

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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1 Corinthians 10:7, 14-22 “The Truth About Idolatry: Then & Now”

Intro. What do you think of when I mention the word, “Idolatry?” Do you think of a primitive tribal people, bowing down to some image? Or do you think of the ancient gods of the Greeks and the Romans, like Zeus, Mercury, Diana, etc? Perhaps, you think that a sermon about idolatry is not relevant, since almost no one worships “idols” here in America.

I can assure you that idolatry was certainly a serious problem for the Corinthians. Corinth was well known for having the famous temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It was on the hill overlooking the port city of Corinth. It had 1000 temple prostitutes. The vast majority of the population participated in the worship of Aphrodite and other gods and goddesses. So idols were more than familiar to the Corinthians than to us. Idolatrous practices were a part of everyday life. Paul was concerned that the Christians there in Corinth might slip back into such practices and worship.

Now this morning, I am going to share with you the fact that idolatry is a serious problem today, even in America. Now granted, worshipping images is not a widespread problem here in America, but nevertheless, idolatry is a problem. And I believe that most of you will agree with me as we understand the true nature of idolatry. And I want you to look at v.15, “I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say.” With Paul, I want you to examine what I say. If it is true, then I hope that you will share my convictions regarding the subject of idolatry, and false religion. If so, I believe your life could be dramatically affected. So note with me:

I. UNDERSTAND THE TRUE NATURE OF IDOLATRY

Paul says in v.14 that we should flee from idolatry. Clearly, Paul considers idolatry a very serious matter. But before you can flee from something, you must first know what it is. So I want to share with you several different forms of idolatry and false religion.

A. Idolatry Includes Worshipping a Physical Image of a False God - Historically, people have wanted to worship what they can see. So creating idol images of a deity has been a common temptation. So in Rom. 1:23 Paul said that people “changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.” This is the most literal and obvious kind of idolatry. The ancient peoples had thousands of different gods, often patterned after some earthly creature. In fact, Rom. 1:25 says that pagan idolaters “exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” Isn’t it strange that people would worship the lesser rather than the Greater?

Furthermore, ancient people created gods to serve their own interests. They wanted safe travel, so they created a god of travel. They wanted a good wine harvest, so they created the god of wine. For obvious reasons they created a goddess of love. They believed you could manipulate such gods with the right type of religious rituals.

This kind of idolatry is rarely practiced in America today. But even professing Christians can be guilty of others forms of idolatry. So let me mention some other kinds of idolatry:

B. Idolatry Is a Mental Image of a False God – Actually, even a physical idol begins with a mental image. And even though most Americans don't worship physical images, they do worship the mental image of a false god. You see, a person may have a concept in their mind of a god who doesn't even exist. For example, do you believe in a god who doesn't hold people accountable for how they live their lives? If so, you have just created your own god, because the God of the Bible will send people to hell who have not had their sins forgiven through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. You say, "Well, I just don't believe that." OK, then what god do you believe in? If your god is different from the God & Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible, then you have created your own god. The idea that God is a nice old man with a long beard sitting in a chair is completely contrary to Scripture and is unacceptable. Furthermore, many have taken the God of the Bible and made Him into a servant that you can use to meet your every need and desire. Listen, just because the God you worship has the same name as the God of the Bible doesn't mean you are worshipping the God of the Bible. In fact, that is the most dangerous and deceptive form of idolatry.

For this reason false religion is a form of idolatry. Many of the false religions & cults that we see today are a blending of different religions. This is called religious syncretism. When Israel worshipped the golden calf, they blended the Jewish and Egyptians religions into one. It is probable that Aaron's calf was a reproduction of Apis, the sacred bull of Egypt. But they called the calf by the name of the God of Israel. Likewise, the founders Islam and Mormonism mixed elements of different religions to produce a new religion. And though Catholicism has undergone a reformation since the early 60's, the Medieval Catholic church especially blended Christianity with paganism and Jewish religion. That has been well documented. Hollywood is turning to Scientology and various forms of New Age religion.

We live in a day of religious pluralism. In today American culture it is popular to say that all religions lead to God. I am sorry, but that is pretty stupid. How can contradictory religions all lead people to God? People who say that are either ignorant of what the Bible says, or they have willfully rejected the teachings of the Bible. It's sad the way our nation has turned from the worship of the true God to a multitude of false religions. We are becoming a nation under many gods, and many different religions. How can we maintain our unity as a nation with so much religious diversity?

