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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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## **Flee from Idolatry!**

### **1 Corinthians 10:14-22**

In 2011, I was on a mission-trip to Nepal... we were in the capital city of Kathmandu. As we were sitting in an open-air restaurant waiting to be served, I heard the repetitive tap-tap-tap of a hammer on metal. I thought we were near an auto-body shop, because I could also see the bluish glow of an acetylene torch melting and welding metal. As I mentioned these sights and sounds to the missionary we were working with, she said "That's not an auto-repair place... those are idol-makers!" I couldn't believe it, but it was true. Nepal is a Buddhist country, and there are statues of Buddha everywhere as the focus of worship. It was a bit odd, though, sitting and eating lunch so near an idol factory.

As I look back on that experience, I think about a famous statement made by the great reformer John Calvin:

**"The human heart is a perpetual idol factory."**

We don't eat our meals near idol factories... our very hearts are continually fashioning the idols that are tormenting our souls.

As we come this morning to 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, we are coming to as clear a command as you will find in the New Testament: "FLEE IDOLATRY!" But I fear that many of us Americans think that we have outgrown such a primitive or pagan plague as IDOLATRY... the tap-tap-tap of metalworkers' hammers fashioning a metal statue for worshipers to bow down before in worship seems as alien to us as Kathmandu itself... we think we are exempt from this issue, from this command. But we're not!

God's first two commandments of the Ten Commandments are very plain:

***Exodus 20:2-5 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God***

God knew very well that he made human beings to worship. We are designed to worship down to the very core of our beings. If we do not worship the true God in the true way, we will most certainly worship a God-substitute, and that is an idol.

Our idols are not generally made of wood, iron, bronze, marble, gold or silver... shaped into some symbolic statue before which we bow every night before we go to bed, and every morning after we rise. No... it's whatever dominates your mind and engrosses the very core of our being... what we live for and cannot live without. In this sermon, we are going to come face to face with the essential reason why we all sin – idolatry... anything that is presently taking the place of God in your heart and in your life.

I. The Urgent Command: Flee from Idolatry! (vs. 14)

***1 Corinthians 10:14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.***

A. The Context

1. Three full chapters on the topic of meat sacrificed to idols... it began in chapter 8
2. It continues to the end of this chapter
3. In chapter 8: addressed the more knowledgeable Christians, who were prideful in their knowledge that an idol is nothing and meat is only meat... but they were forgetting that there were weaker brothers and sisters watching them exercise their freedom boldly, and their own consciences were weak and were severely damaged by watching this bold example... so Paul laid down the basic principle: LOVE LIMITS LIBERTY
4. In chapter 9: Paul gave his own example of limiting his own rights and liberties
  - a. First, in the issue of money he could have rightly received for doing ministry... he restricted his own rights so that he could plant churches and preach the gospel free of charge
  - b. Second, in all other lifestyle choices, especially eating and drinking and other cultural choices, he limited his freedoms based on the people he was trying to reach with the gospel

***1 Corinthians 9:20-22 I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.***

5. BUT THEN... Paul seems to turn the corner and talk about the danger of the desires of the flesh in general
  - a. Paul's body was the vehicle of his service to Christ, it is true

- b. But his body was also a battlefield of lusts and drives and desires that are extremely dangerous
- c. So Paul presents his own strict disciplines over his own body as an object lesson for all Christians to follow

***1 Corinthians 9:27 I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize***

- d. Paul has to curb the drives of his body at every moment, because woven into every fiber of his flesh is a sinful tendency to jump boundaries God has set up
- e. The sinful nature within him is at war with the Holy Spirit and would drive him to sin and to destruction if he does not exercise constant vigilance and consistent strict discipline over its desires and appetites... Romans 7 "sin living in me!"
- f. Because of this overwhelming danger, every Christian must watch over his or her body at every moment, because we carry around in our flesh the seeds of our own spiritual destruction

