

Flee Idolatry **1 Corinthians 10:14-22**

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

Introduction

Paul is continuing to answer the simple question: *are not Christians free to eat meat that has been offered to idols?* This is a question Paul has been working through since 1 Corinthians 8. The Corinthians had written to Paul and asked him a yes-or-no question, but he doesn't just answer with yes or no. It is not a one-word answer. It is more like a 3-chapter answer.

So, for those of you unfamiliar, let's spend a moment on the big picture. Corinth was a pagan city in a predominantly pagan world. People worshipped everything – there were temples on every corner. People even had private household gods. Idolatry was everywhere.

And then the gospel came to Corinth through the missionary efforts of Paul and others, and many people believed. The new Christians forsook their former pagan life. But then a question arose in the church about the church's interaction with the wider culture and its religious practices.

The question was whether they could eat meat freely. People in this pagan culture would sacrifice animals to various gods, and the meat from sacrificed animals was sold at the market. So any meat bought at the market could have possibly been ceremonially offered to an idol.

The question that came up in the church was whether faithful Christians could eat this meat or if they should refrain. There was obviously a schism in the church about this. So they wrote Paul and said, *Tell us, yes or no, Paul, can we eat meat offered to idols?*

But Paul didn't answer it that way because sometimes yes-or-no questions really need thoughtful responses. That is the case here. Instead of “yes” or “no”, he gave us a three-chapter response that is very helpful to the church today.

In chapter 8 Paul asks us to consider whether your freedom to eat meat will harm others in their faith. If it does harm to others, it is better not to eat. **Paul elevated the good of others above personal freedoms.**

In chapter 9, Paul asks us to consider whether your freedom will be helpful for the advance of gospel. Will it make the gospel more fruitful and effective in people's lives? If it will hinder the gospel, or if it simply won't advance the gospel, it would be better to refrain. **Paul elevated the advance of the gospel above personal freedoms.**

In the first part of chapter 10, Paul asks us to consider whether our freedom will be good for our own faith, or whether it will lead us into a path of godlessness and sin. That is the part of the answer we are finishing up today. If it will lead you on a crooked path, it would be better to abstain from eating. **Paul elevated personal holiness above personal freedoms.**

Next week, Burt Newman will begin to walk us through the final part: whether your freedom will be glorifying to God. Will eating glorify God? If not, it would be better to abstain. **Paul elevated the glory of God above personal freedoms.**

Limited Context, Timeless Application

Don't you love the way that the Bible works? This meat offered to idols is not something I would think relevant or for me or for our church. The context is distant. But if Paul had just said, “*Listen guys, I am just going to say 'no' on this one and move on.*” this would not have helped me or us at all. But the way he answers make this is relevant and so helpful to us as we navigate all the seemingly gray areas that we face in life in our culture. Now we have a framework. Now we have some questions we can ask.

Will it be good for others and their faith? Will help other people love Jesus more? Will it be good for the advance of the gospel? Will it testify to a lost world that God's grace in Christ is better than life, or will it mute the gospel? Will it be good for my faith and my sanctification? Will it help me pursue holiness? Or will it trip me on the path? And, the most important question of all, will it be glorifying to God? Now we have a framework to work through stuff. God's Word is amazing!

Will it Lead Me Into Idolatry

But all of that is the big picture. Today, we are working through only the 3rd question. Will this thing help me in my faith or will it tempt me to go down a path that is idolatrous? That is what Paul is walking us through here. So, for our good let's tune in and hear what he has to say.

Flee from Idolatry

In verse 14 Paul warmly and lovingly – don't miss the warmth of Paul saying *my beloved* - urges Christians to flee every form of idolatry.

Note an important word in verse 14: *Therefore, my beloved, **flee** idolatry.* Note the word *flee*.

Fleeing Isn't Simply Leaving

There are a few different ways you could leave my home after having a nice dinner and a bit of fellowship. If you were from Russia, you would have to begin the process 30 minutes before you actually leave. You start saying your goodbyes early and it is a process. You make it clear that you have to go, but you want your hosts to know how pleasant the evening was, so you mosey towards the exit in stages. If you go quickly, your hosts will think you didn't like them.

Then you stand in the doorway for at least 10 minutes. Repeating your earlier farewells and niceties. At last, after the half-hour process has completed, you actually leave. So the Russian way is is one way to leave a house.

In the Midwest, the process is shortened dramatically, but you still have a process. Late last week we had a guest and when they began to make hints of leaving I decided – for the purpose of this

sermon – to time it. That person let us know they were leaving. A minute or two later they headed to the door. They put their boots on and gave a final few farewells and then boom, they left. 7 minutes from bye to gone.

But that is leaving, that is not fleeing, is it?

