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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS

#25

**FLEE FROM IDOLATRY
 1 CORINTHIANS 10:12-22**

INTRODUCTION

John Calvin once said, *The human heart is a factory of idols...Everyone of us is, from his mother's womb, expert in inventing idols.* Certainly, 1 Corinthians 10 recognizes idolatry as a destructive force within both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Corinthian church. 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 reminds the Church of Israel's great blessings and substantial failures, particularly Israel's decline into idolatry. Paul intends to use Israel's example as a warning for the Corinthians because that local church had been greatly blessed, yet it was dangerously close to Israel's pattern of idolatry. What appears to fuel the Corinthian's overconfidence is their participation in the ordinances of the church; baptism and the Lord's Supper. Paul emphatically reminds them that Israel possessed types of these same ordinances and yet, most of Israel perished in the wilderness. Idolatry was not only a problem for God's people between Egypt and the Promised Land; it was a very real problem in Corinth. Pride and overconfidence were characteristic of Old Covenant Israel and this Corinthian congregation. God's blessings, which should have humbled His people, caused them to believe they were morally invincible. Yet, both groups participated in idolatry and most of Israel was *laid low in the wilderness* (v5). The Corinthians were quickly headed down the same path and Paul must correct their overconfidence, but he must also teach them that the ordinances should keep them from the idolatrous feasts, not encourage their attendance.

1. WARNINGS FOR THE OVERCONFIDENT AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE DISCOURAGED (10:12-13)

Having illustrated the effects of Israel's overconfidence, Paul warns the Corinthians, *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.* Taking God's blessings for granted and overestimating the effects of the ordinances, the Corinthians were quickly headed toward the same destructive idolatry that Israel experienced. Paul implores the church to examine Israel and take careful notes. Likewise, we should remember those of our own time who have experienced tremendous spiritual blessings only to abandon the faith in a determined pursuit of sin.

Verse 13 offers encouragement to those who feel the strong pull of temptation and see no way of escape. First of all, they were not alone in their temptations. That pull toward sin, whatever particular direction we are being pulled, is *common to man*. Secondly, *God is faithful*. His faithfulness is demonstrated in two ways: (1) *He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able* and (2) *with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

The faithfulness of God is our peace in the midst of temptations. He ordains our temptations to show the true loyalties of our hearts and He provides a way of escape with each onslaught of enticement toward sin. The answer to every temptation is the same; look to Jesus and be satisfied in Him.

2. BELIEVERS MUST FLEE THE CONSTANT TEMPTATION OF IDOLATRY (10:14-15)

As long as we are in this world, idolatry will entice us. That was a reality in Corinth and it threatened to overwhelm the church. Their culture was saturated with idol worship, but the problem is never an external or cultural one only. The problem is the human heart, even the regenerate heart.

Idolatry is more subtle than we may first think. To want anything more than Jesus is to participate in idolatry. This is why Calvin also said, *The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.* Consider the following example offered by David Powlison,

A woman commits adultery, and repents. She and her husband rebuild the marriage, painstakingly, patiently. Eight months later the man finds himself plagued with subtle suspiciousness. The wife senses it, and feels a bit like she lives under FBI surveillance. The husband is grieved by his suspiciousness, because he has no objective reasons for suspicion. 'I've forgiven her; we've rebuilt our marriage; we've never communicated better; why do I hold onto this mistrust?' What finally emerges is that he is willing to forgive the past, but he is attempting to control the future. His craving could be stated this way: 'I want to guarantee that betrayal never, ever happens again.' The very intensity of his craving starts to poison the relationship; it places him in the stance of continually evaluating and judging his wife, rather than loving her. What he wants cannot be guaranteed this side of heaven. He sees the point, sees his inordinate desire to ensure the future. But he bursts out, 'What's wrong with wanting my wife to love me? What's wrong with wanting her to remain faithful to our marriage?' Here is where this truth is so sweet. There is nothing wrong with the object of desire; there is everything wrong when it rules his life. The process of restoring that marriage took a long step forward as he grasped a lesson his Shepherd had for him.

