

Flee idolatry, but what constitutes idolatry?

1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1

Before we leave Revelation for this year (we will return next year to finish the book), we tie up a couple of loose ends. So far we have worked our way through each of the oracles to the seven churches, focusing on the main message of each passage. Now we take a couple weeks to pay special attention to the two clearest warnings among the oracles: the prohibitions against (a) sexual immorality and (b) food offered to idols (2:14, 20).

Jesus (through John) condemns these two practices without elaboration, detailing instead the judgment that will follow, or some other related matter. Since the passages focus elsewhere, so have the sermons. But it would be a mistake to move on to the next sermon series without taking the opportunity to consider these sins, why God finds them so objectionable, and how we can avoid both the sin and its judgment.

We looked at the prohibition against sexual immorality last week, so now we turn to the prohibition against idol food. While the admonitions originate from Revelation 2, since that text does not elaborate, we look elsewhere: this week, in 1 Corinthians 10. This chapter is part of a larger unit, 1 Corinthians 8-10, and many people get Paul's point wrong, because they misunderstand chapters 8-9. But due to time and space constraints, we necessarily focus on chapter 10.

Day 1: 1 Corinthians 10:1-5 Baptism, communion, and judgment

Where can Christians go for guidance in living the Christian life? Paul took his generation to the Old Testament, not only because it was the only Bible available in his time, but also because Israel is ancestor ('forefather') to the Christian church. Our God is the same as theirs, but more: their experience of salvation was similar to ours. So if we want to know what God expects of us, we can look back on what he expected of them.

We tend to mark our salvation from the time we pray to receive Christ. While that is not wrong, New Testament Christians marked salvation from the time of baptism, and they continued in salvation through communion. So Paul constructs a parallel between Israel's salvation experience and ours. The wilderness generation was 'baptized' (albeit, into Moses not into Jesus, and in the Red Sea not in the Jordan River). They also took 'communion' (albeit, in the form of manna rather than our wafers, and water from the rock rather than wine). Whatever the differences in detail, the wilderness Jews had a salvation experience comparable to Christians.

"Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them." That puts it

mildly; “their bodies were scattered over the desert.” Most of them – in fact, all but two – died in the wilderness under the judgment of God. This is the point of these verses. The Corinthians assumed that they were safe with God, no matter how they lived, because they had come to faith, were baptized and took communion regularly. Paul turns to their Jewish ancestors: God ‘saved’ the wilderness generation, and then he killed them for committing idolatry. How do you suppose you will escape God’s judgment, Paul implies, if you commit idolatry?

Day 2: 1 Corinthians 10:6-10 What is idolatry?

Given that idolatry is potentially fatal, what constitutes idolatry? Some would jump to the conclusion that idolatry is to worship other gods and idols, and only that. But Paul argues for broader boundaries. His selection of Old Testament Scripture is particularly instructive. The Corinthians were defending their practice of accepting invitations to feasts held by family and friends, though some of the food would be offered to idols (even in the course of the meal). “We are not worshipping the god or making the offerings,” they apparently argued; “we are just joining the meal.”

So Paul takes his readers back to Israel in the wilderness, to Exodus 32:6. Or, actually, to a select portion of the text. Exodus reads, “So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” Paul quotes only the latter half, omitting the reference to the Israelites making sacrifices and offerings. Why the omission? Paul’s point is that joining the feast that serves idol food is also idolatrous, even without making the actual sacrifices and offerings.

We will consider further applications of this point later, once Paul finishes his argument. For the moment, it is enough to reflect on two underlying aspects of the argument: (1) Paul’s precise knowledge of Scripture, and (2) his expectation that his audience will also be familiar enough with the Bible that they can follow his argument. How many *of us* know the Old Testament this well?

Day 3: 1 Corinthians 10:11-13 The same could – but need not – happen to us. Paul has already drawn application between the wilderness Israelites and his readers six times, once implicitly, referencing ‘our forefathers’, and five times explicitly: “Now these things occurred as examples to keep *us* from setting our hearts on evil things as they did... *Do not* be ... *We* should not ... *We* should not ... And *do not* ...”