As I was working on this sermon at home in my little corner down in the basement one day last week I asked my oldest son, David, who was working at his desk just a few feet away, how he would describe fleeing from a house. Without a warning or a moment of hesitation he jumped up and bolted – as fast as he could - out of the house. Now that is what it looks like to flee!

When you leave somewhere, you can meander away. But the word here – in verse 14 is *flee*. It is a strong word. Run away from idolatry! With urgency in your heart drop everything and get out of the house. Flee from idolatry.

Verses 15-22 explain why you want to do that. Why fleeing – like that - from the sin of idolatry is the most sensible thing you can do.

The summary is basically that idolatry is totally incompatible with the Christian life. Any dabbling in this world or with its gods is deadly. So we should flee, because it does not jive with the Christian life or the foundation of the Christian life. That is where the argument goes.

The Cup We Bless and the Bread We Break

To go there, he takes us to the Lord's Supper – what we are going to enjoy together in a little while, and he presses us to think deeply about the meaning of the Lord's Supper, *in order to show us how incompatible any idolatry is.*

Verses 16-17 say:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

To get to the heart of Paul's argument, let's ask some questions. First, How is the cup of the

Lord's Supper a cup of blessing? Second, How do we bless it (it says, *the cup of blessing that we bless*)? And third, in what way is the cup and bread a participation in the blood and body of Christ? Those are all vital question to ask. So let's just ask them.

How is the cup a cup of blessing?

Question 1: how is the cup a cup of blessing? It is cup of blessing because it points to the blood of Jesus Christ that he shed when he died on the cross. And we have been richly blessed by the blood of Christ shed for us. The benefits and grace we receive because of his shed blood are enormous. Here are a few verses that show this.

Romans 3:23-26 say:

*...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, **whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.** This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

Justification – the declaring of righteousness by God of people who have sinned, is because of the blood of Christ. And redemption – the buying back by God of sinners to himself, was owing to Christ's blood shed on the cross.

So what is about the blood that makes God able to justify us and redeem us? The answer is there in verse Romans 3:25: *God put forward Jesus as a propitiation.* That means that Jesus' shed blood satisfied God's justice against sin. His righteous case against us and our sin is satisfied, he satisfied it himself by putting forward Jesus Christ.

And, as he says in verse 26, through his blood he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. If your faith is in Jesus, you ought to drink this cup with great joy today because it points to what Jesus has done for you to make you acceptable to God.

If you need some encouragement today, find it in that cup. If your faith is in Jesus, God has justified you and redeemed (bought you for himself) through the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 2:13 says it a slightly different way:

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off **have been brought near by the blood of Christ.***

Is that not precious? The blood of Christ has brought us near to God. You can feel really far away from God because of sin. But if you are in Christ today by faith, no matter how you feel, God has brought you near to himself. So, be encouraged in that.

One more verse. Colossians 1:19-20 says:

*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, **making peace by the blood of his cross.***

God has made peace through the blood of Jesus. Gone is the enmity between God and us because of our sin. The blood of Christ has fixed our broken relationship and made us friends with God.

This is the blessing of the cup that we will drink later today.

How Do We Bless The Cup?

Question 2: how do we bless this cup? This is an easy one. The Greek word is εὐλογέω and it is the word from which we get the English word *eulogy* from and it means – *to say good things about, to praise something*. I'm doing that right now about this cup; I am telling you all the good things this cup represents. When we partake later, if will do that with joy and thankfulness and remembrance of Christ in our hearts, we are blessing the cup; and especially what it points to and symbolizes.

How Is It a Participation in the Body and Blood of Jesus

Question 3: How is taking this cup and eating the bread a participation in the body and blood of Jesus? A lot of traditions have misunderstood this, and ended up elevating the Lord's Supper to a significance far higher than the Bible warrants – as if it is actually the cup and the bread that does the redeeming work in our lives, or the actual imparting of God's grace to us. And that doesn't get this

right. In fact, it ends up pointing to itself instead of pointing definitively to Jesus Christ and his body and blood.

As we call to mind and celebrate and trust in the finished work of Christ – which is exactly what we are doing when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we share in the blessing of his work. It is as if we are at the table with Jesus in that upper room as he hands us the bread and the wine and says, *do this in remembrance of me*. In partaking, we take a share of what Jesus did, by himself, on the cross. That's what is meant here by participate or sharing or fellowshiping or communing (the word is κοινωνία and it means all of those things).

We don't just partake of the Lord's Supper as an end to itself. It points us to the gospel and to Jesus' work, and there is a sense in which we share, by faith, in the work of grace that he has accomplished for us.

Basis of Believers Fellowship

So that is how the cup is a cup of blessing and how we bless it and how we participate with Christ in it.

Paul makes another point here. In verse 17 he seems to indicate that this is central to the unity of the body of Christ – the church – itself. He says:

...because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

That means that the basis of true unity among believers is the gospel of Jesus Christ – his body broken and his blood shed.

