

Stability in an Unstable World

In a world of fluidity Christians can sometimes find themselves being moved along with a never ceasing tide of worldly instability. That would be the true nature of this world to begin with. At best, this world system that we find ourselves having to operate in, can be riddled with uncertainty and capriciousness. Today it's up, tomorrow it's down. The moment you think it is left then all of the sudden it's right. Next week it's black. The week after that it's white. Naturally, there seems to be an abundance of grey areas, which, by the way, can never be the case biblically, since right is always right, and wrong is always wrong. But doubt will obviously abound in a fallen world where right and wrong, good and bad, get convoluted in an intricate labyrinth of lies, fabrications, half-truths, empty promises and outright rebellion toward the Maker. The world's instability can be seen everywhere in society. Of course we understand that by agency of the fall, things have since the entrance of sin into the world, always been in a state of never ending flux. Along with the entrance of sin came great changes in the natural order (Gen. 3:17-18). Life became challenged by death, health by sickness, abundance by poverty, and safety by danger. However, this is not so much the instability of the world that I have in mind. Naturally, nature is in flux, and this is the natural course which the world has been taking ever since the first sin. This instability is of a material nature and we deal with it as best we can (think droughts, catastrophes, etc.). Rather the real danger lies with the moral instability of the world, and this is truly catastrophic in a spiritual sense.

Here are a few examples. Who of the middle aged among us thought that they would live to see the day when abortion gets legalized (the brutal and heartless murder of thousands of babies, worldwide), that gay and lesbian (or whatever orientation these days) marital unions would be seen as constitutional, and no less various church denominations supporting these views. I guess this is sort of surreal in a sense, even for a forty-year-old like myself.

However, this should not surprise us about the world at all. In essence the world is *unstable* in all its ways since it does not seek the things of God, and has instead become a law unto itself. Scripture is forthright about its opinion of the world. Here's a few examples:

In 1 John 2:15-17 the apostle John warned against an unbridled love for the world, but as he did this he also supplied the reason as to why it is foolish to love the world. He said:

"¹⁵Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."

You see the world system is in outright rebellion towards God. The world's desires are opposed to God's desires. The world's moral standards are opposed to God's moral standards. A Christian cannot therefore love participating in the rebellions of a fallen world, who, at best, is opposed to God and his moral requirements. All these things are not from the Father but are indeed the world's. It forever changes its views to accommodate its own failing morality, and one day it will pass away entirely, along with all of its rebellion, and be eternally damned (Rev. 20:15). Of course, when we refer to the world and the ideals of the world, we are referring to the people who represent it. We are talking about the eternal destiny of those who have adopted the lies of the world – invariably the lies of Lucifer himself.

These are the people who have bought into Satan's lies, after all, he is the father of this world (Jn. 8:44). These are people who one day will hear those very sombre words: Depart, for I never knew you.

The world's instability is of course something that God alone can and will do away with one day. He will indeed judge the great and the small who did not shun Satan and his *worldwide web* of lies (Rev. 20:12). This great judgment will be the day, in particular of Satan's judgment (Rev. 20:10), when the Lord will forever end his ruthless opposition of God and his incessant attack on humans created in the image of God. But this is also the time at which he will make everything new (Rev. 21:1-26). The New Testament has an eschatological expectation that predicts the renewal of all things within this sin-cursed created order. The world will no longer have the propensity for any wicked rebellion against God. Everything will be made new, from top to bottom. As it involves God's future earthly kingdom, "...*nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life*" (Rev. 21:27). This is something that is yet in the future. Perhaps not in the too distant future, but nevertheless not yet.

But until such time of total and universal renewal of God's world and God's people, it is vitally important that the true light bearers of all things good, and noble, and pure, and trustworthy, remain exactly as such: good, noble, pure, trustworthy (Phil. 4:8), and I would like to add one more characteristic — *stable!*

In order to understand the importance of Christians as being "stable" people, or people who have shown stability over the months, years, and decades of being a Christian, it is important for us to look at two texts in the Word of God that I have specifically selected to help us understand this important Christian virtue. The first is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and the second in the epistle of James.