There is more that I could say about other forms of idolatry. But let's move on to the next point:

II. UNDERSTAND THE SERIOUSNESS OF IDOLATRY

Why is Paul so concerned about idolatry that he says in v.14 that we should flee from it? It is because this is one of the most serious sins you can ever get involved in. Other Scriptures certainly do indicate that idolatry is a serious sin. Idolatry is listed among the vilest sins of the flesh in Gal. 5:19-21, and the Lord makes it clear that no idolater will inherit His kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9; Rev. 21:8; 22:15). It is not accidental or incidental that the first two of the Ten Commandments are prohibitions that have to do with idolatry. The Lord deals strongly with idolatry because nothing is more offensive to Him than idolatry. And that is true for the following reasons:

A. It Arouses the Lord's Jealousy – In vv.20-21 Paul warns the Corinthians not to participate in pagan worship in any way. Then he says in v.22, "Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?" Clearly, Paul is pointing to the Old Testament teaching that idolatry provokes the Lord

God to jealousy. There is no other God but the God of the Bible, and He is a jealous God who will not tolerate the worship of another. In Isaiah 48:11, God says: “I will not give My glory to another.” Ex. 34:14 says, “You shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”

Furthermore, we can see this truth from marriage. Both the OT & the New Testament compare believers to the wife or bride of Christ or God. Those of you who are married, how would you feel if your spouse became intimate with someone else. You would have a right to become jealous. After all, when you married, you made vows to be faithful to each other. Yesterday Kacey & Joe married, and Joe said “I will” to the following statement, “forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?” Even though we live in a sexually promiscuous society, surveys reveal that only a small percentage of people consider cheating on your spouse to be morally acceptable.

Now if we understand that principle in our own human relationships, how much more should this be true in our relationship with God? So when we worship anyone or anything but the one true God, or when we participate in false religion in any way, we provoke the Lord to jealousy.

B. Idolatry Seriously Affects the Way We Live - What happened to Israel when they started worshipping a false god? Well look back at v.7, “And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.’” I can assure you that they did not rise up and play volleyball.¹ Idolatry led to moral corruption, which no doubt included gluttony, drunkenness, wild dancing, and immorality. False religion leads to wrong living. Ancient idolatry even went so far as to include sexual immorality with temple prostitutes as part of their worship. Also back in Romans 1 Paul discusses idolatry, and he says in v.24 of that chapter, “Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves.” Then in vv. 26-32 he describes the fact a rejection of the true God, and the worship of false gods, led to such sins as homosexuality, sexual immorality, covetousness, envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossip, disobedience to parents, and so forth. Whether a man worships a carved god of stone or a sophisticated god of his mind, that worship has a corrupting effect on his moral and spiritual life. With idolatry, a Pandora’s box is opened to other loyalties and other moral and spiritual standards. If we do not have the right view of God, nothing else can be in the right perspective.

There is a third reason why idolatry is so serious:

C. Idolatry & False Religion Is Inspired by Demons – Paul says in v.20, “Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God....” The Gentile nations had many different religions and gods. And though their gods did not exist, something does exist which is far more terrible than these pseudo-gods, namely an entire kingdom of darkness which is hostile to God. Paul states that demons are the spiritual force behind all idolatry. Paul knew this from his Old Testament. Dt. 32:17 says of apostate Israel, “They sacrificed unto demons, not to God...” (cf. also Psa. 106:37). In I Tim. 4:1 Paul warned of false religion inspired by “seducing spirits” and which taught “doctrines of demons.” 2 Cor. 11:14 says that we should not be surprised by the activity of false prophets, “For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.”

Let me give one example of what I am talking about. I believe that Islam was hatched out of the pits of hell. People who zealously follow the literal teachings of the Koran blow themselves up, as well as innocent victims as we have heard about recently in London. They caused great death &

¹ Here the word (*paizo*) means “to give way to hilarity, esp. by joking, singing, and dancing.”

destruction. That sounds like the devil to me! Jesus said that the devil is like a thief who has come to kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:10a).

Now why would Satan & his demons inspire false religion? Satan knows that very few people will be atheists. He knows that people are created in the image of God. Therefore, we are incurably religious. So he gives people many religions and cults to choose from. It is quite possible that demons have worked supernatural miracles on behalf of a false god, to deceive the people.²

One important application for what I have been talking about is the need for discernment. Don't be deceived by false religion. 1 Jn 4:1 says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

So when you understand how seriousness idolatry is, it is no wonder that in v.14 Paul commands us to flee idolatry. In 6:18 he commands us to flee immorality. There are some sins that we absolutely must not flirt around with.

