



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 10:14-22

Topic

Paul tells the Corinthians in no uncertain terms that by eating meat sacrificed to idols while attending the pagan ceremonies they were having fellowship with demons

Title

“Devil’s Food Steak”

Introduction

After June 20th, 1975, it was no longer safe to go in the water.

The release of the movie *Jaws* forever changed my perception of swimming in the ocean. *Or anywhere else for that matter!*

One afternoon at San Clemente, about fifty yards out, I saw fins. I panicked and began to run and swim screaming like a little girl back to the safety of the beach.

Of course you know the end of this story. They were dolphins breaking the water and swimming parallel to the shoreline - not a ravenous, rogue great white looking to devour me.

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There was and is a real danger in the ocean of shark attack. It is admittedly rare but real. When I perceived the danger, I fled as if my very life depended upon it.

That is how we ought to read verse fourteen of First Corinthians ten.

1 Corinthians 10:14 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

We can think of idolatry as rare in America but it is all too real. We can't be casual about even the perception of it. We must "flee from idolatry" as if our very spiritual lives depended upon it.

Flee first and ask questions later. As this section continues, verses fifteen through twenty-two tell you to figure-out idolatry from a safe vantage point.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Flee From Idolatry Into The Satisfaction Of Your Fellowship With God, and #2 Figure-out Idolatry From The Sanctity Of Your Fellowship With God.

#1 Flee From Idolatry
Into The Satisfaction Of Your Fellowship With God
(v14)

It's obviously important to define what is meant by "idolatry." It can be tough to define because, as we are often told, *anything* can be or become an idol by taking the place God should rightfully occupy in my heart and life.

One author puts it like this:

What, then, is idolatry? Idolatry is valuing any thing or any person more than the one true God. An idol is any thing or any person that takes center stage in our affections... it [can] be a spouse, a child, a humanitarian project, or pornography, or drugs, or power over the poor, or religion... Archeology limits idols to stone statues; [the Bible] teaches that idols are any things that take the place of God in our lives. When understood this way, we can realize that idolatry is not ancient history but is alive and flourishing in America...¹

¹ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1985/495_Little_Children_Keep_Yourselves_from_Idols/

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Let's leave it at that for now. You see, the real impact of Paul's counsel can be lost. He told them first to "flee from idolatry," and to figure-out what it was later.

In other words, he told them to get out of the water and back to the safety of the shore. The fins might not be those of sharks but when it comes to your spiritual life you shouldn't take any chances.

I should remind you about the context of these verses. We are nearing the end of a discussion on Christian liberty that began in chapter eight and concludes with the first verse of chapter eleven. Paul was giving the Corinthians, and us, God's perspective on how Christians ought to proceed in the area of participating in questionable practices that are not specifically listed in the Bible as sinful.

In first century Corinth the issue was meat that had been first sacrificed to idols at the pagan temples. Some of the believers had no problem buying it and eating it. The consciences of other believers, however, would not allow them the freedom to buy it and eat it.

We've seen Paul defend the rights of the so-called stronger believers to buy and eat the meat. But he tempered it by saying that love for your fellow believers should always limit your exercise of liberty.

Here in verses fourteen through twenty-two there is a new wrinkle on the practice of the believers. Apparently the so-called stronger believers were not just buying the meat in the marketplace after it had been sacrificed. No, they were attending and participating in the feasts in which the idols were receiving the sacrifices.

Paul tells them in no uncertain terms that participating in an idolatrous feast was not a questionable practice. It was not a gray area that you might have liberty in. It was sin.

OK, so that is pretty simple. But, again, before we get there, don't overlook the order of things. Paul didn't reason with them first, to show them that

their participation was, in fact, idolatry. No, he warned them first. “Flee from idolatry.”

It sounds a little paranoid, I know. If anything can be or become an idol, won't I constantly be fleeing from things that are not really sharks at all?