So here's first a look at what Paul thinks about the subject of stability. 1 Corinthians 15:58 says it all:

"⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

The injunction in this verse seems obvious from the apostle's word choice. At first glance this verse indicates that Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to be firm in the faith that they have expressed in the Lord, and not to veer to the right or the left thereof. And what is also obvious is that he doesn't talk down on them. We know this because he addresses them as "beloved brothers." Yet, too often in an overly sensitive world offense can be taken for almost anything. Almost anything can be misconstrued as unloving or offensive. But Paul does not shy away from his apostolic

duty for fear of offense. He continues to warn the Corinthians about the necessity of a stable faith. And this is how he encourages them:

1. *An appeal to steadiness*

Paul begins his instructions to the Corinthians by commanding them to remain “steadfast.” Now it is helpful to know that this first command was not issued in a vacuum. The Corinthians have in many ways made themselves guilty of great rebellion toward God. The church was known for rampant moral wickedness, and at best, for massive confusion with regards to the things which God has commanded the church. Paul gives us a glimpse into some of the events which occurred among them.

It is helpful to know that the major problem among the Corinthians was not so much ignorance (though it was true of them), as it was “*worldliness*.” Sadly, they did not understand the importance of being salt and light in this world (Matt. 5:13-16), and to live as ambassadors of Christ, instead of ambassadors of this world. And so licentiousness and worldliness got the better of them. Historically speaking, sin was quite rampant among them:

There was a general misunderstanding of the roles of men and women in the church to start with (1Cor. 11:1-16). This was accompanied by a general misunderstanding and outright abuse of the Lord’s Table as some were eating and drinking without waiting for others, and some were even getting drunk leading to God’s judgment on them (1 Cor. 11:17-33). Complicating matters in the Corinthian church even more was the fact that there was perceived chaos whenever the gifts of tongues or prophecy were being practiced. This of course happened during a time in the church’s history when these gifts were still in working. Nevertheless, the Lord had specific instructions to the way these gifts were to be exercised, always orderly, and never allowing a church service to turn into a circus of sorts (1 Cor. 14:6-19).

But perhaps most perplexing about the rampant sin that occurred in the Corinthian church was the fact that there was an incestuous relationship being tolerated among them (1 Cor. 5:1-2). This was, as Paul described, something which would not even have been tolerated among the heathen. They did not take the strictest possible action with this man, at all. Rather, it seems as if they simply went on with business as usual, lulling him in his sin.

And looking at the historical background of the church it makes all the more sense why some these things would be happening. The Roman city of Corinth was located some 70 km west of Athens in southern Greece, within the Roman province of Achaia. It was a major trade city and a real melting pot of different pagan cultures, and of course of all kinds of immorality as a result. The immorality of the Corinthians was so well-known among the pagans that it became a way to insult someone who was being evil or immoral. If you wanted to say someone was being base or immoral, you called him a ‘Corinthian.’

With this background, it was exactly this that plagued the Corinthian church during their beginning years. The church in Corinth had a tough time breaking with their sinful upbringing. Sure there were people turning to Christ. Sure there were even those who were not saved to begin with, but as a general rule, Corinth did not break ties with their sin as they should have — as people who are new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

So for Paul to properly instruct the Corinthians he had to be stern with them, and in love, to command them not to tolerate worldliness among them. The truly saved among them had to become committed to purging the evil from among them (1 Cor. 5:13). Being tolerant of such obvious and terrible sin among them was only symptomatic of a deep-rooted *instability in their faith*.

And so he commands them to be “steadfast” and “immovable” (1 Cor. 15:58), right at the end of this sword-wielding epistle. Literally, don’t be tossed around by every immoral whim. Rather remain steady in the Lord. Remain firmly established in your faith and your commitment to holiness. The words “steadfast” and “immovable” really complement each other well, and helps define each other’s meaning. If something is steadfast then it will also be immovable to some measure. If something is immovable, then it will be stable or steadfast. To be steadfast in the Greek literally means to be *firm*.

We often use this expression in everyday life. We for instance might say we are going to talk firmly, but lovingly, to a disobedient child. This is what it means to be steadfast. It means not to be willing to budge or consent, but to be firmly settled in one’s persuasion. And this is exactly how the church should be in this world. We should be like this in a congregational sense, just like what was required of the Corinthians. We must deal sternly, yet lovingly with sin, and not allow it to infect an entire congregation. In a Matthew 18 sense, this is something that the entire church participates in through the loving leadership of the elders. Immovably, the church participates in calling sin — sin, good — good, and backing this by a *steady* and godly example.

Something that was incredibly important before the invention of radar and global positioning was the presence of lighthouses at sea that could guide ships safely around protruding rocks and shallow lying reefs. One such light house that is of historical interest is the Eddystone Lighthouse in Plymouth, England. It was built in 1759 when a young engineer by the name of John Smeaton was commissioned by the Royal Society to attempt the building of a much-needed lighthouse there. There had been two earlier lighthouses in this same spot before, both of which had collapsed because of the strength of the waves.

