

1 Corinthians 10:1-14, 23-11:1
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Flee From Idols

We're continuing our journey through 1st Corinthians and this week we're exploring Chapter 10 in our *lectio continua* through Paul's letter to the church in Corinth.

For those of you who are visiting or have been enjoying some time off this summer, I want to provide a bit of context. Corinth is a prosperous commercial center, a significant Greco-Roman city with many pagan worship sites. And the church of Corinth is comprised of Gentile-Christians, and many are well-educated people of status and wealth. This church community is now challenged, as Christ-followers, to determine how they will live in the world while fulfilling their call to Christ crucified.

Now if you have been here the last few weeks, you be feeling a bit of *déjà vu*. Haven't we talked already about this question of eating food sacrificed to idols? And you're right, we did a couple of chapters ago. But Paul's not being repetitive, he's simply not done with his response because it's a hot-button issue of his time and complex issues can't be answered through one-liners and soundbites. Sometimes we need more time, because these issues actually involve much broader concerns within the community, concerns that hit us down deep, touching on how we see ourselves, how we determine our values, and how we perceive the world. These are the kinds of complex issues that divide communities. Just think about some of our own divisive topics today, issues involving immigration or race relations or whether healthcare is a right. Paul's addressing this kind of complex social problem when he's talking about eating food sacrificed to idols . . . which is why he's still on this topic.

So let's quickly review what Paul has told the Corinthians:

- First in Ch 8, he teaches that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. We need to have concern that our actions do not become a stumbling block to others.
- Then in Ch 9, he explains that although we certainly do have rights and knowledge through our freedom in Christ, we should be willing to set aside those rights out of concern for others.
- And now here in Ch 10, we get a warning from Paul about the dangers of idolatry, and our need to balance our freedom with servanthood in Christ, all to the glory of God.

Paul's taking us on quite a philosophical journey to answer this one question about food. But it's important to remember that this community's concerns are actually far less about food, than about those things that make them who they are — their culture, their identity — and how these factors affect how they should *now* live their lives as Christians.

So Paul begins by first telling the Corinthians about the ancient people of the Hebrew Bible. Look back at our predecessors, ancient Israel, those people who were first chosen and so very blessed by God. They came to their own freedom by passing through the waters of the Red Sea, they received the divine gift of holy food and drink to help them survive in the wilderness. They were watched over, cared for, and blessed. And yet over and over again the people sinned. God's own chosen people became idolaters, they complained to God, and they put God to the test. And for their sins, they were judged.

Paul is telling this story, asking the Corinthians, and us, to examine our hearts. Is our community, or are we as God's people, really so different from ancient Israel? Aren't we too only

human and subject to sin? Aren't we also tempted to be puffed up because of our knowledge and sophistication? Or focused so much on our own freedoms and rights that we forget about caring for others? For although we too are saved through the waters of baptism, and nourished by Christ's own body and blood — food and drink at God's table — are we REALLY any different than those who have gone before us? We may actually be fooling ourselves, thinking we're standing, only to find out that we've actually fallen and strayed away from Christ's path. Paul is telling us to be careful. Beware of becoming so confident in our strength and abilities, that we too fall into the trap of thinking that we can't be tempted. Instead, we need to be REAL about ourselves . . . to see ourselves for who and what we really are. And we should flee from the worship of idols.

Paul is not simply asking the Corinthians to navigate some circuitous path that would make it easier to live in the world, but rather Paul invites them and us, in Christ, to discern what's actually in our hearts, and then to enter a binding, covenant relationship with God: to love God first, and live into loving God by loving our neighbors, moving beyond those things that divide us.

When we today look honestly at how we live and act in the world — how we may talk the talk, but fail to walk the walk — then, with God's help, we can discover the reality of our own idols, those behaviors, priorities, and temptations that separate us from God. Let's look at just a couple of examples from our own time:

- Our culture is enamored — I'd even say driven — by wealth and power. We're fascinated by the rich and famous and our perception of their lives actually does affect our day-to-day. Some of us can get so tied up in working to acquire things, that we can be harmfully absent from our own families, hurting both those we love and ourselves. Others are severely stretched beyond their means, yet trying so hard to keep up appearances, causing them to live in a constant pressure-cooker of anxiety and worry. And it's very common within our culture to blame the poor for being poor — whether here in the US or outside our borders — even when our own history, if we read it honestly, points us towards many other factors, including prejudice, systemic oppression, greed, and corruption as contributing towards the crippling economic realities of generational poverty that many face in both our country and other parts of the world.
- We're also enamored with politics, although I imagine that many of you, like me, are more than tired of the daily noise and divisiveness around us. Yet if we're honest, if I'm honest, isn't it tremendously hard to listen to those with those other views, those who think differently than we do; or conversely, how easy it is to demonize those we disagree with? How many families and friends aren't speaking to one another any longer, because of different political points of view? Yet Jesus teaches us to see one another as beloved children of God, not just those who agree with us or look like us or are within our own tribe. What are we actually willing to let go of, to sacrifice, so we can find consensus and ways to help our neighbor, remembering that in God's eyes, all are our neighbor?

While food sacrificed to idols certainly isn't a temptation for us, we are challenged by wealth and power, and our focus on ourselves and our own — these are a few of our idols within our own culture.

Paul encourages us to recognize that idols and temptations have been and always will be with us, and these are the things that separate us from God. We, like the Corinthians, do need to be spiritually aware, to pray and to listen, to discern the Spirit's nudging in our own lives, guiding us to follow Christ's path as we live in this world. For, as Paul has told us, although "all things are lawful, not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up."

We too need to balance our freedom in Christ with servanthood, all to the glory of God. For that is Jesus' way: love God first and love our neighbor. Do treat all God's beloved children with compassionate caring and respect, while pursuing justice and peace for all God's people. For that is how we too can take one more step forward towards becoming imitators of Christ.