

1 Corinthians 10:1-33 ^{NIV} 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. 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. 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. 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? 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.

“Struck down in the Desert”

This passage from First Corinthians is a landmine of trouble. Paul digs up some of the most difficult moments in God's relationship with his people during their wilderness wandering from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. These were incidences of idolatry that resulted in God striking down his people. Let's test our own memories.

First, there was the golden calf incident at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses had gone up on the mountain to get the Law and after being gone forty days the Israelites figured God had struck him down. So they went to Aaron and had him fashion them a golden calf about which they declared, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt." Then they feasted and had an orgy.

Next, was the affair at Peor which involved sexual immorality. The Israelites were encamped at the wilderness of Shittim and the men started chasing the daughters of Moab, the Midianite women. The Midianite women led them to worship Baal of Peor which again involved an orgy. Moses gathered the men who had not gone after the Midianite women and they slaughtered 23,000 Israelites that day as well as nearly all of the Midianite women.

Next, Moses reminds us of the Israelites putting the Lord to the test and the plague of serpents God sent upon them in response. After defeating a couple of Canaanite cities, the Israelites complained and wanted to return to Egypt where the food was better. So, God plagued them with poisonous snakes. Incidentally, a poisonous snake is the image of the patron goddess of Upper Egypt known as Wadjet. To make his point further, the Lord commanded Moses to mount a bronze serpent on a pole so that they could look at it and be healed. This image of the impaled serpent would have told the Israelites that the LORD had defeated and cursed that god. So, their complaining was futile.

Finally, Paul reminds us of when the Israelites at the edge of the Promised Land believed the false report of some of the spies sent to check things out who said there were giants there and they could not possibly go in and settle. The Israelites actually believed the LORD had brought them out to die rather than to fulfill his promise to Abraham.. They complained saying as much. The LORD said that none of that generation would enter the Land except for Joshua and Caleb who gave positive reports and sent his people back to wander another forty years. The men who spread the false report and the spies who started it were struck down dead with plague right on the spot.

With respect to all of this, Paul says God struck them down in the wilderness as an example for us, but...we in our Modern/Post-Modern sensibilities and ignorance of God and his ways step back and ask, "What kind of God would do this to his own

people?” Some have asked that question and walk away from the Christian faith all together. This passage makes us wonder if the cost of idolatry is so high that God would strike *us* down in the wildernesses of our lives for misplacing our faith from time to time, for testing him, and for the many times we complain against him?

So, what is idolatry? Well, one day awhile back I went with Doug and his Probus club to tour that very remarkable Hindu Temple over on the 427 just south of HWY 7. Right off the bat our guide professed, “We are idol worshippers.” It was clear that he wanted us to get that. He explained that the heart of their worship to their gods was feeding them. Then he took us to the temple sanctuary and showed us the idols of the various Hindu deities that they worshipped there. Enshrined there were three or four god-families consisting of a father god, a mother god, and a child god who had human bodies and animal heads as well life-sized figures of men or guru’s whom they believed to be the incarnation of these gods throughout history. While we were there a door would close in front of one of the shrines and our guide explained that a priest was offering a meal to the gods therein. At noon, worshippers gathered and there was some drumming and singing and a priest came with a censer and blew smoke on people to inhale as some sort of blessing. In the Hindu faith there are millions of gods whom people pray to for specific things. As long as they feed the gods, they stay happy. The important thing is the people pray, go to temple, carry out the rituals, and live according to the teachings of the current guru so that after much reincarnation their eternal spirit may be set free into eternity.

That temple visit was like stepping back in time to Paul’s day which was a very religious meaning very idolatrous culture. In Corinth there would have been shrines to every god imaginable along the main roads as well as temples in the city to the most popular ones. So, Paul told the Corinthians not to be idolaters and to rather to flee from idolatry. The problem they faced was how to live there when everything from politics to social gatherings to grocery shopping involved idol worship. You couldn’t buy meat that wasn’t sacrificed to idols. You couldn’t go to a dinner with non-Christian family or friends without there being some form of idol worship involved. You couldn’t participate in civic events without having to pay homage to a god. Escaping idolatry was all but impossible.

