
Flee Idolatry

1 Corinthians 10:14

Introduction It is very easy to define idolatry as worshipping some physical image or object with the worship that is due God alone. We picture in our minds those pagans and heathens that have no knowledge of God and sacrifice animals to some “god” that they have fashioned from trees and bushes. We look with pity at such a sight and wonder how they could be so wrong in their understanding of God.

Is that what idolatry is all about – images that represent god, sacrifices, doing something to appease the deity in order to get what we want or need?

Sometimes that is the extent of our understanding of idolatry. Look at the Old Testament. There is the constant talk about the idols of the pagan cultures. But there is also discussion of spiritual idolatry without the physical image normally associated with idol worship. Tonight I would like to explore this issue of idolatry and begin with the text found in 1 Corinthians 10. Let’s begin reading at verse 1. <Read 1-22>

What is idolatry?

If we confine our view and definition of idolatry to only this text in 1 Corinthians, then we will be able to easily dismiss Paul’s command to flee idolatry as something that is not a problem for us. It is a good warning, and something of which we should be aware, but it’s a problem that can easily be obeyed. But in order to get God’s view of idolatry, we will need to expand our look at the Scriptures in order to get God’s fuller definition. Before we expand our look, let’s see what Paul had in mind as he taught here in 1 Corinthians 10.

In this text and context

Pastor Russ spoke on Christian liberty a few weeks ago and took us through this chapter as well as chapters 8 and 9. There were two points that Paul was making in this tenth chapter.

The example of the Israelites

First, Paul gave some examples of the idolatry in which the Israelites participated while they were in the Exodus wanderings. And his point was that these incidents were recorded so that the Corinthian believers would recognize the idolatry of their own culture.

The example of the ordinances

Second, Paul made the point that when the believers were celebrating the Lord’s table with the bread and the drink, they were, in a spiritual way, worshipping and fellowshiping with Christ. When the Israelites brought and ate their sacrifices at the temple, they were sharing and fellowshiping with God at the altar.

Even though Paul had already made his point in 1 Corinthians 8, that an idol is nothing, he is making the connection that when Christians were eating at the pagan temples, they were really worshipping and fellowshiping with demons. His prohibition to them was to not open themselves to sharing and fellowshiping with demons by eating at the pagan temples.

So the prohibition to flee idolatry in verse 14 was to warn the believers that they were not immune from the influence of demons in their Christian walk. The choice was between God and Satan. The application for us is to be very aware of the influence of demons and Satanic themes and to flee from them. This would involve any activity where the occult is practiced, board games and video games music and concerts where Satan and Satanic themes are exalted, the new age and all mystical techniques of meditation, relaxation, or exercise.

Most of us would be conscious of these kinds of overt Satanic influences that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians as idolatry. But is that all that is involved in this injunction to flee idolatry?

The first commandment

Exodus 20:3

Everyone who has had any exposure to the Scriptures knows that idolatry is not a recent sin. By Genesis 6, God describes the human race in verses 5 and 6: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” And by the time we get to the book of Exodus, God gives the ten commandments to Israel and the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me.”

We can go to the Puritans for a comment on this commandment. It is found in the Westminster Larger Catechism as question 104: “What are the duties required in the first commandment?” Their answer is, as is typical, very insightful. Please allow me to read the answer in its entirety: “The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly, by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him, calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in anything he is offended; and walking humbly with him.”

Think about what has just been said. As yourself if you are thinking about God, meditating on God, remembering about God, highly esteeming God, honoring God, adoring God, loving God, desiring God, trusting God, praising God. Oh sure, you can say that you do these things, but how often? What really takes up the most of your thoughts and time – God?

This first commandment does not permit us to have any other god than God Almighty, the Creator of the Universe and the One Who provides salvation. This commandment is preeminent because it is impossible for us to obey any of the other nine commandments if we fail to obey this first one. But that does not exhaust the Bible’s definition of idolatry.

The greatest commandment

Matthew 22:37-38

One of the lawyers of the Pharisees questioned Jesus about which was the greatest commandment in the Law. Even though the question was to test Jesus, He answered very quickly and decisively, "And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

I think that you are like me; you have read this passage so many times that it doesn't have the impact that it should. What Jesus was commanding was nothing less than our undivided love and worship. Jesus said that the primary love in your heart had to be centered on God. Anything less than this is idolatry. Idolatry isn't about Buddhist temples, incense, and rice. Idolatry has to do with love – my love for God, for others, and for the world. When we look at idolatry this way, then we are not that different from those who feed their gods rice. We have divided love and worship and our primary love is not usually God.

