we say, "I would never," Satan says, "Hold my beer." When we think we stand, let us take heed lest we fall.

That's a lot of finger wagging. But there is also assurance and comfort in God's Word today! This reading ends, "*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*" On the one hand, this verse is comforting. It's comforting to know that no matter what temptation we face, we are not the only ones who ever faced it. The devil doesn't have anything new to tempt us with. It's also comforting to know that God is in control. He doesn't allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear and he always provides a way out for every specific temptation.

This verse can also be not so comforting though! God always provides a way of escape for every temptation. That means what? It means I have no excuse! God gave me a way out and I sinned anyway! If I fall, I can't blame my shoes, or a slippery stone. I wasn't watching my footing.

But cling to this little phrase: "*God is faithful.*" He takes no delight in the death of a sinner. He desires life for us. Life that is full, complete, and eternal. And God is faithful in making sure that he delivers that life to us. As we will sing in our closing hymn today, everything that happened to Jesus happened to him instead of us. Jesus endured it all to make sure that we would have life rather than death. Even when we continue to struggle and fail, Jesus is like that caring, patient, and ever-optimistic gardener. "Don't cut down my tree. Not yet. It just needs a little more manure; a little more time; a little more TLC." He tends to us in exactly those places where we hurt and struggle most...and he will not give up until he sees us bear fruit that will last until we are raised from the dead. We are baptized into Christ and in Christ alone, we stand on firm footing. AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.