So... Paul specifically recounts Israel's history in Christian language... the Jews were rescued from physical slavery and traveled under a pillar of cloud (the angel of the Lord led them) and they were "baptized" in the sea, and they ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink (like the Lord's Supper)... and all of that was really their experience of Christ... BUT MOST OF THEM DID NOT MAKE IT INTO THE PROMISED LAND

***1 Corinthians 10:5 God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.***

- g. Why does Paul tell them this scary story? Well... it was IDOLATRY that ruined their souls

***1 Corinthians 10:6-11 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did-- and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. <sup>9</sup> We should not test the Lord, as some of them did-- and were killed by snakes. <sup>10</sup> And do not grumble, as some of them did-- and were killed by the destroying angel. <sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.***

- h. So... this is their context in Corinth... every single day, they have to coexist in the same city where their former wickedness in idol-worship

was lived out... the same pagan festivals and pagan rituals and pagan worship services are continuing; and the same delicious meat is being cooked and served in the name of idols, and the same temple prostitutes were enticing worshipers to commit sexual immorality in the worship of the gods and goddesses

- i. And that idolatrous worship is a DIRE THREAT to their souls
- j. Paul, the orthodox Jew, would say it was a threat to his own soul! His body would like the taste of illicit food and sensual pleasure and the enticement of drunkenness and revelry as much as any other person
- k. So Paul speaks of the need for relentless vigilance over our souls in a world of temptation

***1 Corinthians 10:12-13 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! <sup>13</sup> 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.***

Every single Corinthian was still in spiritual danger... grave danger... even from idolatry. The strong were in danger – the ones that knew that idols are nothing and that meat is just meat; the weak were in danger – the ones who were still struggling to escape the allure of idolatry.

That is their context... and ours too, as we shall see!

So, Paul's command to them is clear and abrupt:

#### B. The Command

***1 Corinthians 10:14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.***

- 1. "Therefore" = in light of all that I have been saying
- 2. "My dear friends" = Paul uses a tender expression of his love for them. He is their spiritual father... they are BELOVED to him
- 3. FLEE
  - a. It is an urgent command! Like "Run for your lives!!"
  - b. It fits with what he just said about temptation... God will provide a WAY OF ESCAPE from the temptation
  - c. Temptation is an allure, a pull, like a magnet... on your soul, pulling you toward evil, toward sin

- d. The only way to endure, to survive, is to flee... to get out of the situation without having caved in, without yielding
- e. "Lead us not into temptation" is the Lord's prayer... that we avoid all tempting situations; but if we are tempted, the way to stand up under it is to find the WAY OF ESCAPE and FLEE!!
- f. What are they to flee?

- 4. Idolatry: the organized system of wicked pagan religion that they knew so well in Corinth
  - a. The actual practice of bowing down to an idol, perhaps when some music played or a priest uttered some incantation
- 5. BUT Idolatry is much broader than that

### C. What is IDOLATRY?

- 1. Simple definition: "Worshiping anything other than the true God in the true way"
- 2. Best biblical definition

***Romans 1:25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-- who is forever praised. Amen.***

- 3. Another clue: Paul calls greed idolatry in Colossians 3:5

For a person to live for money, possessions... earthly power and prestige and pleasures... that is idolatry

A Wall Street investor who gets up early every day and goes to work to make more and more money, whose mind is consumed with prosperity is an idolater

BUT SO IS SOMEONE ADDICTED to internet pornography... or to hobbies and movies and sports... who not merely lives for such things but is addicted to them and can't live without them

- 4. LUST is idolatry... because it consumes the mind, and makes the person worship the physical beauty that enflames their lust
- 5. Tim Keller calls idols "functional saviors"... created things that take the place of God in your heart
- 6. We humans were MADE to worship and serve... it cannot be avoided; if we do not worship and serve the Creator, we will worship and serve created things

7. Paul's command is FLEE!!

II. Reason #1: Christian Worship is Intimate Sharing with Christ (vs. 15-18)

*1 Corinthians 10:15-18 I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.*

*<sup>16</sup> 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? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. <sup>18</sup> Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?*

