

I want you to picture this morning that you are a Christian living in Egypt around the time of Paul. And you're at home, and suddenly there's a knock on the door. A messenger has come with an invitation. This is how it reads: "Diogenes invites you to dine at the first birthday of his daughter in the Serapeum tomorrow, that is, May the 24th, starting at 2 o'clock." That was a real invitation that came from that time period from that part of the world. Sounds pretty good, right? Sounds pretty wholesome. What could be more wholesome than a little girl's birthday party? You can imagine going to a restaurant, there being all kinds of presents, being all kinds of good food. A good time would be had by all. Seems like the most wholesome thing in the world. But there's a problem. The Serapeum is not a restaurant. The Serapeum is a temple dedicated to the Egyptian God Serapis. And all the food that would be at that party would be dedicated to him. So you can imagine going to a party, for example, and before you sat down to eat, the first thing they would say is: "Okay, let's have a prayer to Satan." What would you do in that situation?

And let me make it very clear here. This is not an RSVP that Diogenes has sent to you. He's gone to great expense to invite you to this party. Because he had to pay somebody to write it. He had to pay for the papyrus it was written on, which was always expensive. And he also had to pay someone to take it to your door. He might as well have written this thing on silver plates with golden letters. He expects you to come. You can't just say, "I'm busy." You need to be there, and to not come would be a very serious insult. So what do you do?

Maybe you would say, "Well, maybe I should just go. Maybe I should go to the party and just kind of ignore all the stuff that's going on. I'll just go for the birthday. I'll enjoy myself. We'll have a good time, and I'll just ignore all the other stuff. I'm strong enough in my faith. I can deal with this. I'm able to take care of this. And didn't God say that these other gods aren't real anyway? Isn't that what he said? 'I'm the only real God'? So there's no danger for me. I don't need to worry about it. I'll go to the party." If that's your answer, Christians, you've given the exact same answer as the Corinthians did in our reading for today. Because they were facing the exact same situation. It didn't matter where you were a Christian in those days, whether you were in Egypt or Greece or Italy or wherever it was. It didn't matter because it was always the same. Whenever you went out to do anything, you had to deal with false religion. There was no such thing as a restaurant in those days. The temples were the restaurants. So you couldn't go to any social event without having to deal with false gods. How do you live as a Christian when all the world around you is opposed to God? What do you do when being a Christian means you have to say "no" when all the rest of the world says "yes"?

Because that was the problem that the Corinthians were struggling with. They imagined that they were quite strong in their faith. They thought that there was no danger for them whatsoever. They said, "We can go to these things. We can go participate in these social events and not have to worry about all the idolatry. We could eat this food, because we're strong in our faith. We are strong Christians. There's no danger for us. We are not going to fall away." But Paul warns them against this attitude. He says there is danger for you! In fact, the person who is at most risk of falling away is the one that thinks he's never going to fall. And so we need to pay attention, so that we don't fall into these traps.

And to prove his point, Paul points the Corinthians back to Israel in the wilderness in the first part of our chapter here. And he says, "Look at them. Look at Israel in the wilderness, and think

about all the things that they had going for them. They saw the Red Sea split in two before their very eyes. They had bread come down from heaven to feed them, the bread of the angels given to them each and every day. They had rocks split open before their very eyes to give them water. And they had the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night to lead them through that wilderness. If anyone in the history of all the world should have been strong in their faith, it was them. If anyone in all the history of the world should of had the least reason to fall away, it was them. But they did fall. Hardly any of them went into the promised land. God destroyed them for their unbelief. And only their children were the ones who went in to Canaan. Because of their unbelief, they fell away and fell under the judgment of God."

And so Paul warns us through their example. He says in verse 6 of our reading: "Now, these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." These things were written down so that we would see the danger of being overconfident, the danger of thinking that we are stronger than we actually are. Because if they were destroyed, Christians, what makes us any different? If they fell, why do we think we're in a different situation? We are not in a special situation. We're not in a different situation from them. It's exactly the same. If they fell, we can fall too. So we need to be on guard at all times. As Paul says in verse 12: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he falls."