When we take communion, we are reminded also that this is why we are the body of Christ. It is not things we have in common that bind us together. It isn't our personalities or our stages in life or our heritage or ethnicities. It is Jesus who makes us one body – his body – the church.

Consider Israel After the Flesh

Now what does this have to do with his warning against idolatry? This is part of his argument. He first shows us the great significance that this ceremony has for the believer and for a church. And then he goes on to argue, first using Israel as an example, that it always works that way. There is always more to ceremonies and religious practices and customs and actions than what we see at the surface.

Thus, in verse 18 he says *consider Israel after the flesh...* again reminding us reminds us – as he did earlier in this chapter - that Israel went after idols in the wilderness. They could not have said, as they brought their sacrifices to the idol alter that what they were doing was insignificant or meaningless. And they could not have said, I am doing this, but I still love God!

Things always have meaning. Just as the Lord's Supper is a participation with God in the things of Christ, there is a very real participation going whenever we dabble with sin. You can never say it is meaningless – or that your heart isn't really in it. Or that it is just a physical thing. You can't say, *It isn't that big of a deal.*

It is a big deal, because it is participation.

Fellowship with Demons

When it comes to meat offered to idols - or any kind of idolatry – it is a participation with demons. In other words, it is satanic. It isn't the meat or the idols that is truly significant. An idol is nothing. Paul made that point before. He agreed that their idols are dumb statues made with hands with no inherent significance. But it is significant because it goes deeper. Behind all idolatry is the evil one who wishes to sway your heart away from the living God.

Let me give you a sweeping statement: all idolatry is satanic.

And you can think, “*Man, that is pretty serious.*” But that is the weight that this passage gives to it. And we have to see it for what it really is so that we will flee from it.

We have a tendency to downplay the significance of everything. Our culture does that, and we

can do that too. It is a clever strategy if you think of it. If I can frame holiness as something like 'uptightness', then, who wants to be uptight? We don't like uptight. We like laid back. So let's relax, it is only a thing. Or it is only physical. Or we are just having fun. What is the big deal?

The big deal for Paul is the second part of verse 20 and verse 21. *I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.*

Christianity is fundamentally incompatible with idolatry. You cannot have it both ways. You can't have a little idolatry and a little God. You try it and you end up with your little-g god (or little-g gods).

A Jealous God, and Our Insufficient Strength

The final thing he says in this paragraph has both warning and a bit of irony. The warning is that idolatry is a very serious thing because God is a jealous God and you do not want to provoke that jealousy. God brooks no rivals.

He has a claim on you and your heart and your allegiance and your worship and he is jealous for it. When we dabble with idols, we provoke him in that jealousy, and I think the warning underneath those words is that we invite the judgment of God when we dabble with idolatry.

Of course, we have a ton of evidence that this is true. If you need some, just go read Judges at breakfast time with your family. That is what we have been doing. The family sits down we eat a bit of food, and then I say *okay guys, time for family devos*. We've been reading Judges for a few weeks. So I read something like, *And the people again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and he sold them into the hands of their enemies, and they were oppressed for 20 years*. It's on almost every page.

All over the Old Testament, we have example after example of people wandering into idolatry, and feeling the jealousy of God as a response.

God is jealous, and idolatry – dabbling with the world and its gods - provokes him. We don't

want to do that.

The irony comes is in the question: *are you stronger than he?* I think it is irony because he is using language that probably originated in the letter from the Corinthian believers. The “strong” group believed they could do whatever because of their freedom in Christ. And they considered the group that had convictions against eating meat offered to idols as weak. And I think Paul is purposely reminding them of that characterization in this last volley.

Sure, you're strong. You can do whatever you want because you are strong. But if, in that strength you follow a path that leads you into idolatry and, therefore, puts you at odds with God, are you willing to stand on your strength then? Are you stronger than God?

Conclusion

If the answer is no, and it obviously is, then you should do what my son, David, did the other day. Instead of dabbling and participating in any sort of idolatry, you should drop everything, and bolt out of the house. *My beloved, flee idolatry.*

No Casual Idolaters or Christians

If anything, my read of this has convinced me that you cannot be a casual idolater. You can't merely worship the world and its goods, and the rest of the time worship God. There are no causal idolaters. Just serious, sold-out ones.

Just as there are no casual Christians. Not for real. There are thousands who say they follow Christ causally, but you cannot take of the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons.

So, my friends, let's do this, as we partake together of the Lord's Supper in a few moments: let's remember Christ and his blood and body, and the enormous blessings God brings to us through Jesus. God has brought us near by his blood. He has justified us. God has reconciled us to himself. Rejoice in that as you take the cup this morning. Let the cup and the bread remind you that, no matter how difficult things are, you have hope! His name is Jesus.

But let's also resolve that we will not dabble anymore, or approach our Christianity lightly anymore. Let's participate at the table of the Lord for real.