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*Yes and No: God Will Never Give You More Than You Can Handle*

Isaiah 41:10, 1 Cor. 10:1-14; 2 Cor. 1:8-11

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For the past few weeks, we've been looking at some of the popular sayings we hear and sometimes even say to other people. Sayings like, "God helps those who help themselves," and "Everything happens for a reason." They sound like they could come straight from the Bible, yet nowhere in the Bible do these words appear. Are they still true? Well, yes, there's some truth in them, but essentially, no, they're not, and in spite of our good intentions, we can actually cause harm with these words. Today we conclude this three-part series with one of my very favorites, "God will never give you more than you can handle."

There's a lot to love about the phrase, "God will never give you more than you can handle." I mean, let's face it, there are some people out there who sometimes need a gentle reminder that they can handle more than they think they can. I fondly remember my youth group at the First Presbyterian Church of Lee's Summit, MO, how it was the custom of this particular youth group to go to a youth conference in Estes Park every July. We would caravan to this conference with several vehicles, usually the 15-passenger church van and a couple of minivans. And on the drive out there, I would assign each youth to a particular van. They could choose where in the van they sat, but I created the groups that traveled in each van.

I did this because if I had not, every youth would have chosen to ride with people they already knew and felt comfortable with. I wanted to help the younger youth, who were brand new to the youth group, get to know some of the older youth, plus there were usually at this point in the year some little cliques that needed a little shaking up. To make things even more fun, I'd mix up all the groups again after lunch, just as they were getting comfortable where they were.

Eventually, van assignments became an accepted practice, but the first couple years I did this, oh my. The complaining I heard from those youth—you'd have thought I'd taken away their cell phones or kidnapped their pets. One time, there were two youth who had been best friends from birth, they had grown up in the church and done everything together, and even though I had warned them how this works, they seemed both heartsick and stunned the morning we left to find that I had assigned them to different vans on the first leg of the trip. We may have had to have pastoral care from some of the adult leaders. And of course, anxiety over riding in a van sounds silly, but being a teenager is terrifying sometimes. It's hard to make it when you ARE with friends, and you ARE having a good hair day, let alone when you're trapped in an enclosed space with peers that you don't know real well.

In spite of the whining and complaining and looks of death aimed in my direction, the youth discovered they could handle it. Every youth, every year, was

able to handle riding in a vehicle with youth who may not have been their first choice to ride with. In fact, many friendships were forged in that youth group on I 70 West over the years. The youth also learned they could handle rooming with people from other churches, long hikes, and the food in the dining hall, except maybe on tofu and pork wings night (we never did figure out what pork wings were . . . ).

Sometimes it's empowering to learn that we can handle more than we think. . .like living in a foreign country, or giving ourselves insulin shots, or welcoming a four-year-old foster daughter with lots of issues into our home instead of the infant we had prepared for, like a single clergywoman friend of mine recently did. After a month, she said to the social worker, "I don't know if I can handle this," and the social worker pointed out, "You ARE handling this." And she was, with a lot more grace than I could have.

"God won't give you more than you can handle," sounds very biblical, probably because of 1 Cor. 10:13, which says, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing, he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." HmMMM.

This passage is talking about temptation. Paul is lifting up the ancient Israelites during the time of Moses as a cautionary tale to the Corinthians. He says,

even though the Israelites had seen the miraculous power of God in the parting of the Red Sea; even though they had seen God's presence leading them with a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night, even though God had provided manna and quail and fresh water to drink out there in the desert, even though God protected them and provided for their needs time and time again, not just sort of, but spectacularly, many of them yielded to the temptation to worship idols. Paul reminds them how common temptation is. God does not DO the testing, yet God will always provide a way out, no matter what that temptation may be. As Adam Hamilton shares in his book Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say, "There's always a way out. The problem is that I may not be looking very hard for the exit." (Half Truths, p. 84).

I also believe that it is important to remember that the way out God provides for me and my temptation may be different than the way out God provides for someone else, and their temptation. So if I am struggling with a temptation to drink more than I should, God might provide a way out for me through the support of Alcoholics Anonymous. Someone else may find that the exit God has provided for them is through medication and counseling. Yet another person may find that their way out is to completely avoid entering the neighborhood bar.

Of course the problem with saying that God won't give you more than you can handle is that it's something people tend to say in the midst of suffering, more

than temptation. If you heard last week's sermon, you won't be surprised when we pause for a minute on the first part of this phrase: God won't GIVE you. God does not go around handing out painful situations according to our ability to handle them. God doesn't make terrible things happen in order to teach us a lesson, though God can help us learn from the choices we make, and the events that come our way. I know this in my head, but I have to say that this idea that God would give me only what I can handle, has been difficult to discard.

Some years ago, back when I lived in Southern California, I was going through the worst time of my life, and there were moments when I found myself thinking, wow, God must think I am really strong. And then I thought, well, this is really awful, but I guess I can handle this--since God won't give me more than I can handle, I must have what it takes to handle this. But then, as this worst time of my life went ON, and ON, I thought, gee, God, don't you think I've built enough character now? Please, can we stop? And then, finally. . .God, if I am your child, then you need to stop punching me like this. God, make it stop, because I am worn out from handling this.

So one problem with "God won't give you more than you can handle" is the "God won't give you" part, which turns God into a sadist. But the other part is the "more than you can handle" part. When we say to someone who has just been diagnosed with cancer, or just lost a loved one, we're basically saying something

like this: “This is hard, but you can handle it. You should. Be able. To handle it.”

What does “handling” even mean, anyway? Does it mean we don’t complain? That we don’t fall apart? That we survive, that we keep breathing in and out?

I wonder what it’s like to be a mother or a father who cannot provide food for their children, and may have to watch one or more of them die from malnutrition. What does it mean to handle something like that?

What does it mean to handle depression? What if I feel so overwhelmed that I don’t want to go on living? What about people caught in a hurricane or a domestic violence situation, and every person carrying a burden or facing a situation that is just too much to handle? Telling someone God won’t give them more than they can handle is telling them that their pain, their situation, is manageable—and there’s something wrong with them if they don’t manage it.

I used to feel a sense of pride at the way I made it through that awful time in my own life, and came out stronger on the other end. I HANDLED it. But a closer look reveals that I handled it because I had help. I had a family that loved me . . . an attorney who knew what he was doing . . . a friend who offered me a job, . . . a church that provided child care . . . a spiritual director who listened to me. When

we look back at our darkest moments, isn't it just amazing all the help we received when we had too much to handle?

I was talking with Lori, our church's office manager. Her daughter Katie had yet another trip to the hospital this week. Katie can't eat and can't speak and is always in a wheelchair or a hospital bed. Because of that, either Lori or her husband must always be with her. They can never get away on a trip together. They take turns sleeping next to Katie during the night. Life has been this way for over twenty years. I said, "Lori, what do you think when you hear, "God will never give you more than you handle." She shook her head and said, "I don't believe that. But I have a sign on my wall that says, 'Nothing will happen today that God and I together cannot handle.' I like that."

I like Isaiah 41:10, "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." Just one of so many verses in the Bible that promise God's presence and God's help.

Sooner or later, we all face something we cannot handle. It's not a character-building exercise from God. It just means we need to ask for help. And be ready to help when we see someone struggling with a burden they cannot handle. And to be on the watch for God's presence, and the help that God promises to provide.