

“Flee Idolatry!”

I Corinthians 10:14-22

July 9, 2017

It’s impossible for any human being to not be a worshipper. The question is not *if* you are a worshiper, but *what/who* do you worship. What do you center your life around? What do you pursue your joy in?

Because we were made for God, because “we exist *for* Him” (I Cor 8:6), because we were created by Him, through Him, and *for Him* (Col 1:16), we were made to respond to God with worshiping hearts. That is, we are designed to worship and when we fail to worship God we will by design worship something else in His place. So you are not a worshiper because you go to church. You are a worshiper because you are a human being and hopefully you go to church and live every day with the same desire because your heart is set on worshiping God.

As you know, most of the people on this earth worship something other than the true God. Worshiping anything other than the true God of heaven, is called idolatry. Idolatry can be making anything the center of our lives including, self, creation, false gods, material objects, hobbies, money, control, or the approval of people—the list is endless. *We can make an idol out of anything!*

As we return to 1 Cor 10, Paul is warning us of the danger of idolatry. Vs. 14 captures the thrust of Paul’s exhortation: ***Flee from idolatry!***

Before we launch into vs. 14-23, let me just step back and show you the flow of thought from the previous verses in chapter 10. Back in vs. 6-11, Paul reminded us of the grave consequences Israel suffered by straying into sin, especially idolatry—they came under the judgment of God which eventually cost them their lives. So Paul says in vs. 12, “*let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.*” Then Paul turns from warning to hope in vs. 13 and reminds us that God, in His faithfulness, has made a way

of escape from temptation. He has made a way to avoid the snare of sin. Therefore, because God has made a way of escape, flee idolatry (vs. 14)! Here’s the big idea: Because of our vulnerability to temptation and because of God’s judgment on sin, we should not use our freedom to walk dangerously close to idolatry, but rather use our freedom to flee idolatry. God has made a way for us to escape the snare of idolatry, so run for that escape—flee idolatry!

Let me give you some illustrations:

- Don’t get as close as you can to the tornado for better pictures. Flee its destruction.
- Don’t get as close as you can to the uncaged lion, but flee to safety. (Getting out of car in Wild Life Safari)
- Don’t dabble with sensuality claiming that you have not technically crossed the line to pornography or fornication, but flee—run as hard as you can in the direction of purity (Prov 7)

Paul’s message to the first century Corinthian church is this: you may be free to eat meat associated with idols, but make sure to be running in the opposite direction of idolatry, not standing dangerously close to temptation.

In today’s passage, Paul gives *3 reasons to flee idolatry*:

1. **Flee idolatry because it is in direct conflict with Christ and His gospel (vs. 16-18, 20-21).**

[vs. 14-16]

When we eat the Lord’s supper together, three realities are brought to light.

- a. *To partake of the Lord’s supper is to commune with or have intimate fellowship with Jesus.* The cup and the bread do not have great meaning in and of themselves but in the one they represent.

- b. *To partake of the Lord's supper is to share in the benefits of His blood and His body* (just as those who sacrificed in the OT share in the benefits of the altar—vs. 18)¹. The cup or the blood of Jesus represents His death and so we share in and celebrate the forgiveness His death provides. The Bread or the body of Christ represents His incarnation, His life. So we share in the benefits of His righteous life.
- c. To partake of the Lord's supper is to fellowship with one another. This is why the bread is broken and shared. Notice that communion is not merely an individual practice, but a corporate one—we always do it together. **[Vs. 17]** We are one body with one bread, one allegiance. We are bound together as a body by our singular, shared allegiance to Christ. Because we have one God and Savior, we have one allegiance which is common among all believers. Notice here that our vertical union and communion with Christ has horizontal implications for our fellowship with one another.

So what does all of this have to do with idolatry? Vs. 20-21 indicate that feasting in idol worship is fellowship with demons. So if idol worship is fellowship with demons, then idolatry and the Lord's supper (and all it represents) are in complete opposition to one another. Idolatry puts you in direct conflict with Christ and the benefits his life and death provide. Paul says it very starkly in **[vs. 21]**. You can't express allegiance to both!

It's like this, you can't declare allegiance to your wife in marriage and then go on dates with other women. In this sense, all idolatry (not just food sacrificed to idols) is a foreign or illegitimate loyalty

that puts you in conflict with the Lord Jesus. This is why Jesus, speaking of the idolatry of money, said, "you can't serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be faithful to one and despise the other" (Matt 6:24). *The heart of idolatry is forsaking our supreme allegiance to Christ for a secondary love.*

2. Flee idolatry because it is both futile and dangerous (vs. 19-21).

[vs. 19-20] On the one hand, Paul says that idolatry is meaningless and futile. If you call on a god who does not truly exist it will do you no good. For example, it's just a waste of time to call on Baal because he has no eyes, no ears, and no hands, and no power because Baal doesn't exist. The same is true of Allah.

On the other hand, Paul warns of demonic power and influence that masquerades behind the worship of false gods. This is how the Egyptian sorcerers or magicians could perform miracles similar to those of Moses. For example, in Ex 7-8 how could the Egyptian sorcerers mimic the miracle of turning water to blood or producing frogs? Was it because their gods Hapi and Heqt were real and powerful? No, they are imaginary god who don't exist. It was demonic power at work behind the mask or veil of idol worship.

Now you may not see such a demonic display behind an idol of money or perhaps a car or hobby that you idolize, but nevertheless, Satan will use the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life to lead the affections of your heart astray from Jesus. ***Idolatry makes us vulnerable to demonic influence.***
"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry! (vs. 14).

¹ The one who offered the sacrifice (along with his family) and the priest all ate of the sacrifice, while some of it was burned. Thus, it was a sharing with the Lord and one another. (see John MacArthur, *The MacArthur NT Commentary: I Cor*, pg. 239.)

