

# THE DANGER OF DISQUALIFICATION

## *SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH*

**Doug Goins**

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I just got back yesterday from two and a half weeks in Romania. I was ministering there with Brent Becker, our high school pastor, Danny Hall, our college pastor, and Rich Carlson, who heads up Discovery Center, our training program. God gave us an amazing time. It was a lot of traveling and hard work, but we had the sense that we were the right people in the right place. We team-taught through 1 Timothy at three different pastors' conferences, the first with a group of Hungarian Baptist pastors, the second with a group of Romanian Brethren pastors, and the third with Romanian Pentecostal pastors.

Romanians are warm people. They have a terrific sense of humor. The group size probably averaged thirty, which gave us many opportunities for interaction and discussion. And it was really a humbling experience for us as a group of pastors to sit as brothers and equals with another group of pastors under the authority of the word of God.

In those conferences I met some outstanding, godly men--older, middle-aged, and younger--who were really radically committed to Jesus Christ and to being shepherds in the body of Christ in Romania. I talked with some who had suffered physical persecution--torture and imprisonment--for their faith under Ceausescu during the communist domination of that country. These men had been willing to tell the truth when lies, extortion, and working the system were the norm. They were serving the Lord with passion, with very poor salaries and living conditions, willingly pouring their lives out sacrificially for very small groups of people, in some cases, whom God called them to love and serve for the sake of the gospel. I talked to men who worked very hard physically. Most of them have to work full-time to support their families, because the churches there have so few resources, and then do the hard work of pastoral care and teaching and shepherding people on top of work. But Romanians are a passionate people, and we sensed these men were sold out to Christ. So many times they shamed us as we listened to the stories of the lives they had led in obedience to Jesus.

The same passion to live a life of sacrificial service for the Lord is evident in 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13.

By way of review, 1 Corinthians is a very practical, issue-oriented letter. Paul was the spiritual father of this church. He lived in Corinth for a year and a half. He had led most of the people in that church to Christ.

Some five years after the church in Corinth had been established, Paul got word that there were serious problems in the church. This letter addresses those sinful struggles. Chapters 1-4 dealt with the problems of pride and prejudice that were undermining their life and the credibility of their witness in Corinth. There were issues of divisiveness and competitiveness in relationships. Chapters 5-6 dealt with some specific moral and ethical issues that the church was facing with both sexual immorality and legal immorality, so to speak. Beginning in chapter 7 and continuing through the end of the letter, Paul began responding to a series of questions that had been written to him by the spiritual leadership of the church in Corinth. They were practical questions about lifestyle issues: marriage, divorce, singleness, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, public worship, what happens to our bodies when we die, and a concern about financial support for some poverty-stricken Christians at the church in Jerusalem.

We're now in the middle of a discussion of the dangers of idolatry in the life of a believer. That encompasses chapters 8-10. The presenting problem was introduced in 8:4: "Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one."

banquets at the pagan temples in Corinth. They wanted to eat whatever food they wanted, when they wanted, because they understood that the food wasn't desecrated or unclean--meat was meat. They had a lot of theological knowledge about their freedom in Jesus Christ. These were the same strong Christians who were very critical of Paul and his ministry there. They said that he wasn't forceful enough for them, that he gave up his rights too quickly, and he refused to accept their financial support.

Paul's pastoral counsel in chapters 8-9 is very clear and helpful. He told the strong Christians that he did agree with their theology of freedom, but that their knowledge had made them selfish and arrogant. He said evidence of spiritual maturity is not Bible knowledge but willingness to express *agape* love. So Paul asked these mature believers in Corinth to exercise the freedom they had in Christ in a loving, sensitive way for their brothers and sisters. They ought to be concerned for the brothers and sisters in the body who had a weaker conscience with regard to eating food sacrificed to idols or attending events that took place in the pagan temples. Paul stated his own willingness to give up his freedom for the sake of those weaker brothers in 8:13: "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble." Paul was controlled by love for the people whom he ministered to.

He went on in chapter 9 to explain his decision to give up his apostolic right to financial support so he could present the gospel free of charge to these Corinthian believers. He was happy to work nights as a tent-maker to support himself financially, just as most of the pastors in Romania have to do, for the privilege of serving the gospel. Paul was willing to give up any and every right for the sake of winning men and women to Jesus Christ. And he was excited about the reward of doing something for nothing in ministry. Finally, he said toward the end of chapter 9 how committed he was to flexibility and freedom. He would follow the Spirit in order to win everybody he possibly could to Jesus Christ.

