

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church he started around the year 50 AD. He has since left the church in the hands of other leaders so that he might start other churches, and he writes this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to what he is hearing about some of the issues in the Corinthian church. So far he's addressed the pride and arrogance in the church that has led to division and rivalry, and the sexual issues that are rampant in the church and culture. The current section, from chapters 8-10, is about another issue that is threatening to divide or destroy the church – **how the church members should interact with the rampant idolatry in their city**. Corinth was in Greece, part of the Roman Empire. It was therefore a polytheistic city, with many gods and goddesses and temples to those deities, and so it was a regular part of civic life to attend banquets in temples and homes where you would eat food that was sacrificed to those idols. For a church community that believed that there was only one God, and that worshiping an idol was contrary to what it meant to be a Christian, this was a tricky subject to navigate. Some people found eating food that had been dedicated to idols to be morally wrong, while others did not, and it was causing conflict.

Now, of course, most of us don't have to deal with that specific issue in today's world, but the principles Paul lays out in these passages on how to navigate these issues where Christians disagree are very relevant today. Two weeks ago, he encouraged the Corinthians to abide by this principle: **in Christ we have freedom, but we are to use that freedom not to serve our own interests but to serve others**. Last week we talked about how Paul encourages them to **bring every desire they have under the primary passion of honoring Jesus and being a witness to the gospel**. In today's passage, he is going to finish his discussion of the question of eating food sacrificed to idols and tell them a little more plainly whether he thinks it is dangerous or harmless. He begins by giving them an example from Israel's history:

^{NIV} 1 Corinthians 10:1 – 11:1 - For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

I do not wish to get caught up in all the particulars here. Remember that Paul wants to address their behavior in participating in feasts and meals where meat is being sacrificed to idols. He is speaking particularly to those Christians who saw nothing

wrong with it, who saw it as just eating meat among friends. And to make his point, he begins by referring them to the Old Testament account of the Israelites in the wilderness, after they have been brought out of slavery in Egypt in the Exodus. In verses 1-3, he makes the point that they had every spiritual blessing in God. They were saved from slavery and experienced the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. They were protected from their enemies. They had their needs provided for them by God, and Christ, though hidden, was with them the whole way. Nevertheless... let's read on:

⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. ⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did-- and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test the Lord, as some of them did-- and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did-- and were killed by the destroying angel. ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

Nevertheless... **despite all their blessing, despite the protection and provision of God, what happened? They turned from God to idolatry.** They erected the golden calf and declared that it was their god who had rescued them. They participated in pagan revelry. They committed sexual immorality. They repeatedly tested the Lord and grumbled against Him. And in the end, only two of them – Joshua and Caleb – entered the Promised Land. Two!

Once again – Paul is speaking to a people who have convinced themselves that participating in feasts and meals in the temples of the pagan gods in Corinth is no big deal. He is addressing those who see no problem with eating meat that has been sacrificed to an idol, because, after all, an idol is nothing, just a fake god, and so the meat is simply meat and nothing more. And up until this point, Paul has talked about some general principles with them to help them think through their predicament: first of all, use your freedom not to please yourself but to serve your brothers and sisters. And secondly, let every desire be subordinate to the primary passion of honoring God and being a witness of the gospel to others. **But now, in chapter 10, Paul comes straight out and tells them what he really thinks of their behavior: it is idolatry. And it is wrong.**

¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. ¹⁴ Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.

Listen to Paul's heart in these verses: you Corinthians see yourself as spiritually strong and mature, and you are convinced that participating in this idolatry is nothing at all. **But you do not realize, my brothers, that you are in a very dangerous place, because those who think they are standing firm are more likely to fall.** Those who think "eating meat sacrificed to an idol is no big deal" do not have the vigilance necessary to perceive the attack of the enemy. Be careful, those of you who think you are standing firm, that you don't fall. Temptation is right there, ready to destroy you. But God has provided a way out if you will take it. And what is that way out? **Flee from idolatry.** Run as far and as fast as you can from that idol's temple. Do not eat that meat that has been sacrificed to an idol. Do not participate in idolatry.

Paul continues by contrasting their participation in meals in an idol's temple with their participation in the Lord's Supper, communion:

¹⁵ I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? ¹⁹ Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. ²² Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

To get his point across to the Corinthians, he contrasts what they are doing with the Lord's Supper. He tells them that when they eat the bread and drink the cup in communion, they are joining together with the Lord, and with their brothers and sisters. And he tells them even though idols are nothing, there are demonic forces behind those idols and those temples, and that by participating in the banquets, they are joining together with demonic activity. It is not as innocent as they think it is; these situations have real power to defile and destroy them.

He ends with this summary and gives them practical answers to their dilemma:

²³ "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is **beneficial**. "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. ²⁵ Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶ for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." ²⁷ If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸ But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake-- ²⁹ the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? ³⁰ If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? ³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God-- ³³ even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.

He reminds them once again: use your freedom to serve your brother and sister, so that God will be honored and many will be saved from sin and death. He tells them to eat meat without investigating it, but if they find out that something has been offered to an idol, then they should not eat it, so as to not participate in idolatry and to not cause anyone to stumble, whether weaker brothers or unbelievers who will be confronted with a different viewpoint on the reality of gods.

He ends by encouraging them to follow Him as He follows Christ in laying down His rights and freedoms for the sake of others.