The only way I know to discuss this is to jump ahead and grab a word from verse twenty-two. It's the word “jealousy.” It's a word we most commonly identify with the most intimate relationships.

Let's say you get engaged to be married. How do you feel about your fiance dating other people? About them spending more time on their habits and hobbies than with you? You're not very happy about it. In fact, you are very upset by it. You are jealous - in a good way.

Does that make you paranoid? No, it makes you normal. You hold the relationship to be precious and you want to guard it from threats - both real and perceived.

There is another key word. It's in verse fourteen. It's the word “beloved.” We are the Lord's “beloved.” It is as if we are betrothed to Him, engaged to Him. We must hold our relationship to Him to be precious and want to guard it from threats - both real and perceived.

The way to “flee from idolatry” is to be so in first-love, in engagement love, with the Lord that we are sensitive to anything that can be or become an idol.

If it turns out to be the fins of passing dolphins, I can laugh about it with Jesus from the satisfaction of the shore. I won't take the chance it's a shark seeking to devour me while I wave to Him and swim towards danger.

Cultivate your love for the Lord, guard it and protect it, be just as zealous for Him as He is jealous for you, and you will be sensitive to “flee from idolatry.”

Then, together with Jesus, you can analyze it.

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#2 Figure-out Idolatry
From The Sanctity Of Your Fellowship With God
(v15-22)

From the mindset of being willing to immediately “flee from idolatry,” we can figure-out things in the world to see if, in fact, they are idols - either to us or to everyone.

In the case of the Corinthians, feasting at a pagan temple was idolatry for everyone. Period. End of discussion.

1 Corinthians 10:15 I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say.

Some commentators feel that Paul was being sarcastic when he said “I speak as to wise men.” Maybe; but it is so hard to identify sarcasm in a letter.

I rather think he was appealing to them to use their sanctified common sense and see the biblical logic of his coming argument.

In our own twenty-first century experiences we can use some of Paul’s biblical logic to identify people or things that can be or become idols.

The so-called strong believers in Corinth were attending and thereby participating in the feasts to the idols. So Paul made a comparison to the Christian feast of the Lord’s Table and to the Jewish feasts under the Law of Moses.

1 Corinthians 10:16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

1 Corinthians 10:17 For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

The point Paul was making was very simple: When a Christian participates in the Lord’s Supper, he or she is sharing in fellowship with the Lord. It is more than just eating the bread and drinking the juice.

Even though this is being used as an illustration, we can pause for a moment and learn a few things about our celebration of Communion.

- Paul's entire discussion supposes that they participated often and regularly in Communion.
- The normal order of Communion is reversed. Paul talks first about "the blood of Christ." It reminds us that we enter into the blessings of fellowship with God because of the precious sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross. It is because of Jesus becoming a Man and, as the God-Man, dying on the Cross that men can be saved. His death as a sacrifice was your substitute so you can live forever.
- By "the blood of Christ" we do not mean that there was anything mystical or special about the blood that flowed through Jesus' veins. By "blood" we mean His death and everything that surrounded it.
- The "bread" refers to Jesus' material, human body but it also indicates that there is now a mystical "body of Christ" still on the earth. The church, comprised of born-again men, women, and children, is His body on the earth. We are one in Him and, thus, affect one another for good or for ill.
- Finally, Paul's discussion implies what he will say more clearly later on about Communion: That it proclaims the Lord's death till He comes. It is a public statement that we believe Jesus came, He died, He rose, and that He is coming again.

Participating in the meal of Communion involves us in fellowship with God. It is more than a mere outward ceremony.

The same was true of the sacrifices under the Law of Moses.

1 Corinthians 10:18 Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?

"Israel after the flesh" is referring to Jews under the Law of Moses. When a Jew brought his sacrifice, part of the meat would be offered to the Lord and consumed. Part of it would be given to the priests for them to consume. And part would be consumed by the offerer.

These offerings, then, brought you into fellowship with God and others. They were not merely outward ceremonies.