#### DISCIPLINED EFFORT FOR AN ETERNAL REWARD

That brings us now to the final paragraph in chapter 9, beginning with verse 24. Here Paul writes about an imperishable prize that motivates him to self-discipline in his ministry. Paul is going to talk about his willingness to give up personal rights to comfort and indulgence in life in order to gain God's approval for his life of service. This is a concern for all of us, not just for apostles, or Romanian pastors, or even American pastors. Every single one of us is called to the same life of sacrificial service and ministry that Paul is describing. Our gifting and calling may be different, but passionate willingness to be sold out for the sake of the gospel is what ought to drive each one of us. Let's read verses 24-27:

**Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.**

It says in verse 24 that a lifestyle of ministry is like competing in athletic games. Every two years outside of Corinth there were famous Olympic-type games, called the Isthmian Games. They had all the events that our Olympics would have: boxing, wrestling, and all kinds of different foot races. The winners of these events were given a wreath or crown to wear on their heads. It was woven of either pine boughs or olive branches. The value of the prize was not monetary but symbolic. And the prize for Paul was a sense of delight that he was being used by God in ministry, knowing that he had used all his energies and talents and gifts to God's glory, for the good of the kingdom. That's what Paul lived for. He described that prize in Philippians 3:14: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul makes clear in verse 25 that winning spiritual rewards like that requires spiritual discipline on our part. The word "compete" that he uses is the Greek word for agony. It points to the tremendous effort that was put forth to win. And if that kind of disciplined, focused effort was expended to win a wreath that was going to be forgotten the next time a competitor did better, then how much more should Paul agonize for an eternal winner's wreath? He was committed to agonizing effort for the spiritual reward of effective ministry. He limited indulgence and denied laziness and intemperance. He was radically committed to what God wanted him to do. He understood that the most important investment was people. Nothing

else--programs, facilities, institutions--lasts eternally.

In verses 26-27 there is an unsettling concern that Paul had. It says that he feared disqualification. This was very personal to him. He states his goal-orientation. Four times, earlier in chapter 9, he said his goal was to win as many people to Jesus Christ as possible by as many means as possible. And he wasn't going to allow that goal to be thwarted by his own selfish desires.

In verse 27 when he says, "I buffet my body and make it my slave," obviously that includes all of his physical appetites that needed to be controlled by God's Spirit. But those words also include everything Paul means in other places by the term "the flesh." It's a more inclusive idea than just physical. It's anything emotional or volitional or spiritual that might undermine his effectiveness as God's servant. The flesh in each one of us is that part of us that doesn't like to deny ourselves anything, that wants to do exactly what it wants to do whenever it feels like doing it. And every one of us are people of the flesh. We're right there with Paul when we look honestly at ourselves.

When Paul writes of fearing disqualification, he's not referring to losing his salvation. When we studied chapter 3, we saw that every one of us is going to have our lives of service and ministry examined by the Lord as to their quality. Our ministry will be tested by fire to determine whether we built with self-confidence, which Paul calls worthless flammable materials, or with Christ-confidence, which he called precious, durable materials. None of us in Christ can lose our salvation, but as Paul says, there's the possibility that we could be disqualified from ministering; we could lose our opportunities to serve the Lord. The fear for Paul was that his service for Christ would be empowered by his own resources and done for his own glory. And the result of that would be that he would fall into some sinful temptation and end up on the shelf of disqualification from effective ministry. Paul feared wasting his life that way.

We heard some tragic stories in Romania about pastors who had had great, significant leadership in the church, and had then lost their ministries. They had served faithfully under communism. But after 1989, when Ceausescu was overthrown, the country was free, and our capitalistic orientation came into that nation to "save" it. There were pastors who got involved in businesses. I heard about a trucking business, an import/export business, and a manufacturing plant. None of these men started out to shift their aim. It was a very slow process. But the goal of capitalism and the materialism that went along with that gradually became more important in their lives than the original goal, the calling to serve Christ in pastoral ministry. So the prize was changed, and they were marginalized.