Idols of the Heart

Ezekiel 14:1-5

We have a very definite teaching on idols being in our hearts in Ezekiel 14. "Then certain of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Any one of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him as he comes with the multitude of his idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, who are all estranged from me through their idols.

These verses confirm that the issue of idolatry is not just to physical images, but is, in fact, in our hearts.

Definition of Idolatry

Let's see if we can't come to some kind of definition of idolatry that can help us to come to an understanding of it's importance to our relationship with the Lord.

I think we can start by saying that idolatry begins in the heart. Idolatry is a sin that has its beginning in the mind, in our thoughts, beliefs, judgments, and imaginations. In fact, I would go so far as to say that idolatry is an issue of the heart that expressed itself in many and various ways.

Idolatry is when my heart is controlled or ruled by anything other than God. It is loving anything more than God.

Looking at it from another angle, idols are the thoughts, desires, longings, and expectations that we worship in the place of the true God. Idols cause us to ignore the true God in search of what we think we need. The worship of idols is the reason we're discontented, and it's why we disobey God.

If you haven't identified with this definition and determined that you are an idolater, then you are proof that idolatry breeds a deceived heart. You cannot see your heart for what it is – a

heart that loves anything more than God. The deceitfulness of idolatry is how quickly and unconsciously this love that is due God is given to something or someone else. How does this happen?

How does idolatry develop?

The Scriptures refer to our desires. The Bible does not use the adjectives good, or evil, or bad whenever it refers to desires. Desire is a neutral term. The translators, as well as those to whom the Scriptures were written, understand desires to be good or bad based on the context. We do have desires that are good. We get hungry and have the desire to eat. We get hot or cold, and have the desire to change the temperature around us. But we also get angry and have the desire to hurt someone else as much as we were hurt. So the word desire is neither good nor bad in and of itself.

But in the passages that describe desires in the negative, we can discern that there is a downward spiral to our desires that leads to idolatry. Paul Tripp in his book, *War of Words*, speaks to this issue of elevating desire to the place of idolatry.

He describes the process where desire battles for control until it becomes a demand. That demand is then expressed as a need. My sense of that need sets up my expectations. And my expectations, when they are unfulfilled, lead to disappointment. And disappointment leads to some kind of punishment. This describes how the love that belongs to God alone is given to someone or something else. This is idolatry.

An example of the development of idolatry

To help us examine our hearts and discern our idolatry, let's look at an example of the development of idolatry.

Let's take something as innocent as marriage relationships. I am going to make up a situation that is a compilation of counseling cases that I have had and I am going to present it as if it is my situation. This is not how it is with Becky and me.

So let's say I have a desire that my wife be a more godly person. First of all, is this a sinful desire? Shake your heads, NO. There is nothing wrong with wanting my wife, or anyone else for that matter, to be a godly person. In fact, someone could get the idea that I was a very sincere Christian who was concerned with helping others in their Christian walk. The question that is more appropriate is why do I want a godly wife? Now the plot thickens. This is where the deceitfulness of my heart comes into play. I can convince myself that my motivation for a godly wife is for her good and the glory of God; something that is totally honorable. I am doing nothing more than helping my sister in Christ to grow in her relationship with God. This would be the end of the story, if that were true.

But, what I really desire is a godly wife who will be a better wife to me. She is lacking in some areas that really grate on me. She is more concerned with her comfort than mine. She is always asking me to pamper her. Where is her understanding of Philippians 2:3-4? She is supposed to be in-

interested in others and she is to think of others as better than herself. If she should be interested in anyone, it should be me – her husband. And besides, she is supposed to be my helpmeet.

So I begin to really dwell on this issue. I begin to mentally list all the ways that she prefers herself above me. I begin to observe how selfish she really is. I realize how much I have to do in our relationship and how little she really does. I am in the battle for control with my desires. I say that I want her to be more godly, but inwardly I am battling with my desires for a wife who pays more attention to me and less to herself. I begin to make some comments about her spiritual walk. I ask about her Bible study habits. I ask about her prayer life. I express to her my concern, as the head of our home, about her spiritual walk. I mention that I would like to help her grow in her love for God. She welcomes this offer of help, because she is very much aware of her spiritual shortcomings and is eager to please God with her life.