Here he develops the application further: “These things happened to

them as examples and were written down as warnings for *us*.” Even though Christ has come – even though the fulfillment of the ages has come upon Christians – we stand in similar position to the wilderness generation: if we commit similar sin, we will face similar judgment. But this fate need not befall us. No temptation we face is extraordinary or insurmountable. God is faithful, and restricts the temptation to manageable levels. Moreover, when the temptation comes, he provides a way of escape.

Day 4: 1 Corinthians 10:14 Flee idolatry

Paul lays the foundation of his argument in 1 Corinthians 8-9, and then develops the argument proper in 10:1-13. Now he shifts to application. “Flee from idolatry.” The command is forceful: *flee*, run for dear life. But stated thus, the command is too vague. What constitutes idolatry?

To provide concrete guidance, Paul considers three scenarios in turn. What is notable is that *none* actually entails *worshipping* idols. All concern the much milder case of eating food that someone else offered to idols. So this is the first point to note: Paul never imagined that his audience would participate in the worship of idols or other gods, or even be bystanders while others worshipped their gods or idols. Clearly, sacrificing to other gods, worshipping them, or joining with others who were sacrificing or worshipping, was not a consideration for him or for his readers. They understood that well enough from Old Testament, internalized through the judgment of exile.

This is an important admonition for those who have non-Christian relatives in Asia, who might want them to venerate ancestors or to participate in the funerals of loved ones. It is an equally important admonition for Christians in this country, invited to participate in inter-faith religious services, or in various religious rituals (such as coming of age ceremonies, or weddings) with friends of other faiths. Declining to participate can offend friends and family, but participation offends God.

Day 5: 1 Corinthians 10:15-22 Application #1: Feasts serving idol food

How far does the prohibition of idolatry extend? Granted that Christians cannot participate in the actual worship of gods and idols, or in religious rituals honoring them, what of attendance at social occasions with religious elements?

At first-century festive occasions and celebrations, the host would acknowledge his gods with food offerings before the guests ate, and with wine offerings before the guests drank. What should a Christian do? Does God require his followers to abstain from all food and drink that have been

offered to idols or gods, and from all meals where food and drink are offered, even if the occasion is predominately social in purpose? Given that every major family, social and cultural celebration included sacrifice to the gods followed by a feast, strict abstention from idol food would alienate family and friends, and bring ostracism on believers.

Despite the painful social effects, Paul insists that if the meal occurs in the context of worship, for Christians to participate is idolatry. 'Why?,' he anticipates his readers objecting. He explains: just as Christian communion connects us to Christ and to each other, and just as Jewish sacrificial meals connect worshippers to God and to one another, so joining social meals in a religious context connects even Christian diners with those who made the offerings, and with the gods whom others venerate. These are not just social meals: eaten in the context of worship, the meals have dual religious effect, uniting the diners with one another and with the god.

This extends the prohibitions noted yesterday. It is not enough to abstain from active participation in ancestral rites, Buddhist funerals, inter-faith religious services, or religious life-stage rituals. Participation in the social dimensions of the events is equally problematic. Even if we do not actively engage in worship, but attend only for social reasons, we are implicated in the worship that others offer to their gods.

Day 6: 1 Corinthians 10:23-31 Application #2: Meals of unknown origin

So, it is not just actively worshipping the gods and idols which is wrong; socializing in religious contexts is also idolatrous. That being so, a second question reasonably follows: How far must a Christian go in discerning any religious overtones? Not far, Paul reassures them.

Much of the meat found in the market or on tables in private homes would have originated from sacrificial offerings. In the effort to avoid participation in idol feasts, must Christians research the origin of the food they purchase in the meat market or eat at a friend's home? No, says Paul. The issue is not the origin of the food, but the context of the meal. Provided the meal is set in a purely social context, then Christians can eat without compunction. If the origin is not evident, it is irrelevant.

So, for example, today Paul would make a sharp distinction between wedding ceremonies and wedding feasts. Christians must not participate in, or attend, wedding ceremonies (or funerals) that invoke other gods, or that occur in other houses of worship. But we can freely participate in wedding meals which are set in neutral venues and which invoke no god. Of course, such provision is not sufficient to avoid some measure of social isolation. Yet we seek to respect not only family and friends. but also God.