In addition to the help of a team of tough Cornish tin miners, the real key to Smeaton’s success was his invention of a clever method that allows for building fast and solidly, which was incredibly necessary in order to build on a rock at sea. He designed heavy interlocking granite blocks, each with dovetail joints and marble dowels which ensured that the heavy stones could not be pulled apart, even when being subdued to the immense forces of the most powerful waves.

Like interlocking granite blocks at sea, steadfastness is a team effort, not just the pastor’s job. We are all called, interlocked and side-by-side, to be stable Christians in life’s storms.

An Old Testament example of instability

The Old Testament is filled with historical narrative that not only help us to know which human examples to follow, but also those examples we must avoid at all cost. Not only do we learn from the generally good examples of saints like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah and Rahab (Heb. 11:1-39), but we can also learn to avoid the bad

examples of people like Cain, Absalom and Saul. We can also learn valuable lessons from “hall-of-shamers” as we do from “hall-of-fathers.”

For a study about being stable in the faith, Saul certainly helps us to know what not to be like. Though he was anointed by God to be the first king of Israel, in a very short space of time his true character started to surface, and it became obvious to many, including Samuel, that he was never fit to be the king of Israel. One might wonder how it can be that he was chosen as king to begin with. Perhaps it had to do with the Israelite elders’ demanding of a king (1 Sam. 8:4-6). Clearly this was a rejection of the God who had been their ruler since the days that he led them out of their captivity in the land of Egypt. The Lord however granted the elders’ request, but not without a warning. The Lord then spoke to Samuel and instructed him to warn the people what the consequences of their demand would be. And so Samuel warned them about the typical results of a monarchy (1 Sam. 8:10-18). Nevertheless, the people continued with their demand.

The story then unfolds with the Lord selecting Saul as the first king of Israel, effectively ending the era of the judges, Samuel being the last living judge of Israel. And this is where the fun began...

In spite of his tall and handsome appearance (1 Sam. 9:2), Saul quickly rose as an undisciplined, unprincipled and unstable leader of Israel. Interestingly the mere fact that he is referred to as “tall” suggests that he was no friend of Israel. Theologian Robert D. Bergen points out that “Saul is the only Israelite specifically noted in the Bible as being tall; elsewhere it was only Israel’s enemies whose height was noted (cf. Num 13:33; Deut 1:28; 2:10; 9:2; 1 Sam 17:4). Israel had asked for a king ‘like all the other nations’ (8:20), and the Lord was giving them the desires of their heart, even down to the physical details!”

His ineligibility for the job may already have been hinted at through his physical appearance, but it became undisputed once he got settled in his new position as the monarch of Israel. His ignorance soon became obvious in the way he went about his responsibilities as the new king. Firstly, his ignorance about the things of God became evident in the fact that he wasn’t familiar with Samuel, who was a well-respected prophet of Israel. When embarking on a search for his father’s donkeys with the help of his servant, it is the servant, to his shame, who reminds him about the nearby home and potential assistance of this well-known man of God (1 Sam. 9:6). The slave was also the one who recognised their need for spiritual assistance, not Saul. Interestingly, Saul thought that he had to be paid for this service (1 Sam. 9:7), something which God would not allow any good servant of his to do.

A few chapters further we find the Lord sending Saul as the front runner of the army of Israel to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1-35). In this passage the Lord not only commands him to kill the evil Amalekites, but also to destroy everything that belonged to them, all the way down to their camels and donkeys. But Saul did not listen to the Lord. Although the victory was theirs against the Amalekites, he did not take the Lord seriously at his request. He kept aside everything that was useful to them, and though useful, this was not what the Lord commanded. The author tells us that God eventually came to Israel expressing his regret for anointing Saul as king. This word from the Lord impacted Samuel so much that we are told that Samuel cried to the Lord for the remainder of that night (1 Sam. 15:10).

The best example we have of Saul’s unstable and unprincipled character might however be found in his interaction with David, who would eventually succeed him

as king. We see this in his repeated efforts to kill David after he became jealous about David's military success. This started in chapter 18 when women of all the towns of Israel credited David for the killing of tens of thousands, yet Saul for the killing of only thousands. Driven by an intense jealousy, Saul, from this moment on sought to kill David.