Paul applied this principle of participation to the pagan feasts that the Corinthians were attending.

1 Corinthians 10:19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything?

1 Corinthians 10:20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.

Earlier Paul had indicated that an “idol” was, by itself, “nothing” compared to God. He had told them that the meat that had been offered to idols was not contaminated by demons and could be eaten.

However, sitting down in the temple of the idol and participating in the ceremonies was something far different. The idol might be a thing of wood or stone but behind all idolatry is the devil, who desires to be worshipped, and his demons.

Food sacrificed in the pagan temples is, in fact, being sacrificed to demons. And because of the principle of participation, if you are there, you are fellowshiping with demons whether willingly or unwillingly. It might seem innocent to you but it can open a door for demonic influence.

1 Corinthians 10:21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons.

The two celebrations are mutually exclusive. In other words, you do not have Christian liberty to participate in idol worship - no matter that you think it is not stumbling to you or to others.

1 Corinthians 10:22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?

Participating in the ceremonies at the pagan temple would be like going out on a date with someone who is not your fiancée. The so-called stronger believers may have seen it more like a business lunch. God saw it as an intimate date.

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Have you heard of open-relationships where the partners are free to have physical, emotional, and spiritual relationships with others as well? God isn't in to 'open-relationships' when it comes to idols and idolatry. And if He isn't, we cannot be, either.

Paul's statement, "are we stronger than He?", was a rebuke to those whose argument was that they were so strong in the Lord that participation in the pagan ceremonies was no big deal. Instead of seeing how near you can come to idolatry see how far you can keep away from it.

OK, so if anything can be or become an idol, what should I be on guard against?

A biblical list of things that men have substituted for God would include images, angels, demons, and the dead. It would include ideas, philosophies, habits, and occupations.

Let me focus on just three more common, but subtle, things we must be on guard against.

1. The first is to worship God in a wrong, non-biblical manner. Earlier in this chapter Paul used the illustration of the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf. Many commentators point out that they didn't set out to worship an idol. They wanted to worship Jehovah, but they borrowed what they knew in the world and made a representation of Him to worship. We, therefore, need to be constantly on guard against bringing the world and its practices into the church.
2. A second thing we must be on guard against is covetousness. We are told in Colossians 3:5 that "covetousness... is idolatry." We covet when we want more, when we want something or someone that God has not given to us. Covetousness is dissatisfaction with God and with His sufficiency in our lives. It's not unlike a husband or a wife who tells their spouse that they are unhappy with their surroundings - that they require something different or more in order to be satisfied. We should realize that our lives are being designed by God as His question to us, "Am I sufficient for you?" Things are withheld by Him in order for us to

understand His value. And sometimes things are given to us to test our faithfulness. Will prosperity lead us away from Him?

3. A third thing we must be on guard against is the desires and lusts of our flesh. James 1:14 says we can be “drawn away by [our] own desires and enticed.” In Galatians 5:13 we are exhorted, “do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh.” Too often we are claiming our liberty in order to indulge our lusts. It’s easy to deceive ourselves.

Flee idolatry first, then figure-out idolatry later.

Here is a parting thought. It’s been said that you become what you worship. I think that’s true. Since it is true, it gives us an excellent way of examining ourselves with regards to idolatry in our lives.

Simply put, *Who or what am I like?* Another way of putting it - *Who or what am I becoming like?*

If I am like or becoming more like the world, more interested in material things, less interested in serving the Lord by a real sacrifice of my time, talent, and treasure, then it is a pretty good indicator I am worshipping idols. Like the Corinthians I may not think I am doing anything wrong. I may think myself strong. But my likeness to the world gives me away.

If, on the other hand, there is growing spiritual fruit in my life and ongoing spiritual service that actually costs me something, then it’s obvious I am guarding my first-love for Jesus.

Jesus was all about serving and sacrificing. So will I be if He is my one great pursuit and love.