

TESTING AND BEING TESTED
I CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

As I tried to craft the sermon for this week, I found myself drawn to the story of Montgomery Brewster. Brewster is the main character in the movie Brewster's Millions. The role is played by Richard Pryor.

Brewster is a down-and-out pitcher for a minor league baseball team. He's not good enough to play in the pros, but he keeps trying because he doesn't have any other skills, and it is his dream, after all. Then one day Brewster gets into a bar fight alongside his best friend, Spike Nolan (played by John Candy), and the two are arrested. They are bailed out of jail by a mysterious man on the condition that they will ride downtown with him. The man takes them to a law firm, where Brewster learns that he is the heir to a fortune.

His great uncle Rupert has passed, leaving behind no other heirs and a fortune of 300 million dollars. Brewster didn't even know he had an Uncle Rupert. His Uncle Rupert, though, knew all about him. His uncle gives him a choice. He wants his great nephew to learn to not waste money. So, he has 30 days to spend \$30 million. If he succeeds, he will inherit the entire fortune of \$300 million. If he fails, he gets nothing. There is one more catch. Nobody around him can know what he is doing or why. There is, also, an escape clause. He can take \$1 million and walk away with no strings attached.

Think about what a challenge that would be. Imagine the task of spending \$30 million in thirty days. As you have probably guessed, Montgomery Brewster takes the challenge. He finds it very difficult. He just can't seem to spend money fast enough. I won't tell you how he eventually resolves the dilemma, but I will tell you that it's a struggle for him. His will is tested. He nearly gives up several times before ultimately winning out.

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. Corinth was a seaport. Just about any sinful distraction that a person can imagine was available in Corinth. The church was not immune to the temptation of those distractions. So, Paul uses the example of the Exodus to point out the danger inherent in giving in to those distractions.

Doing so makes several points simultaneously. First, by referring to the Old Testament Paul makes a point for the continuity of the biblical message. Paul makes the case that the God who was leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, is the same God who is leading the Corinthians. That's important because there are several points of congruence between their stories.

If you remember the story of the Exodus, you know that the process took decades. The members of the nation of Israel knew the agenda of God only in the vaguest sense. They knew they had left Egypt and were headed towards the Promised Land. They didn't know how they were going to get there. They didn't know how long it was going to take to get there. They didn't know what they were going to eat or drink along the way. They didn't know how they

were going to defeat the enemies they encountered along the way. It would have been easy to say, "We didn't have it so bad back in Egypt. Maybe we should just go back." In fact, they did that several times.

Paul gives us a sort of Reader's Digest version of what really happened. He reminds us that the entire nation of Israel was brought out of Egypt. They were under a cloud that contained the Spirit of the living God. They crossed the Red Sea. While Moses went up to the Holy Mountain to receive the Law, the people made an idol- the golden calf- to worship. The message about eating, and drinking and play is a euphemism. Play really refers to sexual immorality here, so the scripture is talking about sacrificing food and drink to the idol and engaging in immorality as an act of worship.

Paul says that these things serve as examples that we should not crave evil things. That was an important message to the Corinthians. They knew that Jesus Christ had founded the church to spread the good news and to give Christians the opportunity to make new disciples and minister to their neighbors. Like the Israelites, they didn't know much beyond that. They only knew in a broad sense what the plan was. They couldn't have known what the end result would be- where their church was going, how long it would last, how they would know when they were done.

I'm sure it was difficult for the Corinthians to avoid the temptations around them. It's easy to get impatient- like Montgomery Brewster did. It's easy to give in to what is easy, to give in to what is simple. It's easy to take the temporary pleasure and to go for the early win- to give in to what we know- to give in to what we've always done before- to give in to what is comfortable- to give in to what we want- to give in to what society tells us we should have.

It's easy to do that, but there is a hidden danger in doing that. When we start to think about how to meet our own needs, it distracts us from the longer-term goal towards which God is leading us. Suppose God had relented and allowed the Israelites to go back to Egypt. The nation of Israel would never have made it to the promised land, and we would not have this story to tell. Suppose God had allowed people to choose between worshipping that Idol and worshipping the one true God. the message would be diluted at best, and the Law of God might not have survived at all.

Suppose Paul had just said to the Corinthians, "It's okay. You can give in to the temptations around you. You don't have to do anything but stay in the church." The Gospel might not have survived. It would have been easy to just walk away- follow their friends and neighbors and enjoy the temptations around them. It takes faith to stick to that road when you don't have all the answers. It takes faith. If they had done that, they would have diluted the message of Jesus Christ. If there were no difference between the message of Jesus Christ and the message of the culture around them, they why should they come to the church. There's no reason to do it.

This message I think is very timely for us. I think it's timely because there are so many temptations around us these days. Our society promises us so many temptations. If you listen closely enough to what our society is telling us you might conclude that eternal youth and unlimited prosperity are just waiting for you. You can live a life without any limits, providing yourself with anything your heart desires.

It's also easy, within the church, to make idols. Our possessions, our social status, our relationships, or even our personal preferences can become idols for us. That happens every time something becomes more important to us than spreading the word, making disciples, and ministering to our neighbors. Think for a moment about those three things. Where would you place those three items on a list of priorities: spreading the word, making disciples and ministering to our neighbors? How many of us can say we make those three things, then we make them into an idol. When we make anything important than those three things, we've made an idol.

We're going to be tested. That's going to happen. Even Paul says it. How we respond to those tests determines how faithful we can be. It would be easy just to throw in the towel. Just to say, "It's too hard." Let's just do what we want and God will forgive. Well, God will forgive, but we will miss the journey to the Promised Land if we do that. We condemn ourselves to a life without any real meaning- without any real hope.

When we do that, we're also testing the patience of God. When the people of God sinned, God punished them. Are we so sure that God won't punish us? Do we really want to put God to the test? When we focus on things other than spreading the good news, making disciples, and ministering to our neighbors, we run the risk of making idols. We put God to the test.

In the end, I think the advice Paul gives us to avoid idolatry is sound. But rather than focusing on negative terms, as Paul does, I prefer to focus on the positive. We have the opportunity to be a part of what God is doing in the world. We already are a part of it. Each of us is a testimony to the saving power of Jesus Christ. You know that, but here is the thing you may not have considered. We can be more. We can be a testimony of the power of God to transform lives. We can be a testimony to what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

So, when you are tested, as you surely will be, let me encourage you not to focus on what the temptation is and why you should avoid it. Instead, focus on what you can do through the power of Jesus Christ. Focus on being something great- a Disciple, a servant of the Living God.