Now what Paul does in chapter 10 is give us an historical example of disqualification. He reminds the Corinthians and us of the nation Israel's failure to gain God's approval for their lifestyle, of their own disqualification from the call that they originally had to be a light to the nations. Let's read verses 1-5:

**For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.**

## THE BLESSINGS WE HAVE AS GOD'S PEOPLE

Verses 1-4 summarize some amazing blessings and privileges that these people had. Five different times in those first four verses the word "all" is used. It emphasizes the oneness of Israel as a faith community, the commonality of their experience under Moses' leadership through the deliverance from Egypt and the years in the wilderness. That nation, from the youngest person to the oldest, enjoyed tremendous blessings from God. There are four blessings listed in these four verses.

First, in verse 1 the statement "...Our fathers were all under the cloud..." speaks of the *Shechinah* glory that always hovered over the camp of Israel as a symbol of God's presence, expressed through his protection and his guidance of that nation for forty years in the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. God was dwelling in their midst. He never forsook them. He guaranteed his providential care for them.

The second blessing in verse 1 is in the statement "...And all passed through the sea...." That speaks of the saving power of God at work. He miraculously opened the waters of the Red Sea so Israel could escape the bondage of Egypt. They walked through the waters on dry ground. And they walked into a new life, a new identity. He delivered them from enslaving death into salvation life as a people.

Third, in verse 2 Paul says they had intimate access to God through Moses: "...All were baptized into Moses...." He was God's appointed leader. In the Old Testament, nobody was a stronger mediator between God and his people than Moses. Through his spiritual leadership they all had access to God.

Fourth, verses 3-4 summarize the provision of God: "...All ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink...." God miraculously gave them a new supply of fresh manna to eat every day for forty years. And God provided water in a totally arid landscape--the springs at Marah that were made fresh from bitter water, and the water that came out of the rock that Moses struck.

We as followers of Jesus Christ have the same benefits and privileges as our spiritual ancestors in the faith. We have the same supernatural resources available to us, as we live out our lifestyle of service, ministering in Jesus' name. Think about what we've summarized in the first four verses: First, the power of God has delivered us from the bondage of sin into the freedom of new life in Christ. We have been saved, transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's own dear Son. Second, we're protected by the power of God. He constantly guards us and guides us. Third, he leads us into his plans for ministry for our lives, if we're sensitive to him.

Again, we were amazed during the two and a half weeks in Romania at how God superintended logistics, travel, health, facilities. At times we had to fight our own insufferable American efficiency mentality, because as westerners we know everything about logistics. It was kind of funny at times. God really was in charge; it just took us awhile to realize that and be willing to submit to it.

And fourth, as Israel was baptized or placed into Moses, we have been placed into Christ and identified with him. You see, through his shed blood we now have complete access to God. We don't need Moses. Paul writes about this in Romans 5:2: "...Through whom [Jesus] we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (NIV).

In verse 4 Paul describes the symbolic presence of Jesus Christ with Israel in the wilderness as the rock out of which flowed life-giving water. They were physically fed and given water by his spiritual presence. We are spiritually nourished and refreshed by the Spirit of God flowing out of Christ constantly. Jesus makes that very clear in John 7:38-39, where he speaks of rivers of living water flowing out of us. Israel didn't recognize that the rock symbolized Jesus. But we know his availability to us, his commitment to us--only we've got to be willing to come to him to eat and drink, to access his resources.

Now, those are the advantages they had. But verse 5 said that there were individuals who were tragically disqualified. The phrase "not well-pleased" in verse 5 has the same root as the word "disqualified" in 9:27. Over forty years, of the almost two million people who left Egypt, only two experienced God's approval of their lifestyle. All the rest were disapproved. They died in the wilderness. Now, that doesn't mean they all went to hell. There were righteous Israelites who died in faith believing. But a generation was not allowed to enter the land, which meant they couldn't enter into the rest, a fulfilled life of ministry in the land of Canaan. Only Joshua and Caleb were qualified to enter the land.

## DISQUALIFIED FROM SERVING GOD

At this point, beginning in verse 6, Paul draws himself, the Corinthian Christians, and all of us who read the text into the story. There's a warning given to us collectively. He's going to summarize five stories from those forty years that show a pattern of disqualification. He's going to say that this is important for us to understand, because we stand accountable as Israel did. Look at the first statement in verse 6a:

**Now these things happened as examples for us....**

Then look at the end of the section, verse 11:

**Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**

These bracketing comments are setting the context for the history lesson that unfolds in verses 6-10. And Paul wants us to see ourselves here, because there's a danger, in our immaturity, of being over-confident of our spiritual understanding and Bible knowledge. One of the things that the Corinthian church struggled with was presumptuous arrogance about how well-informed they were Biblically. With the freedom of the gospel come inherent dangers from within ourselves, the temptation of the flesh that Paul was concerned about at the end of chapter 9. The history of Israel in the wilderness warns us that the privileges we enjoy as God's people don't make us immune to God's discipline of disqualification from ministry.