But we don't have to worry about meat sacrificed to idols. It's not like when we go out to a restaurant we have to ask ourselves: was this offered up to a demon? That's not the kind of thing we have to wrestle with in our time. But that doesn't mean that we aren't facing similar problems. Because there is always the temptation to go along with the world. There is always the temptation to say "yes" when the world says "yes," even when God clearly says "no."

Let me use an example. If you received an invitation in the mail to a gay wedding, we know what God says about such things, that they are sinful. And going to this wedding would give the appearance that you approve of what was happening. So you have to stay away. But you might say, "But if I don't go, they're going to be angry with me." Yes, they will. "If I don't go, they're going to say that I'm just being bigoted." Yes, they will. "If I don't go, they may never talk to me again." It's a very real possibility. But God clearly says no, so what do you do?

Let me use another example: a couple living together before marriage, even someone who's part of your close family. God clearly says that such things are sin, so we have to say something against it. But we might say, "But if I say anything against it, they'll be angry." Yes, they will. "If I say anything against it, they might say that I'm being judgmental." Yes, they will. "If I say anything against it, it might hurt our relationship." It's a very real possibility. But God clearly says no, so what do you do?

Or one last example: the world says it ultimately doesn't matter what you believe. What binds us together, what we have in common is the most important thing. The details are unimportant. But God says that the details are important. Didn't Jesus warn us when he said, "Beware of false teachers"? It matters what we believe. But we might say, "But if we say anything against it, they'll be angry." Yes, they will. "If we speak out against it, they're going to say that we're being close-minded." Yes, they will. "If we speak out against it, they'll say that we're just keeping to ourselves, that we're being standoffish." Yes, they will. But God says no, so what do you do?

But this is why we face the same temptation, Christians, why we struggle with the same things as the Corinthians did. Because we feel the same intense pressure to go right along with the world, to say "yes" when the world says "yes." And we can imagine that we're doing something that is easy for us if we just go along with it, that we can take care of ourselves, that we can say "yes" and be just fine. Or even saying no, but saying it so quietly that no one can actually hear us. We can think that there's no danger for us whatsoever. But in reality, Christians, what is easy is stumbling and falling away. What is easy is taking the easy way out and going the way of the world. Let those who think that they are strong, who think that they stand take heed lest they fall.

But God gives us strength in that moment to stand firm. God gives us what we need to say "no," even when the world says "yes." Because as verse 13 says: "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." God will lead you out, Christians. He will bring you through this temptation. He will help you to say "no," even when the world says "yes." And that way out may not be the way that you like. It may actually be quite hard to do so. But God will still lead you through. He will give you the strength to stand. And when you hold on to him, not relying on yourself, you will find the grace and the mercy that you need.

Because God knows, Christians, what it's like to be tempted. God knows how hard it is to say "no" when the world says "yes." Because Jesus was tempted in every way like us. He knows what it's like. As Hebrews chapter 4, verse 15, tells us: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Jesus too was tempted to take the easy way out, to go the way of the world. Jesus was tempted by the devil to just bypass all of his suffering, to go past the cross straight to glory. Jesus was also tempted in Gethsemane to just skip it all, to not go through with it at all. But he didn't give in. Jesus turned to his Father and in that moment found the strength to go through. He found the strength to endure, even though it took him to the cross. But Jesus is now glorified, seated at the right hand of the Father. And when we turn to him, Christians, not trusting in ourselves or in our own strength, we will find the strength to endure, his strength to resist every temptation. We will be able to say what God would have us say, even when the world is against us.

So let us not think that we are stronger than we actually are. Let us say "no" when God says "no," even if all the world says "yes." It's not going to be easy. But as hard as it may be for us, God is faithful, and he will make us faithful too. We can say "no" to the world and "yes" to God when we hold on to Jesus in everything.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you know what it means to be tempted, for you suffered temptation for our sake. Help us to stand firm in the day of trial, to say what you would have us say even when it hurts, because we know that you will strengthen us and lead us out of every temptation; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.