Idolatry can manifest itself when we desire something that is outright forbidden. Such is the case for the Corinthians who longed to return to the pagan feasts. Just as often, idolatry arises from wanting a good thing way too much. One more example from David Powlison,

I remember the time I counseled a man who habitually escaped life's pressures into TV, food, video games, alcohol, pornography, antique collecting, sci-fi novels. Where to begin? Could I find a passage to focus his problems? I wasn't sure what to pick up on. Then it struck me: Try the Psalms--as a whole! Almost every single Psalm, in some way or other, portrays the Lord as our refuge in trouble. The Psalms implicitly and explicitly rebuke taking refuge in anything less; the Psalms offer steadfast love and mercy; the Psalms spur us to know and obey God in the trenches of life. This man felt vaguely guilty for some of his bad behavior. But he didn't see the pattern or the seriousness. His efforts at change were half-baked and unsuccessful. Conviction of the specific sin of his heart--turning from the living God in order to seek idolatrous refuge--woke him up, and made him see his behavioral sins in a fresh way. He even began to identify little escapist tricks he hadn't even realized he did--ways he (mis)used humor or made subtle excuses for himself. Christ's grace became very real and necessary. He became motivated to practical change--to face pressures and responsibilities to God's glory.

3. REGULAR PARTICIPATION IN THE LORD'S SUPPER PROHIBITS US FROM REGULAR PARTICIPATION IN IDOLATRY (10:16-22)

Paul's primary reason for prohibiting the Corinthians from attending pagan feasts is their participation in the Lord's Supper (v16). Because of the blood of Jesus, we as the Church, share the benefits of Christ's shed blood and broken body (v17). In other words, we have been united with Christ and this union is made possible by Jesus shedding His blood and giving His body to be broken. We signify our "sharing" in Jesus' death by coming to eat at this ordained feast, the

Lord's Table. Verse 18 reminds us that Israel did the same type of thing when they participated in their feasts signifying God's work for them. At such feasts, sacrifices were offered and the people of God shared in the benefits of those sacrifices; their sins were overlooked for a time. When we come to the Lord's Table, no new sacrifice for sins is made, nor is one necessary. Instead, Jesus acts as our Host and He gladly applies His sacrificial work on the cross to every faithful participant. If we come to eat and drink in faith, Jesus meets us here. In short, to eat and drink here at the Lord's Table is to experience the spiritual presence of Jesus. More is happening than what our senses can perceive.

This is exactly Paul's point in verses 19-20; more is happening at those pagan feasts than what the Corinthians can perceive. On this point the Corinthians are perceptive; the idol is a false, nonexistent god (v19a). Furthermore, the food offered to those false gods, it is nothing to be concerned about. Eating it or abstaining from it holds no spiritual significance (v19b). But demons lie behind those feasts. There is more going on than one's senses can grasp. To eat and drink at that pagan table is to participate with demons in such a way as to come under its influence and incur the wrath of God (v20). This was true for Old Testament Israel and we should take notice of their example.

When one considers the demonic activity inherent to pagan feasts, one realizes the impossibility of sitting and eating at both the table of demons and the Table of the Lord (v21). To attempt to do such a thing is to provoke our jealous God (v22).

CONCLUSION

This text forbids Christians from participating in anything that is inherently inconsistent with obedience to Jesus. We are to forsake everything that is inconsistent with the lordship of Jesus over our lives. Unbelievers must forsake their unbelief and Christians must leave their habits, hobbies, thoughts, etc, which do not reflect their Spirit-given and Word-guided self-control. In other words, our allegiance is uniquely given to our Lord Jesus. Each time we come to the Lord's Table, we are sharing in the body and blood of Jesus in a way that makes this plain. May God give us grace to be consistent with our attendance at the Lord's Table.