Now I want you to follow Paul's argument here. We have seen how wrong & evil idolatry is on the one hand. Next I want to speak to all professing Christians here today. I want you to:

III. UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN VITAL CONNECTION WITH THE TRUE GOD

Beginning in v.16 is a series of questions intended to lead us to understand how worship of the true God creates a bond of identification between us and God, and between us and fellow believers. Paul uses the Lord's Supper to build his argument. Notice that:

A. Communion Demonstrates Our Fellowship and Attachment with Christ – Paul says in v.16, "The cup of blessing³ 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?" One word that is repeated several times in this passage is the Greek word *koinonia*, here translated "communion." It means to have in common, to participate with, to have partnership with. When we gather around the Lord's Table, we declare that we have a share in the body & saving blood of Jesus Christ. When we all partake of the cup, we are saying that we recognize that Jesus shed His blood for our sins, and we share in that blessed forgiveness of sin. In fact, the Bible says in 1 John 1:7 that "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." No wonder Paul calls it "the cup of blessing." The word translated "blessing" (*eulogia*) literally means "good word." Here we drink the cup of God's "good word" concerning us in the cross of Christ, and in so doing we say a good word of praise concerning our Lord.

² On the other hand, demons are not unlimited in power, but they have power to perform enough wonders and to make enough predictions come true to keep superstitious worshipers deceived and loyal (Cf. 2 Th. 2:9-11). Many cultic and pagan religious claims are faked and exaggerated. For example, in Pompeii you can find the ruins of the temple of Isis. There the worshippers would come to the statue of Isis, and believe Isis would speak through the opening at the mouth. But a tour guide can show you a secret passage that a person would enter, and speak through a pipe to the worshipers (Illus. #2431 in Paul Lee Tan's illustration book).

³ The cup of blessing was the 3rd cup of the Passover meal. A blessing was pronounced over this cup. [The first cup was the Cup of Sanctification. The second cup, the Cup of Plagues, recounts the ten plagues with which God smote the Egyptians. The third Cup was the cup of Redemption, actually taken after the Passover meal. Over this cup Jesus said, "This cup is the New Covenant, ratified by my blood, which is being poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). The wine in this cup symbolized the Passover lamb's blood. The fourth cup is the Cup of Hallel or "Praise." Jesus & His disciples sang a praise hymn at the conclusion of the meal.

Likewise, when we all partake of the bread, we confess our joint partnership in the body of Christ. Bread is a symbol of life. I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "bread of life." Jesus took on a human body that He might share with us His life.⁴

So the Lord's Supper demonstrates our fellowship and attachment with Christ. Furthermore:

B. Communion Demonstrates Our Fellowship with Other Believers – In v.17 we read, "For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread." A better translation is this: "Because there is one bread, the many are one body...." Apparently the practice of the early church was to break pieces from a common loaf. That symbolized the fact the each member of the Corinthian church was a part of the same body, the body of Christ.

This hand and this hand are a part of my body. They share the same life source, and they are connected to the same controlling head. Even so, when we share in the communion bread, we confess that we are all part of the same body, the body of Christ. Celebrating our common salvation and eternal life is the ultimate fellowship of believers while we are on earth, and reflects the perfect fellowship we will have in heaven. All believers stand on the same ground at the foot of the cross, as forgiven sinners who possess the eternal life principle within them.

Now Paul's point in vv.16-18 is to lay the groundwork for his point beginning in v.19. He is saying that for a Christian to share in communion, or for a Jew to share in the sacrifices both point to the fact that participation in such worship makes a vital connection with God, and with other worshippers. Likewise, to participate in any way with idolatrous worship is to identify with false gods, and the worshippers of false gods. And so that leads to the main & final point:

IV. THEREFORE, COMPLETELY SEPARATE FROM ALL FORMS OF IDOLATRY

Paul says in v.19, "What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything?" This points back to his previous argument regarding Christian liberty in chapter 8. Paul had argued that eating meat from the public meat market was OK, even if it had come from the sacrifices of an idol temple. Why? It is because an idol represents a god that doesn't even exist. Furthermore, the food offered to them is no different in its qualitative substance than any other food of which a man might partake. So v.19 recalls his previous argument.

But now he must be addressing a different situation, as the strong adversative (*alla*) at the beginning of v.20 indicates. What about participating in a public event that involves false religion, and you are asked to partake of the food & wine that had been offered to that idol? Paul says that Christians should not participate in such events. Remember, he has already stated that demonic forces are behind false religion. So Paul says in the last of v.20, "...I do not want you to have fellowship with demons." The essence of the argument was that if one was in fellowship with Christ, then he must avoid fellowship with the demonic. Why? Because there is evil power associated with idolatry. We are to separate ourselves from any form of pagan religion. Notice a similar argument in 6:15, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then

⁴ Another illustration of this fellowship is to be found in v.18 concerning the sacrifices offered by Israelites. When they sacrificed to the Lord, some of the offering was burnt as the sacrifice proper, some of it was eaten by the priests, and some was eaten by those who offered it. Everyone was involved with the offering, with God and with each other. To eat is far more than ordinary eating that merely fills the stomach with meat. To eat is to have a part in all of the benefits of the altar. The sacrifices were visible pictures of the forgiveness that would come in Christ, while the Lord's Supper is a visible picture of the forgiveness we have in Christ. (For a non-Baptist view of communion, see Lenski).

take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not!" We are to live separate lives.

