

“Do All to the Glory of God”

The Seventeenth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 10:14-33; Malachi 1:1-14

Despite popular opinion to the contrary, Christianity is not a religion centered in prohibitions—“thou shalt not do this,” “thou shalt not do that.” Rather, Christianity is a religion centered in God’s gracious plan to rescue the sinful human race from the guilt and consequences of our sin. Because God has saved us from our sins, he will not allow us to worship him while at the same time keeping our allegiances to any non-Christian religions or practices in which we may have been involved before we came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. In the Corinth of Paul’s day, the people to whom Paul is writing were all new Christians. They are struggling mightily to leave their pagan past behind. They have written to Paul asking him a series of questions about how their new faith in Christ impacts them as they continue to live in a city dominated by pagan temples and practices. Earlier, Paul exhorted them to put the needs of their neighbors above their own—to give up their liberty for the sake of others. Now he gives the Corinthians a very simple standard by which to live as Christians in the midst of a pagan world—do all to the glory of God.

We have made our way as far as the second half of 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul brings to a conclusion the discussion begun back in 1 Corinthians 8:1 when he first raised the question of a Christian’s participation in pagan feasting. The reason it has taken Paul so long to lay out his response is probably due to the fact that Paul is answering each of the points the Corinthians raised in their letter to the apostle in which they asked the question of whether or not it was acceptable for Christians to eat meat which had been sacrificed to idols.¹

Paul has already explained that idols are nothing since there is one true and living God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Paul has spelled out that eating such meat, or not eating such meat does not commend us nor condemn us before God. But Paul is emphatic that the strong—those who see nothing wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols—should be willing to bear with the weak (who think this meat should not be eaten) until the weak become strong. The strong should be willing to give up their freedom until such time as the weak out-grow their spiritual immaturity.

As we have seen throughout this part of 1 Corinthians, food was often tied to pagan forms of worship. It was commonplace for an animal to be sacrificed in one of the city’s pagan temples. Part of the butchered animal was used as a burnt offering, some of it went to the priests and participants in these pagan rituals, but the remaining meat was often sold to local butchers or in city’s marketplace. It is one thing to go into a pagan temple and participate in the pagan ceremony which includes an animal sacrifice and the ritualistic consumption of its flesh. It is another thing to buy the leftover meat from these ceremonies from a third party when that meat had no religious significance other than it was to be eaten for dinner. Should Christians buy and eat this meat, or should they abstain? And what are you to do when someone offers you a meal and you don’t know where the meat came from. What then?

We now take up the conclusion of Paul’s discussion of pagan feasting and the Christian’s relationship to idolatry in verses 14-33 of chapter 10.

¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 463.

In verse 14, Paul gives the Corinthians (and us) a direct prohibition regarding participation in idolatry. “*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*” That this verse is the conclusion to what has gone before is much more apparent in the original language than in the English translation.² Paul continues to speak of his readers as “my beloved,” indicating Paul’s personal concern for those to whom he is writing. These are people whom the apostle knows well and loves affectionately. In a similar tone, Paul has already urged the Corinthians to flee from fornication (1 Corinthians 5:9; 6:18), now he strongly urges them to flee from idolatry. This is to become the daily practice of the Corinthians. As one writer puts it, “there is to be no leisurely contemplation of the sin, thinking that one can go so far and be safe from going further. The only wise course is to have nothing to do with it.”³ The Christian is to flee from idolatry. Paul is worried about the Corinthians who just don’t seem to be able to sever all ties to their pagan past.

Even though Paul has just assured the Corinthians in verse 13 that God will be with them even in the midst of whatever temptation they may face, nevertheless, the Corinthians must make every effort to avoid all forms of idolatry. The gravity and difficulty of this is easy to overlook. Like other large Greco-Roman cities, Corinth was filled with pagan temples (and prostitutes), trade-guilds which were dedicated to pagan deities, and public baths, which were filled with art which can only be described as the ancient equivalent of porn. Paul’s exhortation not only includes the avoidance of all places where idolatry is practiced (i.e. the pagan temples), but his exhortation probably includes the avoidance of all things associated with paganism such as temple prostitution and sexual immorality as well.⁴ Paul is not asking the Corinthians to do something which would have been easy to do. Paganism was everywhere.