As I've thought about this passage this week, I've tried to think about why the Corinthians would participate in something that from Paul's perspective was blatantly opposed to what a disciple of Jesus should be doing. I can think of two reasons, which are very relevant to us today. I think the first reason is that they were either naïve to or underestimating the deceptiveness and destructiveness of sin.

1) Don't underestimate the deceptiveness and destructiveness of sin

The Corinthians certainly knew that idolatry was wrong, but they were not concerned about eating meat sacrificed to idols, seeing it as nothing more than

meat. Paul on the other hand clearly thinks they have reason to be concerned, and sees what they are doing as participation in idolatry. **The point is clear: just because you are saved or are experiencing God's blessing or victory in your life does not mean that you have defeated sin and can become overconfident.** Paul tells them to look at the Israelites in the wilderness and see what happened to them. They failed to enter the Promised Land because of their idolatry and lack of trust in God. In the same way, we can experience salvation and victory and the blessing of God but still get derailed from God's will for our life by our idolatry and lack of trust in God.

Never underestimate the deceptiveness and destructiveness of sin. **There is a reason that those in AA say "I'm an alcoholic," even after 50 years sober.** Whether or not you say that or say "I'm a child of God that struggles with alcoholism" or just know in your heart that you can never let your guard down, the principle remains: ¹² *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*

Some of you need to hear this message today and take it to heart. You may be overconfident, underestimating the enemy and the deceptiveness of sin. Listen to Peter:

1 Peter 5:8-9 - Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

For some of you, your discipleship is about how close you can get to the edge without falling, pushing the boundaries and putting God to the test. Sexually, financially, morally, relationally, spiritually, you are doing just enough to get by and you are flirting with disaster. Discipleship is not meant to be about how close you can get to the edge but about how far and fast you can go after God. Do not put the Lord to the test or take it lightly.

¹³ *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* ¹⁴ *Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.*

God will never let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, but He will always provide you a means of escape. Flee from the enemy and run to Christ.

James 4:7 - Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Flee from idolatry. What is idolatry? Looking to anything other than God to be your ultimate source of satisfaction, joy, righteousness. The language of idolatry reveals to us that we are looking to the things and people of this world to give us what only Jesus can give us. An idol is anything you are looking to give you what only God can give you. If I have that, then I will know my life has meaning.

The world is trying to seduce you away from God. It is much more deceptive and destructive than you realize. You can not fool around with idolatry as the Corinthians did and think it's nothing to be concerned about.

I believe that the second reason they were fine with engaging in idolatry was that they were not willing to deal with the social and financial consequences that would come from not participating in these meals and banquets. Every home, city, professional guild had its own gods – do some ritual to honor the gods. To not do so was highly insulting and dangerous and treasonous. More than likely, the Corinthians are willing to engage in these practices because they don't want to deal with the financial and social fallout that would come from saying no to participation in idol feasts.

1 Peter 4:3-4 - For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do-- living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. ⁴ They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.

They did not believe that it would be worth it. They did not trust that God was good, that their obedience would be met with God's blessing and something better. But here is the second implication, which the Corinthians needed to know and so do we:

2) There is nothing you can give up that God will not replace with something better: more of His presence

At the heart of the Corinthian's behavior, I believe, is a lack of trust in the goodness of God. They are reasoning, if I give up these meals and banquets, I will suffer socially and financially, God, and I do not think you will be enough to make up what I lose. But the truth is that there is nothing you can give up for God that He will not replace with something better: more of His presence, His blessing, His

power, His protection, His joy, His peace, and His love. If you choose to give up social standing and the acceptance of the crowd out of a desire to honor and obey Him, the world may reject you but He will strengthen you, and you will find that His acceptance is enough. If you give up money by deciding to tithe and be generous and live on less, you may have less money and fewer possessions, but you will find that His presence gives you greater peace than you ever had when you were rich. You may give up unhealthy relationships, and as a result you may have less immediate companionship, but you will find that His presence gives you more love and joy than any earthly relationship ever could. You may give up earthly pleasures and entertainment, and so maybe you will be a little more out of touch with what is going on in the world, but you will find that nothing compares to the joy and satisfaction of the presence of God.

Jesus put it this way:

***Matthew 16:24-26** - Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?*

Eternal life is knowing God. And that kind of life is found in giving up the things of this world and trusting that God will give you everything your heart has desired in the form of His presence. There is nothing this world can offer that can ever come close, and there is nothing you can give up for God that He will not replace with something so much better in His presence.

As C. S. Lewis put it, *"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who goes on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are too easily pleased."*

My experience these past 40 days of prayer and fasting – there is nothing I have given up that I have not received back 100x in the form of his presence. Everything I was looking to the things of this world to provide for me was actually found in God. I have lost nothing by what I have given up, and gained so much more.

We are in the season of Lent. Giving up chocolate is not Biblical fasting. That is dieting. Giving up chocolate and letting your cravings for chocolate push you to prayer and time with the Lord is fasting. Giving up Facebook is not fasting. It is taking a break from social media. Looking to the Lord for your satisfaction, for

your joy, for your approval and affirmation – that is Biblical fasting. **Biblical fasting is identifying what it is that you are looking to for your salvation, for your joy, for your meaning, for your peace, and declaring to God that as much as I love this, I love you more, and as much as I want this, I want you more. It is not just giving something up but letting God meet your deeper need that that material thing can never meet.**

There is nothing you can give up that the Lord will not give to you 100x over in His presence.

***Jonah 2:8-9** - "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."*

Some of you need to lay down specific things of this world. Let me close with a quote from the missionary Jim Elliot:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."