The story progresses as Saul schemed about ways to make an end to David's popularity — by ensuring his death. Under a façade of benevolence, Saul offers his daughter Merab in marriage (1 Sam. 18:17) to David who in turn refuses the offer because he saw himself as unworthy to become the king's son in law. Soon Saul receives news that one of his other daughters, Michal, was in love with David and then sees this as his opportunity to ensnare David. Apparently Michal was not the most eligible lady-in-waiting and would therefore be a valuable tool in Saul's hands against David "that she may be a snare for him and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him" (1 Sam. 18:21). His murderous desires finally got so intense that he instructed his son, Jonathan, to kill David; Jonathan refusing to do so. In a fit of rage, he even hurled a spear at David, who played the harp for him (1 Sam. 19:9-10). Saul's treacherous and sinful instabilities as the king of Israel continued on in this way as he, in pursuit of David, killed the priests of the Lord (1 Sam. 22:6-19) and even consulted a demonic woman (1 Sam. 28:3-25) to bring Samuel back from the dead to help him with the Philistines — all because the Lord has given Saul into their hands.

What we see in Saul are all symptoms of an unprincipled and unstable man, who had no control over his sinful lusts. That he was even saved to begin with can be seriously doubted. He eventually dies a tragic death when he falls on his own sword during battle against the Philistines (1 Sam. 31:4).

Sadly, the unsteady and unprincipled soul eventually becomes an easy target for Satan, like Saul. To have a reputation of unsteadiness only attracts the attention of the demonic forces, who by their cunning will seek to destroy Christians who are unstable in their faith, rendering them ineffective and even destructive to the church. The apostle Peter describes the process by which demonic, false teachers might seek to prey on unsteady souls. With defiant confidence these false teachers:

"...do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, ¹¹ whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord. ¹² But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, ¹³ suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. ¹⁴ They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin." (2 Pet. 2:10-14)

And with this malicious intent, Peter warns that *"They entice unsteady souls."*

The picture used here is found in fishing. A fish would be "enticed" by a fishing hook specifically designed for its capturing. The picture is yet again repeated in verse 18 where Peter this time adds that these unstable Christians who get ensnared or enticed are *"barely escaping from those who live in error."* This is a fair warning to anyone who is unstable in the faith.

2. An appeal to readiness

Instability will also cause the child of God to be lethargic and ineffective in their duties. As a natural consequence of stability, Paul now appeals to the Corinthians to be ready in the Lord for every good work. He doesn't of course use these exact words, but his exhortations boil down to the same. As we are committed to not being topsy turvy, up one day, down the next, we must equally remain committed to the task ahead of us. For this reason, Paul continues to exhort the church to remain active in the work of God,

"...always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Paul is commanding the Corinthians to remain ready and active in their service for the Lord. As was already shown, obedience was an issue with the Corinthians largely because of their strong pagan roots. Perhaps there was a substantial number of false converts. Much of this was substantiated through Paul's repetitious correction of the church. But whatever it was that was going on, this was all the more the reason for them to get committed to the task at hand and continue their work for the Lord. For the Corinthians this of course meant to understand that any victory of theirs against sin is the result of their union with Christ. It was in Christ that any victory was to be had. Paul does not allow for the possibility of defeat against sin and its effects for the true believer. Even though sin will have its sting. The victory is truly ours in Christ. As Paul says: *"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor. 15:56).

We as the church today can similarly be tempted to an unstable Christian walk. I am by no means preaching a sinless perfection here. But the truth is that a fluctuating commitment to the Lord, toward his people, and toward the things which he commands us, can negatively impact our efficiency for the Lord. Unwillingness to be committed to God, his people, the work that he would have us do while we still have breath in our lungs, inevitably leads to an ineffective and stale salvation.

How does this look in your life? Where are you in need of stability? Here are a few introspective questions that might get some us thinking:

Could it be that your orthodoxy does not lead to orthopraxy? In other words, could it be that the things you believe in and the things you confess do not get expression in the things you do - because you do not have enough stability in your life?

Parents, are you merely teaching your kids the right things or are you actually loving and doing the right things?

Young people, is church something only to tick off on a checklist, maybe once or twice a month, or is it a way of life? Do you see church, and the fellowship it offers, as indispensable to your spiritual health? Are you committed to a local church, serving humbly alongside other Christians, or are you indifferent to committing to a church and the need to exercise your spiritual gifts?

Looking at the world around you where sinful lifestyles flourish, do you merely acknowledge that the world is morally opposed to God in principle only, or do you do this in practice as well? In other words, we cannot merely confess that something big is wrong with the world system, we also have to show it through our acts (Jas. 2:14-26).

Does the world know about your Lord and the salvation that he alone can provide? Do they know about the impending judgment that is on the way for rebellion against him? In other words, are you really zealous for the Lord, so much so, that you can emphatically say, “I am never going back to that old way of life?” If so, you will be steadfast. You will be known as someone who is *immovable* and *abounding* in the work of the Lord.