Since the Corinthians prided themselves on their great wisdom, Paul puts their claim to the test. “*I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.*” Surely, sensible people can see the obvious. Resisting temptation is a fool’s errand. Instead of resisting temptation, we should flee from it. Paul is right and the Corinthians should know that the apostle is telling them the truth—if they are truly as wise as they claim to be. Nothing good can come from a Christian’s involvement in idolatry. Christians must flee from paganism.

This is certainly reinforced by what follows—Paul’s questions regarding a believer’s intimate relationship with the Risen Christ through the Lord’s Supper. Those who come to the Lord’s table enjoy fellowship with Christ himself. Therefore, they cannot continue to participate in the demonic. In verse 16, Paul writes, “*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*” Paul’s reference to the “cup of blessing” is significant. This is clearly a reference to the Lord’s Supper, as the following discussion here and in chapter 11 will make plain. The background to Paul’s words is that Jesus referred to the third cup of the Passover meal as his own blood of the New Covenant shed for the remission of sins. The prayer of thanksgiving was uttered over this cup as a means of both consecrating the wine and to humbly give thanks for what God has done for us to provide for the forgiveness of our sins.

From Paul’s vivid language it is clear that when a Christian drinks from the cup, they somehow participate in the blood of Christ. Through this cup, believers are bound together with Christ in

² Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 464. Morris, 1 Corinthians, 142.

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 142.

⁴ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 464.

fellowship, i.e., a participation with the blood of Christ.⁵ As Calvin once put it, “the soul has as truly communion in the blood, as we drink the wine with the mouth.”⁶ According to the Belgic Confession, “This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. At that table he makes us enjoy himself as much as the merits of his suffering and death, as he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood.”

The reception of Christ’s blood is clearly spiritual, and nothing is said as to how that this takes place, we are only told of the fact that it does. The same thing therefore holds true of the bread as it does for the wine. The fact that Paul mentions the cup and blood before mentioning the bread and Christ’s body, might be connected to the fact that in local pagan rituals of Corinth much was made of the shedding of sacrificial blood of the animal about to be consumed. Perhaps Paul mentions the blood first because of its significance in redemption.⁷

But why would Paul even introduce this subject in regards to a Christian’s participation in pagan feasting, if the Lord’s Supper were but a mere memorial meal wherein what mattered was whether or not we feel sorry enough for our sins to come to the table? Participation in Christ’s body and blood implies spiritual eating and drinking, not merely remembering—although remembering what Christ has done for us is an essential aspect of the Supper. We must also consider the fact that the worship of pagan deities also involved in this kind of eating and drinking.⁸ Since the Lord’s Supper is said to be a participation in the body and blood of Christ, how can the Corinthians simultaneously participate in pagan feasting?

The point is this. If a Christian truly enjoys fellowship with Christ through his body and blood, how can they still participate in pagan practices and engage in fellowship with pagan deities, especially when they know that deity is in reality nothing? As he indicates in verse 17, “*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*” Paul’s stress on unity is important and often overlooked in connection to the Supper. Christian believers are diverse. Yet once joined to Christ, they all become members of his spiritual body which is the church. In the celebration of the Lord’s Supper not only do believers participate in the body and blood of Christ, they are likewise united to each other as members of Christ’s body (the church) even as they are fed by Christ’s body in the supper.

The supper is not only a sacrament in which we feed upon Christ’s body and blood through faith, it is also a sacrament in which that same Christ binds his people together as his spiritual body. This means that to participate in pagan feasting is not only to be unfaithful to Christ, it is to be unfaithful to the other members of the body of Christ. This is why the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is also the sacrament of Christian unity. We are one body who together partake of one loaf.

In verse 18, Paul once again returns to redemptive history to illustrate his point. “*Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?*” It is interesting that Paul literally

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 143.

⁶ Calvin, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians

⁷ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 143.