There were some in Corinth who dealt with this problem by diving head first into idolatry. They figured that since they had the Spirit and were participants in Christ it didn’t matter if they went to the feasts, the drunken orgies. It didn’t matter if they raised a cup in homage to another god while they were at a friend’s house for dinner. They said “Everything is permissible.” And they therefore indulged in everything. Unfortunately, there was nothing to their lifestyle that proclaimed Christ other than their simply saying they’d had a really good spiritual experience at these Christian gatherings. Moreover, their behaviour was causing division in the Christian fellowships for obvious reasons.

Paul admonishes them by basically saying, “You do have a point there. There really is nothing wrong with that idol stuff if you who have truly experienced the Truth in Christ believe there’s nothing to that idol stuff. But, ponder this. The Israelites who wandered in the desert having all together experienced the work of the LORD – the night of the Passover when the first born of Egypt died, as well as when they crossed through the Red Sea on dry ground and Pharaoh’s army died. Then later on they ate the manna from heaven and drank water from the rock. In all this they all experienced Christ yet, some of them, great numbers of them, were struck down in the desert by the LORD because of their idolatry.” Further paraphrasing Paul, “‘Everything is permissible’ but know this, not all things are beneficial in that they do not build up the body of Christ. Your philandering into idol worship might be a good way for you to at best witness to Jesus; but most likely, it’s only your way of keeping from having to suffer for Christ. In the end, your idolatry is only causing division among your friends in Christ who do see a problem in worshipping other gods. After all, the power behind these gods is demonic. So, even though your own conscience may not convict you on this, the Jesus way is to consider and do what is best for building up his body, building up fellowship that is in his image Jesus. So, don’t seek your own good. Seek what is good for others.” Thus, Paul’s admonition and advice to the Corinthians was relational in nature. He directed them away from thinking about the consequences of idolatry for themselves to considering the effect it was having on others and particularly on their Christian fellowship.

Today, we face a similar struggle. Our culture is not full of blatant idolatry as it was in Paul’s day, though we do have quite a few Hindu temples around. The idolatry in our culture is more subtle. Ever since the 60’s preachers have commonly preached against our idolatry of the three gods of money, sex, and power stating that our philandering with those things will put our own salvation in jeopardy just as ancient Israel’s dabbling into idolatry put their participation in the fulfilment of God’s promises to them in jeopardy. Paul pushes us beyond simply considering the eternal state of our own bum-bum’s to considering what affect our lust for power, our carnal lust, and our love of money has on those we love and particularly on Christian fellowship. Paul would have us to consider how seeking to rise to the top rung of the ladder hurts people and particularly those closest to us. Paul would have us, particularly us men, to consider how pornographic our world is and how our accommodation of that exploits relationships between men and women. Paul would have us to consider how destructive materialism and consumerism is not only in spoiling ourselves and our children but more so in the exploitation of the poor. In Paul’s day, money, sex, and power were not the only gods. There were also gods of sports. Who can watch the Olympics and not think of Mt. Olympus where the Greco/Roman gods lived? Well, apparently most everybody. Did you know that there has been a considerable body of scholarly writing and not Christian scholarly writing that identifies hockey as the national religion of Canada? There were also household gods, gods of the family. Need I expound upon the power that family bonds have over us and how worship of the family ultimately destroys the family?

Isaiah gave us good advice: “Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.” I am 44 now. I have been an active follower of Jesus for 25 years now. When I was but a child my mother more than anyone else was the impetus of

building me up in the Lord. Through my teen years Jesus used other people to keep me close. At 19 I met the Lord. After 13 years in the ministry and 8 years preparing for it, I know that Jesus lives in Christian fellowship and in our relationships with others. Seeking him involves devoting ourselves to building up Christian fellowship and to being Christ-like in our relationships with others. Daily we face the temptation of succumbing to the idolatries that undergird our culture. So, we must not focus on what is to our own advantage and rather focus on what is best for the body of Christ and all our relationships for the sake of Christ. For you see, it is better to be a martyr in the desert than to be struck down in the desert. This I know. Amen.