If not however, then you will be like the “double minded” person that James talks about in his epistle. Let’s read what James has to say about it. And just to usher us into this, James is addressing Jewish Christians of the diaspora who have been scattered, and as a result have had to endure certain hardships since they were no longer in Israel. And so James instructs them, at least as wisdom is involved, to ask for it without fluctuation:

“⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” (Jas. 1:5-8)

These verses capture one of the main reasons for James’ writing to these dispersed Christians in the first place. To be wise is that singular, distinguishing mark of Christians that will forever distinguish them from the world, or worldly Christians for that matter. And so James adds that the one who does not seek wisdom earnestly — constantly doubting God and his will for his life — is nothing less than a doubter. This points to a person who is zealous one day, and cold the next. This is the kind of person who is seen today and then gone tomorrow. The kind of person that James has in mind is so unstable that he can be compared to the tides of the ocean. James’ reference to the waves of the sea is not to be understood as a wave that crashes on the beach. Rather we are to understand his reference here as referring to the actual changing shape of the ocean tides. This is indeed fitting. The water splashes, morphs, twists, bubbles and turns, and there really is no rhyme or reason to its appearance right now, as there is none 5 seconds, 5 minutes, or 5 hours later. The point is, there is just no stability. The one who asks God for anything with *doubting* has no stability in themselves.

This is the life of the Christian who does not do what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58. They are at best tossed back and forth like water in the oceans. To be sure, James applies this to the act of praying, but his emphasis is generally on any unstable Christian living. Instability in our Christian lives may certainly surface in our prayer lives, but it can easily be seen in other ways as well.

Theologian Douglas Moo says it well in his commentary on the letter of James: “So the doubter, not possessing an ‘anchor for the soul’ (Heb. 6:19), does not pray to God with a consistency and sincerity of purpose. Prey to the shifting winds of motive and desire, he wants wisdom from God one day and the wisdom of the world the next.”

What Moo says is exactly what happens when Christians become unstable in their ways. Sadly, they do the worst thing possible and start to rely on the wisdom of the world. When this happens the church starts looking like the world. In other words, we might believe in ‘sola scriptura,’ but if in doubt, practically the church starts to adopt the wisdoms of the world.

Instability and doubting can start to show its presence in different ways in the Christians life. The question that remains is “how are you being unstable in your ways?” Are you firmly established in the faith? Are you steadily walking in the Lord, as Paul said to the Colossians, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Col. 2:7)? There are various ways in which doubt can manifest in your life. Does your pastor have to rebuke you regularly for sinful behaviour? Do you often fall trap to every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14)? In other words, are you easily dissuaded from the straight and narrow way of believing? Is it a burden to go to church and meet with the saints? Do other church members regularly have to ask you “where have you been so long?” “We miss you brother, or sister.” Do you allow the lost in the world, who are naturally unstable in their ways, to dictate your social activities, and cause it to interfere with your testimony and your fellowship with the saints? Do you allow them to rule your time? How often in a month do the social agendas of the unbelieving take you away from church responsibilities and activities? These are all necessary questions.

What the church needs today is not to be filled with people who are up and down, left and right, neither here nor there, one foot in the world, another foot in the church. No, what the church is in need of are people who are squarely committed to their Lord and to his people. What the church desperately needs are people who don't see church and obedience to the Lord as optional, but rather as indispensable. What the church needs are real biblical men and women who persevere in the faith, without doubting.

In fact, perseverance is the opposite of being unstable. To persevere in the faith means to be unwilling to let the changing ocean tides of the world move us back and forth in our walk with the Lord. Paul illustrated it so well when he says,

“²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

An athlete cannot expect to put in a good performance and to receive a prize if he did not put in the required self-discipline of exercise and a good diet. No athlete who pitches up for the odd practice session and then gone again twenty others can expect good results in his career. Neither can a Christian expect growth and maturity in the absence of stability and self-discipline.

“¹⁹...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

To conclude, Martin Lloyd-Jones commented on these words from 1 Corinthians with helpful insight:

“Once a man sees the message of the cross, he has an entirely new view of everything. He is not just trying to live a good life now; not just trying not to do harm; not trying to live just on the edge of the law—not wanting to be prosecuted, but going as far as he safely can. That is all finished. He is a new man. He has been prepared for him. He has a new motive. To sin now means that he is wounding love, he is not breaking a law. He is wounding the love of the one who gave himself for him. He says, I cannot

do it. I have been bought with a price. I have no right to do it, I am not my own. I belong to him. He has a new conception of sin, he has new motives for a holy life, and thank God over and above all, he has got new power whereby to do it.”

We don't own ourselves. We belong to God. We are his. He has given us everything needed to live godly lives this side of eternity. Instability ought to be a foreign concept to us...