⁸ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 466.

speaks of “Israel according to the flesh” perhaps to distinguish national Israel from the new Israel which is the church. Says Paul, those who eat the sacrifices, participate in the altar, that is, they participate in all that the altar stands for.⁹ Paul is probably referring to the meals prescribed in Deuteronomy 14:22-27, in which the people eat the sacrificed food. By eating this meal, the people were bound together to YHWH and to each other.¹⁰

Paul returns to the point made by the strong in 1 Corinthians 8:4—idols are nothing. “*What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.*” The dilemma that Paul is facing is simply this—if a Christian eats meat sacrificed to idols then he or she in some sense participates in the demonic. But if a Christian can’t eat such meat for ethical reasons, this seems to imply that idols are real, and appears to be the reason why Christians should avoid this food. Paul’s rhetorical question, asked in verse 19 and then answered in verse 20, is designed to point out that not only are sacrifices made to idols nothing, but idols themselves are nothing.

And yet while idols are nothing (there is no God but one), there is an occult (demonic) reality underlying idolatry. While the idols are nothing but wood and stone, Paul’s point is that demons use people’s susceptibility to idolatry to make inroads into their lives (probably through deception)—as some kind of bond is formed with demons through a fellowship meal associated with a pagan temple. Even though idols are in actuality nothing, people who associate with idols are not engaging in some neutral activity. There is an occult dimension so real that people who sacrifice to idols (which are nothing) are actually sacrificing to the demons themselves. Therefore, to share in the eating of food sacrificed to idols (which are nothing) is to form a bond of fellowship with demons (which are real).¹¹ Idol worshipers do have fellowship with demons when they eat food sacrificed to idols. This is why someone who is in fellowship with Christ (and who participates in the Lord’s Supper) must not continue to participate in the things which go on in these pagan temples.

This explains Paul’s emphatic assertion in verse 21. “*You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.*” When Paul speaks of the “table of the Lord” he is echoing a number of Old Testament passages (including the first chapter of Malachi, our Old Testament lesson) which speak of the altar in the temple as the “table of the Lord.” The altar occupied the central place in Israel’s worship of YHWH. The unbelieving priests of Israel polluted the altar by offering improper sacrifices—blemished animals. As a result, they came under God’s judgment. This is yet another illustration from redemptive history from which Christians can learn.

In the new covenant, the altar in the Jerusalem temple has been replaced by the “table of the Lord,” in every Christian church wherein Christ gives himself to his people through bread and wine, if they receive that bread and wine through faith—believing that they are receiving Christ. Clearly, this indicates the centrality of the sacraments in general, and the Lord’s Supper in particular in the worship service of the apostolic churches—a key reason why the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is tied to the preached word, and to be celebrated frequently, not infrequently (quarterly) as in so many Reformed churches.

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 144.

¹⁰ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 471.

¹¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 145.

Paul puts this matter in sharp relief. Christians cannot be participants both in the Lord's Supper and idol feasts. This is clearly an either/or choice. Christians cannot compromise on this matter.¹² When we drink the cup of the Lord, we are spiritually participating with the blood of Christ. But someone who drinks the cup of a pagan ceremony somehow and some way participates with the demonic. Those who participate in the Lord's Supper cannot take part in any pagan rituals—lest they come under judgment.

As Paul will go on to point out in verse 22, there are serious consequences involved in this. *“Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”* As Paul has pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the Corinthians must be aware of the fate of ancient Israel—how they ate spiritual food and drink and yet came under God's judgment. So now he reminds the Corinthians that it is not a good thing to arouse God's jealousy. For we are not stronger than God and to mock him by participating in paganism is to risk coming under the covenant curse as described in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32: *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”*

In verses 23-33, Paul returns to the subject he addressed back in chapter 8, the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. The practical application of Paul's doctrine is now made clear in the balance of the chapter. As Paul puts it in verse 23, *“All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up.”* Paul has made this point several times before. While everything is permissible for him, not everything builds up the body of Christ. Christian liberty is to be defended at all costs against Pharisees and legalists, and yet at the same time exercised in such a way as not to stumble the weak. Just because I am free to do something, doesn't mean that I should.

In verse 24, Paul reminds us of one of the basic principles of his doctrine of the Christian life. *“Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”* Since we are all members of Christ's body, we are not to place ourselves above others. Since we are to seek the good of others, we must be careful not to use our liberty as a way of justifying self-centered behavior. We are always to consider the weak, especially in the context of food. Food and drink should never divide the body of Christ.