A. Paul REASONS with Us!

1. All true religion, true worship, true piety begins with the MIND... the transformation of the MIND by the word of God
2. So Paul encourages them that they have been made wise by the Holy Spirit: **“I speak as to sensible people”**
  - a. Idolatry makes human beings FOOLS

*Romans 1:22-23 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images*

- b. The Holy Spirit has come to rescue us from FOOLISHNESS, and the central and essential foolishness is idolatry
- c. The central wisdom is CHRIST... “the wisdom of God”

*1 Corinthians 1:23-24 we preach Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

3. So Paul urges them to THINK... to reason it out! (vs. 15)

B. Look at the Essence of Worship: It is FELLOWSHIP, an Intimate Sharing with the Deity

1. Understand what is going on spiritually with worship... either true worship or idolatry: a mystical UNION with what is worshiped
2. When we worship Christ, we are intimately, spiritually connected with him
3. But when pagans worship idols, they are intimately, spiritually connected with the idol
4. Do not underestimate that intimate, spiritual oneness

C. The First Example: The Spiritual Intimacy of the Lord's Supper

***1 Corinthians 10:16-17 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? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.***

1. Paul reaches for a central part of the Christian worship life: the Lord's Supper... he'll address it much more next chapter
2. But he speaks of the spiritual reality behind the actions of partaking in the Lord's Supper... the "cup of thanksgiving" or "cup of blessing" which we take and drink with thanksgiving... and the loaf of bread which we break and take and eat
3. This ordinance was established by Jesus Christ the night before he was crucified... and it was to be done permanently "in remembrance of me"
4. If we actually recognize by faith the body and blood of Jesus Christ, we partake in a spiritual experience of UNION with Christ in our minds and hearts and souls... the wine is still wine, the bread is still bread, but the spiritual reality of union with Christ is overpowering and awesome
5. We are in KOINONIA... fellowship... sharing with Christ whenever we do it... a spiritual UNION

***Romans 6:5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.***

D. Example #2: The Jewish sacrifices

***1 Corinthians 10:18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?***

1. When we worship, there is an active spiritual participation; a real sharing in the experience with God
2. So, in his contest with the prophets of Baal, Elijah called down fire from heaven, and it consumed the animal being sacrificed, and the altar, and the water which was soaking the altar, this was the people's reaction:

***1 Kings 18:39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD-- he is God! The LORD-- he is God!"***

It was as if the spiritual fire of God had entered their hearts as well! It was a participation in the altar and the sacrifice!

Worship is a form of spiritual union with the deity being worshiped... the people become God's people, and God is their God... like a marriage

III. Reason #2: Pagan Worship is Intimate Sharing with Demons (vs. 19-20)

***1 Corinthians 10:19-20 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? <sup>20</sup> No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.***

A. There is a Real, Spiritual Presence in Idolatrous Worship... but it is DEMONIC!!

1. Paul has to address the earlier basic teaching about idolatry

***1 Corinthians 8:4 We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.***

2. So the pagan gods and goddesses do not really exist, and all the idols are just the corrupt creativity of idolmakers... stone, wood, gold, bronze... whatever

3. But now, Paul is saying, “actually, there IS a spiritual reality behind all idolatry... there really IS something going on in the spiritual realm

4. The sacrifices of pagans are offered to DEMONS... fallen angels... wicked spiritual beings in the heavenly realms

B. Taught in the Old Testament... in the Song of Moses

***Deuteronomy 32:15-18 Israel made God jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols. <sup>17</sup> They sacrificed to demons, which are not God-- gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear. <sup>18</sup> You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.***

C. All False Religions Have a Demonic Origin and are Sustained by Demons

1. The temple of Artemis of the Ephesians was based on a supernatural image of Artemis which fell from heaven... a false miracle

2. Islam began with supernatural visions given by an angel to Muhammad in a cave named Hira near Mecca, 610 AD; he was assaulted by a supernatural being who pressed him hard and commanded him to recite. Three years later, Muhammad identified this being as the angel Gabriel... but Satan can masquerade as an angel of light

3. So also Mormonism and the angel Moroni who appeared to Joseph Smith in 1827 on the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York