Listen, attachment to Christ requires detachment from the world. In fact, Paul said in 2 Cor. 6:14, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?" Then in v.16 he said, "And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?" Then in v.17 he reaches his conclusion, "Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate', says the Lord. 'Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'" Now this is just the old-fashioned doctrine of separation. Many don't want to hear it preached in our modern day. But I believe that a lack of separation from sinful and idolatrous religions is one reason the Church today is so lacking in spiritual power.

Now I want to glean from this text several reasons why Christians are to remain totally separate from any expression of false religion:

A. Because of the Command to Flee Idolatry - Even the word "flee" in v.14 indicates that we are to be totally separate from such sins. We are to have nothing to do with idolatry.

B. Because Fellowship with God & False Religion is Morally Impossible – Paul says in v.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." He is saying that it is morally impossible to worship the Lord, and participate in false worship at the same time. It is not simply that we *should* not but that we *cannot*. The Corinthians had proclaimed at the Lord's Table their fellowship with Christ. They could not at the same time show fellowship with demons by participating in pagan worship. You have to make a choice between following God, or following the devil. You can't have it both ways.

C. Because You Are Not Strong Enough - When Paul asks in v.22, "Are we stronger than He?", he may be thinking of the Christian who thinks he is strong enough to participate in the idolatrous activities of his friends, and not be spiritually harmed. Or someone today claims they can listen to certain kinds of demonic music and not be affected by it, or read the latest Harry Potter book and not be affected by it. But remember what Paul taught in v.12, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." This must be learned and practiced by such Christians. Or he may be thinking of someone who imagines that he can provoke the Lord the jealousy by participating in false religion, and then somehow not be overcome by the judgment of God. God will not allow idolatry to go unpunished, and no one can escape.

So Paul is concluding that Christians should not go to the pagan temples, especially when they know that pagan worship is going to take place, because of the evil associations involved.

How does that principle apply to us today? I believe that secret rites of Mormonism have similarities to the secret rites of paganism. Furthermore, Mormonism does not proclaim the one true God, and the atoning sacrifice of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. How can a Christian attend or participate in Mormon worship? How can a Christian ever worship in a Mosque? If you are invited to participate in some group that does something that even looks or smells like pagan religion, you need to separate yourself from it. Paul says in Eph. 5:11, "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them." I believe we have to draw the line when it comes to so-called ecumenical worship. I can cross denominational lines to worship with other true believers, but I can't worship along side the leaders of non-Christian religions!

Furthermore, anything the devil and his demons are involved in, we should have no part in it. I believe that many of the heavy metal rock bands are under the influence of demons. Just

examine the music dedicated to the gods of sex, drugs, and to Satan himself! Look at the CD covers if you are not convinced. Some of the music is clearly associated with Satan worship! Christians are to have no part in that!

I think that many Christians today are “dining with demons.” They go to a worldly, sensuous dance on Saturday night and then teach Sunday School the next morning. They put the devil’s brew to their lips during the week and then on Sunday partake of the cup that represents the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Gary Linebarger recalls a story that shows the challenge he and other missionaries face in Taiwan (Republic of China): He met a woman while witnessing door to door. She was one of those rare people who expressed an interest in hearing more. For three or four years, Gary kept in contact with her. Finally, she made a profession of faith in Christ during a Bold Mission Taiwan crusade led by Missouri Baptist volunteers. But she wasn't baptized. Six months later she told her pastor she wanted to take down the altar to an idol in her home. Then she was baptized. "Her own feeling was that she wouldn't be baptized until she made that complete break," explains Gary.

You have to make a choice this morning. Are you going to worship and serve the God of the Bible, or are you going to worship your own god? I hope you will say with Joshua of old, “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” If you are going to be a Christian, you have to get rid of your idols, and serve only the true God.

Has God’s Holy Spirit convicted you of idolatry? Will you continue in it, or repent? In the book of Acts, chapter 19, we read of Christians in Ephesus who became convicted of the fact that they were holding on to occultic books, so they brought them together and burned them at the same time in a big bonfire. About 7-8 years ago our young people came back from youth camp and burned some of their music that was clearly sinful and even demonic. That’s the kind of repentance I am talking about today? Will you separate yourself from anything that relates to the devil and false religion? Or are you going to provoke the Lord to jealousy?

Sources: R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Paige Patterson, *The Troubled Triumphant Church: an Exposition of First Corinthians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: I Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).