This brings Paul to the very practical question of eating meat which has been sold in the market. What are we to do about this, especially if we do not know the origins of the meat? Once again, Paul's advice in verses 25-26 is simple and eminently practical. *“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.”* While Christians cannot eat meat in a pagan context—i.e., attendance at a pagan feast, there is nothing wrong whatsoever with eating meat which may or may not have come from a pagan temple. While the Jews would have been very scrupulous about this, Paul lays no such burden on the Gentiles. If we don't know where the meat came from, why worry about it? Eat and enjoy!

With a single sentence (the revolutionary nature of which we take for granted) Paul has just dismissed every religion centered on works and rituals. Paul tells us to eat and not worry about it! We are not bound to superstition, nor to the rules of men who think themselves wiser than God.. After all, there is

¹² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 145.

no reality to the idol since the earth and everything is it is the Lord's—a citation from Psalm 24:1.

But what about meat which is offered to us in someone's home, when we may not know the origin of the meat? Paul's advice in verses 27-30 is simple and utterly practical. *"If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?"* The principle is very simple. A Christian is to eat whatever is put before them as a matter of charity. But if the host announces that the meat comes from a sacrifice, the Christian should not eat it, both an example to the host that a believer's union with Christ prevents them from doing so, but also to avoid matters of which might disturb a weaker person's conscience.

According to Paul, the Christian is free to eat whatever they want—our liberty should not depend upon what others think. But the weak Christian, or the non-Christian, needs to know that the Christian does not (and indeed) cannot sanction idolatry. Paul does not want Christians to offer a prayer of thanks over something which the strong is free to eat, but which the weaker party thinks is sinful, and so they then denounce the strong. Paul wishes to avoid all such situations in the first place. Better not to eat if there are doubts. But if nothing is said (the implication is don't ask!), eat and enjoy!

This leads to the following guideline from Paul in verses 31-33 which serves as test as to whether or not to eat and drink: *"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved."* If we do everything to the glory of God (which means that we carefully consider what exalts Christ and furthers his kingdom), we are free to eat and drink what we wish. However, doing everything for the glory of God means that the strong must be careful in the presence of weak and avoid doing any of those things which may cause the weak to stumble. Like Paul, we should all follow the example of Christ, and put the good of others before our own, so that we gain a hearing to preach the gospel, by which they may be saved.

What, then, do we say, by way of application?

Paul raises three issues in this section of 1 Corinthians. The first is that Christians are to enjoy their liberty in Christ. If our standing before God depends upon the merits of Christ (his death for our sins, his obedience providing us with a justifying righteousness which are received through faith), then what we eat and drink does not impact our standing with God. This means we are free to eat or drink whatever we wish (within moderation, of course). And yet, we must always be cognizant of the weak, and we must do nothing to cause them to stumble. We must put love for our brothers and sisters ahead of our freedom to eat or drink, or not.

Paul's second point is that although idols are nothing—there is one God, who created and sustains all things—if people think the idols are real, then for all intents and purposes they are. The demonic comes into play through deception. Even though idols are nothing, demons are real. People may think they are worshiping Caesar Augustus, Diana, Mars or Jupiter or some other pagan deity, yet in doing so, they are actually serving demons. This is why Christians are to have nothing to do with idolatry. Paul is not worried about meat, he's worried about Christians participating in the demonic.

Paul's third point is closely related—Christ gives himself to us in the Lord's Supper. This is why the sacraments are essential to Christian worship—and not just something tagged on once in a while. When we eat the consecrated bread and drink the wine, we are truly participating in Christ's body and blood because through faith we take ordinary bread and wine, as though they were the true body and blood of Christ. When we do this, the Holy Spirit ensures that we receive what is promised—Christ's body and blood. Paul's point is that if this is true, how can we receive Christ's true body and blood and yet still be willing participate in the demonic. We can't. This is why, Paul says we must flee from idolatry. We must have nothing to do with idolatry in any of its forms.

At the end of the day, Paul leaves us with two basic ethic principles to help us navigate our way through a pagan culture, like that of our own. Because our salvation has already been accomplished for us by Christ through his death and resurrection, we put the needs of our neighbor ahead of our own, and whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God.