I am pleased that I have so brilliantly gotten her to agree to my help without some kind of fight. I begin to celebrate that soon I am going to have what I want. But, guess what? She doesn't change in the way I want her to. So I resort to making demands. I demand that she get up early in the morning with me so that I can help her in her studies more. I demand that we begin to study Philipians. I demand that she stop spending so much time talking on the phone with her friends when I am home. After all, how can I help her if she isn't available when I am.

When the demands are not accepted very well, then I start talking about my needs. "Honey, don't you know how much I need you to listen when I come home from work. I am so frustrated with my job and my boss. I need you to listen to me and tell me how much you understand and how right I am in thinking what I do. You're not giving me what I need. How can we please God as a family if you aren't meeting my needs. After all, you are my help meet, aren't you?"

So after this self-disclosure about my needs and the importance of them being met, I expect that the next day when I come home, she will be waiting for me with breathless anticipation. She will have put aside everything that could possibly get in the way of my being pampered. In fact, she may even have fixed my favorite supper in order to make it a more enjoyable time.

But when I get home, she isn't home. There isn't even a note about where she is or when she will be back. You talk about angry!! In fact, it's a good thing that she didn't get home for two hours. That gave me enough time to cool down. In fact, I realize how very disappointed I really am. How could she have been so thoughtless after my little talk with her? She is never going to change. I guess I will have to live with this self-centered woman for the rest of my life. What a cross I have to bear!

As the time drags on and there continues to be no change that I can detect, I begin to think that I am justified in treating her the same way she treats me. Why should I be the only one who is concerned about our relationship? Perhaps if she gets a little bit of her own medicine, she will realize how selfish she has been and start treating me the way I deserve to be treated by a godly wife. I mope around the house. I begin making sure that I'm away from home as often as possible. I really begin to complain to my wife about everything she is not doing that I think she should be. I get irritated at any little thing she does or says. I am making life as miserable as possible so she will change. She is going to get punished for the way she is treating me.

Now, I am going to assume that this little scenario is not that far from your own experiences. Granted, the details are probably different, but the downward spiral of idolatry is the same.

Why do I define this as idolatry? Because I have given the love and worship and satisfaction that belong to God to someone else – ME!! In fact, most of the time my idolatry involves me.

Notice how innocently it begins. I want my wife to be more godly. Not a wrong desire, but the motivation for this desire is wrong. I wanted a godly wife for my benefit, not God's. My love for God was turned into a love for me and my comfort and my satisfaction. God tells me that I am to love my wife so much that I would die for her. There is nothing in that command that states that I love her because she deserves it or because she returns it. I love her as Christ loved the church. If I were worshipping God and loving Him more than anything else, then I would be delighted to obey and love my wife without thought for a love for myself. My demands would have been for myself to love God so much that I love my wife. My needs would have been to think of others more than myself. My expectations would have been for me to grow in my love for God as I grew in my love for my wife. My fulfillment would have been as I realized that I was growing more like Christ and I would find great satisfaction in serving Him. The punishment would be directed toward me for the way I responded to my ungodly behavior to my wife and my lack of love for God that I exhibited.

As far as helping my wife with her spiritual walk, I would confess to her my struggle with self-centeredness and ask for her to help me to be more aware of my selfishness and lack of love for her and for God. I would spend time with her so she could observe my struggle with sin and allowing God to deal with me. Perhaps in God's providential care, she will have observed me humbling myself before God, and that may motivate her to examine her walk before God, but that's not what consumes me. I am consumed with God's glory.

Do you see the difference? One scenario is idolatry. The other godly. Both started with the same desire – to have a godly wife. But the motivation was completely different. One was for God's glory and the other was for my desires.

It is a matter of worship. Will I worship God or someone or something else? You may be asking, "Greg – how can I tell if my desires are idolatry?" One way you can tell if your heart's desire is idolatry is if you're willing to sin to obtain your desire, or if you sin when you don't get what you want, then your desire has taken God's place and you're functioning as an idolater.

One of the downsides to this summer series of evening messages is that for those messages dealing with fleeing, you are going to be left up in the air about how to effectively flee. The Biblical concept of putting off and putting on says that you stop doing what is sinful and replace it with that which is God-honoring. Those replacements are the pursuing messages of this series.

Conclusion

However, that does not leave us with nothing to do about our idolatry. We are commanded to flee. So my brothers and sisters, let us flee idolatry in all of its multitudinous forms. Remember what John Calvin observed – our hearts are idol factories. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry!