

THE DANGER OF IDOLATRY

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Introduction:

Illust. – “WHAT GOOD ARE YOU?”

Hideyoshi, a Japanese warlord who ruled over Japan in the late 1500s, commissioned a colossal statue of Buddha for a shrine in Kyoto. It took 50,000 men five years to build, but the work had scarcely been completed when the earthquake of 1596 brought the roof of the shrine crashing down and wrecked the statue.

In a rage, Hideyoshi shot an arrow at the fallen colossus. "I put you here at great expense," he shouted, "and you can't even look after your own temple!" (Today in the Word, MBI, August 1991, pg. 23.)

We hear a story like that and think, “How can anyone be so foolish? We would never worship an idol...” would we? As Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth, he had a warning for them regarding idolatry – *read 10:14-15*. Sensible people... why would he say that? Well, it appears that the things that some of the people in Corinth were doing were less than sensible. They were dabbling in areas of idolatry. And Paul is trying to remind them, you're smarter than that.

So, what was Paul getting at? Well, let's review a bit. Over the past several weeks we have been looking at his response to a question from the believers in Corinth – is it okay to eat meat that has been offered to idols. That was a very real concern for the people of Corinth as idols and pagan temples were a major feature of the landscape and the lifestyle of Greek culture.

The immediate answer to that question seems rather clear – Since an idol has no real existence—it's just a piece of wood or stone—the meat is not in any way defiled. Therefore, there can be nothing sinful or wrong with enjoying that meat.

However, as is often the case, the answer is not always that simple. Paul goes on to point out the harm that can be done to a fellow believer whose conscience is weaker. Paul says, he may be offended or led to violate his conscience and thus sin by your actions.

Then there is the aspect of our rights and freedoms as believers and servants of God. But again, we must be careful that our expectations do not put a barrier before other people that hinders the gospel of Christ from being heard or received by those whom we are seeking to reach. As Paul said in 9:12b – *read it*. And again in 9:22b-23.

Last week, we moved into chapter 10, where Paul begins his warning about idolatry with a reminder from Israel's past. This morning we are going to follow up on that warning. We begin with Paul's injunction...

Flee from Idolatry

In the previous passage, which we looked at last week, Paul reviewed some of the serious failures in ancient Israel. He mentioned four specific areas of sin – idolatry, sexual immorality, testing or questioning God, grumbling. These things, Paul says, were recorded for our instruction – v. 11. They took place as examples for us, so that we would not desire evil or be led into sin as they were - v.6. It is incumbent upon us to learn from their failures.

I would suggest that the most pervasive and ongoing sin that the Israelites suffered from was that of idolatry. Throughout the history of the OT, the nation of Israel continually turned away from God, often to worship the false gods of the nations that surrounded them – Baal, Ash-taroath, Molech, and many others. The result was that they faced the judgment and punishment of God.

In order that we not find ourselves in the same predicament, Paul exhorts us with that simple directive – v. 14. Before we go any further, I think we need to define what idolatry really is.

What is Idolatry

I would like to suggest several things that are covered by the term idolatry:

- First, and most obvious, is the worship of false gods – literal idols. Bowing down before a statue of wood or stone, worshipping creation—the sun or moon, trees or mountains—rather than the creator, venerating angels or ancestor worship are all idolatry.

- But, there are also what we might call idols of the heart. There are things which displace God in our thoughts and attitudes – lust, covetousness, money, power, position, possessions, and the list goes on. Anything that we set our heart on, that pushes God out of the place of worship in our life, can be an idol. Anything that takes our focus away from God can be considered idolatry.
- Idolatry can also be the worship of God in the wrong way. In the OT God had specified how they were to worship, through sacrifices and offerings. And God had chosen a specific place to put his name and to build the temple. And it was there that they were to come to worship. One of the great acts of idolatry was when King Jeroboam decided that the people of the northern kingdom should not go to Jerusalem to worship, and he put up golden calves in Bethel and Dan as places of worship and sacrifice. That was an unacceptable form of worship. We no longer have the restrictions on where we are to worship, but Jesus made it clear that we are to worship God in spirit and in truth – John 4:24. When we think that we can worship God in our own way, it is a form of idolatry.

So, we might say that idolatry is anything that defames or insults the name or character of God. When we begin to think anything about God that is not true about Him we are establishing an idol in our mind. In his little book, *“The Knowledge of the Holy,”* A. W. Tozer begins the very first chapter with these words:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.”

Whenever we begin to think of God as anything other than what He really is, we are creating in our own minds an idol, a god of our own making, and that is idolatry.

So, where does this fit into Paul’s discussion with the believers in Corinth? Let’s look for a moment at the Corinthian problem.