4. Demons are god and goddess impersonators

D. Paul’s Point Here: The Sacrifices of Pagans involve spiritual union with demons... an actual demonic intimacy, and he would not have them in union with a demon

IV. Reason #3: Idolatry Provokes the Lord to Jealousy (vs. 21-22)

***1 Corinthians 10:21-22 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. <sup>22</sup> Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?***

A. God Will Not Share His Bride with Another... He Is a Jealous God (Ex. 34:14 says his NAME is jealous)

B. Jealousy Provokes the Lord to Anger

***Deuteronomy 32:21 They made me jealous by what is no god and angered me with their worthless idols.***

C. You Are Not Stronger Than the Lord! Don't Make Him Angry with your Idols!

V. Our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Applications

A. Easy to Excuse Ourselves... Because We are a Modern People

1. We don't bow down to graven images like the Hindus or the Japanese or the Aztecs... so we have no idols; FALSE!!
2. I have already said that an idol is anything that takes the place of God in your life and heart affections
3. Keller: "Functional saviors"
4. Something you live for, and can't live without

B. We Should Not Say, "I thank you, God, that I have no idols"... but "O Lord, show me the hidden idols of my heart"

David Powlison: "The most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart: Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart's trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear, and delight?" Does the Lord rule over these things, or is it an idol?

Anything more fundamental than God to our happiness, sense of well-being, definitions of success... what is our ultimate good and purpose?

If seen properly, idolatry really is at the root of every one of our sin patterns... sin is what we do when Jesus Christ is not enough. And that means that some idol is at the root of all our sins

An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure."

Tim Keller:

“Why do we ever fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is ‘because we are weak and sinful,’ but the specific answer is that there is always something besides Jesus Christ that we feel we must have to be happy, that is more important to our hearts than God, and that is enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. For example, we would not lie unless first we had made something – human approval, reputation, power over others, financial advantage – more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace of God. So the secret to change is always to identify and dismantle the basic idols of the heart.”

Money/Possessions... Sexual pleasure... Food... Alcohol... Success... a person... power/control...

Tim Keller shares 4 ways that we can identify idols in our life:

**Look at your imagination.** Archbishop William Temple once said, “Your religion is what you do with your solitude.” In other words, the true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention. What do you enjoy day-dreaming about? What is it that occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about? Do you develop potential scenarios about career advancement? Or material goods such as a dream home? Or a relationship with a particular person? One or two day dreams do not indicate idolatry. Ask rather, what do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart?

**Look at how you spend your money.** Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.” (Matt 6:21) Your money flows most effortlessly toward your heart’s greatest love. The mark of an idol is that you spend too much money on it, and you must try to exercise self-control constantly. As Paul has written, if God and his grace is the thing in the world you love most, you will give your money away to ministry, charity, and the poor in astonishing amounts (2 Cor 8:7-9). For most of us, however, we tend to overspend on clothing, or on our children, or on status symbols such as homes and cars. This reveals our idols.

**How do you respond to unanswered prayers/disappointments.** If you ask for something that you don’t get, you may become sad and just a little disappointed. Then you go on. Hey, life’s not over. Those are not your functional saviors. But when you pray and work for something and you don’t get it and you respond with explosive anger or deep despair, then you may have found your real god. Like Jonah, you become angry enough to die.

**Look at your most uncontrollable emotions.** Just as a fisherman looking for fish knows to go where the water is roiling, look for your idols at the bottom of painful emotions, especially those that never seem to lift and that drive you to do things you know are wrong. If you are angry, ask, "Is there something here too important to me, something I am telling myself I have to have at all costs?" Do the same thing about strong fear or despair and guilt. Ask yourself "Am I so scared, because something is being threatened, which I think is a necessity when it is not? Am I so down on myself because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?" If you are over-working, driving yourself into the ground with frantic activity, ask yourself, "Do I feel that I *must* have this thing to be fulfilled and significant?" When you ask questions like that, when you "pull your emotions up by the roots," as it were, sometimes you will find your idols clinging to them.