Now let's read verses 6b-10 so we can see the sinful patterns that God was displeased with and that might disqualify us from ministry.

**...We should not crave evil things, as they also craved. And do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play." Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.**

From the Old Testament historical books of Exodus and Numbers, Paul reminds these Corinthian Christians of five stories from Israel's forty years in the Sinai wilderness. There is a single theme that defines the pattern: discontentment with or ingratitude for all the blessings that God had given them. They wanted more. His presence, his provision, his availability, and his power weren't enough. Remember the horrible downward spiral in Romans 1 that ends with murder, violence, a depraved mind, and inhumanity in family relationships. That whole list begins with ingratitude (1:21). That's what triggers the downward spiral.

Let's look at these five events quickly. The craving of evil things in verse 6 was an episode that took place about a year after the exodus (Numbers 11). The law had been given, they had built the tabernacle, and they had begun to travel. Do you know what the evil things were that they craved? Fresh vegetables! They were sick and tired of manna, and they wanted to go back to Egypt where there were cucumbers and garlic and onions.

Having just spent two and a half weeks in Romania, I'm very sympathetic with the Israelites, because there aren't a lot of fresh vegetables in Romania. Any time I travel internationally, I enjoy international food, but I start longing for American food. When we came out of Romania and stopped in Budapest, Rich asked if we wanted to get some Hungarian goulash. But we ended up at Pizza Hut instead (there are fresh vegetables on pizza).

The problem for the Israelites, however, was that their desires for a more interesting diet controlled them. They obsessed on it. And whenever we have to have something different or more than what God has provided, our desires become evil. That kind of lust or craving will result in disqualification, losing the power and the authority of God in our ministry.

The idolatry in verse 7 took place during the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 32). While Moses spent forty days on the mountain, the people became fearful and restless. They started to distrust that God even existed, and they asked Aaron to create an alternative god for them. Weak leader that he was, he gave in and created the golden calf. The result was an orgy with eating and drinking. The phrase "stood up to play" is a euphemism for sexual relations.

For us, idolatry is putting anything in God's rightful place in our lives, looking anywhere else for ultimate fulfillment. Anything can become an idol, but I want to focus for a moment on making our Christian experience an idol. We can create religious idols because we are fearful of intimacy with the living God of the universe. The busier we stay in Christian activity, the less we have to deal with him. So success in

ministry can be an idol. Love relationships in the body of Christ can become an idol. A concern for a healthy self-image can become idolatrous, because we don't believe that God himself can be enough. So we end up demanding that our Christian experience and activity fulfill us, give us meaning and purpose. Then it becomes an idol.

Verse 8 speaks of immorality. This happened near the end of the wilderness wanderings (Numbers 25). They were just preparing to enter the land, and the women of Moab threw a big welcome party. They offered Moabite food and seduced the men into sex with them. The Israelite men were helping themselves to resources God didn't want them to have, Moabite food, and involving themselves in relationships with women that God didn't ordain and couldn't bless. The result was a terrible venereal disease, a deadly plague that killed thousands of them.

They wanted to experience something different from what God had ordained. The temptation to immorality for us can be subtle, seductive. When I was in seminary twenty years ago, there was a Christian woman I had known of a number of years earlier, a well-known Bible teacher. I was really surprised to run into her when I was going to seminary. I was further surprised to find that she was divorced. She told me the tragic story of an infatuation that became an affair. It destroyed her marriage and her children's trust in her. She lost her ministry and her credibility. She said the rationalization that was at work was that even though it was sin, she knew that God would forgive her afterward. This was not an immature young woman in the faith. This was a woman of middle age. Immorality is a dangerous attraction.

Trying the Lord in verse 9 was something that happened when the nation complained about God's leadership (Numbers 21). They actually accused him of unfaithfulness, and they charged him with delivering them from Egypt so that he could take them into the wilderness to kill them. That's the ultimate blasphemy.

But we can do that without meaning to be like Israel. We can grow dissatisfied and impatient with the circumstances God has placed us in. We can subtly accuse him of meaning evil for us and not good. We can demand that life be more like we think it should be. That's putting God to the test, trying him. He won't tolerate that from his servants for very long, even though he is merciful and patient. Eventually he'll express his displeasure with us by removing us from fruitful, effective ministry on his behalf.