The Corinthian Problem

This whole discussion began with the question of whether it was appropriate for Christians to eat meat offered to idols. The clear truth that comes out in chapter 8 is that an idol is nothing, therefore the meat is not defiled in any way, and consequently there can be no harm spiritually with eating meat that has been dedicated or offered in a pagan temple to a pagan god.

However, as Paul proceeds through his argument, it becomes apparent that there is more involved in the whole situation. As we look at the text we read this morning, it appears that some of the believers there were going a lot further. It seems that they felt that if the meat is fine, then what could be wrong with joining in with some of the pagan festivals. Why not go down to the heathen temple and join in with the celebrants there. After all they have some great feasts, and we know that the food is not defiled by their false spirituality.

Paul says, not so fast. Don’t you know that you are dabbling in idolatry? Flee from idolatry. Don’t get trapped by false thinking. Don’t think that you can consort with idols and maintain your relationship with God.

So, why is idolatry so dangerous?

The Danger of Idolatry

I’ve got three points that come out of these verses to help answer the question, why is idolatry so dangerous? These points are not original with me – I’ve borrowed them from John MacArthur.

It is Inconsistent

Read vv. 15-16 – We do not have time to go into all the details that we could glean out of these verses regarding what we call communion or the Lord’s table. Perhaps we will do that another time, on a Sunday when we are celebrating communion.

But very simply, Paul’s argument is this. When you, as a believer, come to the table of the Lord, and you eat the bread and drink the cup, you are participating with Christ in a very real and personal way. In the eating of the bread, you are participating in the body of Christ. In

drinking of the cup, you are participating in the shed blood of Christ. There is a real and genuine participation with Christ, the one who is being worshipped in the whole celebration. Eating at the table of the Lord is a way of saying that you are identifying with the Lord. It is an identification with Christ.

Not only that but note vv. 17-18 – *read them*. Not only are we identifying ourselves with Christ, but we are identifying with one another. We are joined together as one body, the body of our Lord. In ancient Israel, when they brought their sacrifices, they were participants together with one another. Those who ate the meat of the sacrifices were themselves participants of the altar and all it represented.

So, Paul's argument to the Corinthians is that you cannot then go and participate in the pagan temple ceremonies and assume that it doesn't matter. You may say that you are only going to enjoy the good feast that is laid out. But Paul says that by doing so, you are identifying yourself with the pagan god that is being worshipped and you are identifying with the people who are worshipping there.

So how can you go participate in the table of the Lord and identify with Christ and then go and participate in a pagan feast and identify with a false deity. It is inconsistent.

It is Demonic

Not only is it inconsistent, but to participate in such pagan festivities is also demonic – *read vv. 19-21*. Back in chapter 8 Paul referred to the knowledge of the Corinthians, who understood that an idol has no real existence – an idol is nothing. He is not here saying that an idol is something, or that it has some power or control. But what he is saying is that behind that idol there are demons.

When the pagans, in those heathen temples offer a sacrifice to that idol, they are really sacrificing to the demonic beings that are associated with that idol. Let me give you a brief quote from MacArthur...

"...here's what happens. People worship an idol. And we've showed you this before. And there is no god there. But if a person wants to believe there's a god there, you know what Satan will do? He'll send one of his demons to impersonate the god

that the people think is there and that demon will do enough supernatural works to keep the people worshipping that idol. I've said this to you many times ... Why do you think people stay in false systems of religion year after year after year and can't ever see the light? Because they have seen supernatural revelations in those systems. Not because there is a god there, there is no god there, but a demon will impersonate him."

And so, Paul says, I don't want you to be participating with demons. – *read vv. 20b-21 again*.

You can't participate in pagan activities and then participate in the table of the Lord. It is inconsistent, and demonic. One more point...

It is offensive to God

Read v. 22 – You do not want to anger the Lord. An important rule in life is that if you are going to offend someone, or make someone angry, or instigate a fight, you want it to be someone you can handle.

Paul is suggesting here that when you get involved in idolatrous activities or thinking you are offending God. And you really don't want to do that. He is far stronger and more powerful than you are.

Conclusion

How does all of this apply to us today? I doubt that you have ever attended a festival at a temple to Baal. But we all have to deal with idols of the heart – lust, covetousness, greed, power, prestige, possessions – a myriad of things that can displace God in our lives. We cannot consort with idols and at the same time expect to have a fruitful relationship with God.

Yes, we are free in Christ. We are not bound by the law but have liberty to enjoy all that God has given for our good. But we cannot allow that freedom to lead us into activities that will draw us away from God or provoke Him to jealousy. When it comes to Christian liberty, there are really two things to consider: How will my freedom affect others? I do not want my liberty to offend others or cause them to stumble. And, how will my freedom affect me and my relationship with God? I don't want anything to lead me away into sin, to face the judgment of God.