In 1 John 5 when the apostle warned us that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one, his final word was, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:19, 21). ***Idolatry entangles and ensnares, but a heart supremely in love with Jesus will not be enslaved to secondary powers (or secondary joys).***

3. Flee idolatry because it provokes divine discipline (vs. 22).

We already saw last week how God brought judgment on the Israelites for their idolatry—23,000 died in one day (1 Cor 10: 7-8). And now Paul asks the question in vs. 22, “*Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than God, are we?*” Paul’s point is clear. God is jealous for those whom He loves. He will not overlook spiritual infidelity but will discipline those whom He loves. And when His discipline comes, who is strong enough to resist it? “*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry!*” (vs. 14).

What does it look like to flee idolatry?

Now, it’s one thing for me to urge you to flee from idolatry. But what does that look like, especially when there are different kinds of idolatry that we struggle with?

Let me suggest 4 steps in overcoming idolatry:

1. *Recognize your struggle with idolatry.*²

Keep in mind that we don’t want to see what we love as an idol—because we love it and want to keep it. Beware that *your first response to your idol is to justify it.*³

So how do we recognize if something is an idol? Ask yourself:

- Is it demanding sacrifices of me or others that contradicts God’s order (idols always require sacrifices). For example, is it getting ahead of my responsibilities to my wife or children or my walk with God?
- Is my enjoyment of it an end in itself, rather than promoting gratitude and praise to God?
- Do I get angry when I can’t have it? Is it becoming a right that I demand rather than a gift for which I’m grateful?
- If you are not sure if something is an idol, pray that God will help you discern if it is and seek godly counsel from those who are closest to you.

2. *Determine the rightful place your desire or object should have in your heart and life—and ACT on it!*

- If it should have *no place* because it is forbidden by God (e.g. pornography) then abstain completely.
- If it should have a *limited place* because it’s a good thing that you’ve loved too much but *can* live without (e.g. hobby, entertainment) then practice restraint by taking a fast from it.
- *If it should have a subservient place* because it’s a good thing that you’ve loved too much but *can’t* live without (e.g. food) then practice restraint by choosing stewardship over mastery.

² For further consideration, see John Piper’s article, “Discerning Idolatry in Desire: 12 Ways to Recognize the Rise of Covetousness,” on www.desiringGod.org

³ This is why God so often had to use prophets in the Old Testament to point out the idolatry his people were struggling with.

3. *Pray for God to change your heart and reign supremely in your affections.*

This is essential because simply trying to abstain or exercise restraint alone is not powerful enough to overcome idolatry. You need a change of heart because the power of temptation and idolatry is not in the desired object itself, but in the desire of your heart that wants it. Each person is “tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his *own* lust” (James 1:14-15). Idolatry will only be overcome ultimately with a changed heart.

4. *Renew your mind and heart with re-ordered beliefs that Christ is more satisfying than your idol.*

At the root of idolatry is the belief that something will bring me superior satisfaction to what God offers. In other words, I make food, or entertainment, or control the source of my joy or security rather than looking to God for satisfaction and seeing secondary things as a means of enjoying and trusting Him. The most powerful way to tear down your idols is by feeding your heart, and mind, and preoccupations with the goodness and beauty and grace and holiness of Jesus. We need to consider how Christ is better than the things we idolize.

How is Christ better than our idols?

(20 benefits of Jesus your idols can't provide)

- Jesus gives grace—your idols can't do that.
- Jesus forgives sin and frees us from guilt, shame, and condemnation—your idols can't do that.

- Jesus gives us favor with God—your idols can't do that.
- Jesus answers prayer and supernaturally intervenes in our lives (John 15:7)—your idols can't do that.
- Jesus meets our deepest need (as well as our basic needs) as we trust in Him—your idols can't do that.
- Jesus gives us a living hope that will never be diminished and can't be taken away (I Peter 1)—your idols can't do that.
- Jesus promises to never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6)—your idols can't promise that.
- Jesus promises peace more robust and enduring than the tribulations of this world (John 14:27; 16:33)—your idols can't promise that.
- Jesus provides and fulfills the very purpose for which we were created (I Cor 8:6; Col 1:16)—your idols can't do that.
- Jesus is never changing (Heb 13:8)—your idols are temporary and futile.
- Jesus is all-powerful—your idols only feign power (Psalm 115:4-7; Acts 19:26).
- Jesus will not disappoint those who trust in Him (Rom 10:11, 13)—but not your idols.
- Jesus will fulfill every promise God makes (2 Cor 1:20)—but not your idols.
- Jesus holds all wisdom and gives it to those who ask (James 1:5)—but not your idols.
- Jesus has authority over your every enemy (Eph 1:20-22)—but your idols don't.
- Jesus can deliver your soul from death and secure heaven for you (John 10:27-29)—your idols can't.
- Jesus providentially makes all things work to your good, including hardships (Rom 8:28-29)—your idols can't.
- Jesus is completely pure and will never lead you into sin (1 John 1:5; James 1:13)—but not your idols.

- Jesus promises joy and eternal satisfaction that surpasses momentary pleasures (John 15:11; Psalm 16:11)—but your idols can't.
- Jesus loves you with a love that is self-sacrificial, eternally enduring, perfectly pure, and infinitely satisfying—but not your idols.
- Jesus cannot be over-indulged! Too much of your idols will ruin you. Yet, more of Jesus will not harm you but only make you sweeter, more hopeful, more joyful, more secure, more holy, more gracious and more fruitful.

So I suggest that you abandon your idols and turn all the affections of your heart toward Jesus who alone can satisfy what your truly desire.