The last pattern of sin in verse 10 is grumbling. This is a frightening story about three young men who challenged Moses' spiritual authority (Numbers 16). They said that their leadership was just as good as Moses'. They were discontented with the authority that God had placed over them. They began to publicly complain about Moses and create a dissension. They sowed all kinds of seeds of mistrust for Moses' authority, and God stopped them dead in their tracks. The ground literally swallowed them up.

For us in ministry today, ambition--coveting somebody else's position or influence or effectiveness with people--can be a deadly thing. Paul warned the young pastor Timothy to flee from youthful lusts (2 Timothy 2:22). That's not just about sexual purity, but also about purity of motive toward people in authority. One of the most common lustful tendencies of young people is to wish that the old guys would get out of the way so they can be more progressive. Young people get frustrated with how slowly older people want to respond to things that need to be changed. But Paul said to run from such youthful lusts. If we don't want to be disqualified, we must repent of envy, competition, impatience, and jealousy.

Remember, the same theme runs through each of these five sinful patterns: discontentment, dissatisfaction, ingratitude. The apostle Paul said about himself in Philippians 4:11 that he had learned to be content in whatever circumstances he found himself. He calls the church in Corinth and Peninsula Bible Church to the same contentment, so that we don't suffer God's disciplining disqualification from ministry.

## A WARNING AND A WAY OUT

The last two verses of this section (vs. 12-13) give a wonderful summary. In them are balanced an important warning and a very hopeful word of encouragement and grace.

**Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has**

**overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.**

Verse 12 brings us back to the language of the Isthmian Games outside of Corinth. There are races to be won or lost, boxing matches to be fought. And we know our own fleshly tendencies toward pride, discontentment, a demanding spirit, ingratitude, ambition, and materialism. All of us are tempted to have these sinful attitudes. Any one of these things can undermine our effectiveness in a lifestyle of serving the Lord. Pride is trusting ourselves, and it's easy to substitute prideful confidence in ourselves for submissive confidence in the Lord. Perhaps that's your struggle today. Or perhaps it's discontentment. Your disappointment with God is much greater than your grateful appreciation for his wonderful resources in your life. All you can see is what you don't have and how it ought to be different. Overwhelmed by your frustrating limitations, you become oblivious to God's goodness, generosity, and grace toward you.

These temptations to sin are very real. But it's clear from verse 13 that we don't have to be overwhelmed by what these temptations represent. This wonderful word of grace counters our fear of being disqualified from ministry, wasting our lives, being set aside. There are three wonderful realities in verse 13 that we ought to take note of. The first is in the statement "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man...." You see, the pressures that we experience are shared by everybody. I'm not the only one who struggles with these temptations or trials. We're all frail, fallen human beings, prone to fleshly indulgence. And God's word does understand my situation, my circumstances, my struggles. That's the first bit of good news.

Look at the second statement: "...And God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able...." The pressures we experience are under God's control. He sets limits on what he allows to happen to us. And this implies that God really does know our strengths and our weaknesses. It doesn't mean that we'll never be overcome by evil, but it means that our failure will not be the result of having more than we can handle. The great promise here is that none of us will face anything in this life that can overwhelm us if we turn to the Lord for help and deliverance.

Third, "...But with the temptation [he] will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it." God will provide the resources, the conquering grace, the way of escape. There will always be the counteractive power of God available to us to withstand any pressure to sin. The call is to live in dependence on him and not in dependence on our own resources. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 13 in *The Message*:

*"No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it." (1)*

I was humbled by the nine days I was privileged to have in conferences with ninety Romanian pastors. They sacrificed time from their families and in some cases gave up three days of income from their jobs to sit under the authority of God's word and consider the seriousness of the pastoral calling. These men are radically committed to God's call on their lives. As I said before, these were men who work hard as servants of Jesus Christ.

We have the same calling and the same privilege. We may have different gifting and a different place of service. But we have all the resources of God. We have his conquering grace available to us. And we can learn to live in dependence on him. We can forget about self-confidence and cultivate God-confidence. We're called to live life with that passion, that abandon.

*The Message* paraphrases the opening call of this passage like this:

*"You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally."*

*I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it, and then missing out myself." (2)*

I ask you to find yourself here and say with the apostle Paul, "I want my life to count!"

## NOTES

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. © 1993, 1994 by Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 353.2. Peterson, P. 352.

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Doug Goins  
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