

No Middle Ground

- 1 Corinthians 10:14-22
- I like the story Kyle Idleman told about Michael Jordan in his book, “Gods and Idols.” Jordan went to see his friend one day, Fred Whitfield, who was an NBA executive. Michael was cold and asked if he could borrow a jacket before they went out to eat, and Fred told him where the coat closet was. He was gone a while, but when he came back, he was carrying an armload of branded athletic jackets, shirts, shoes, and other gear. He dumped the pile on the floor and then went to the kitchen. He returned with a butcher knife and began to cut the pile of gear, which were all branded Puma, not Nike, into a thousand pieces. When he had thoroughly destroyed the gear, he gathered it all up and took it to the dumpster. When he was done, Jordan said to his friend, “Hey dude, call so-n-so, my Nike rep tomorrow, and tell him to replace all of this. But don’t let me ever see you again with anything other than Nike. You can’t ride the fence.” That’s an uncomfortable image of what Jordan did, and it might seem arrogant on his part, but it serves as a great illustration of idol-smashing. It demonstrates total commitment, the kind of radical commitment that God demands from his people.
- Last week we looked at the history lesson Paul gave the church in Corinth, reminding them that the things that happened to Israel were “written down for our instruction.” We saw God’s judgment on the children of Israel in the wilderness for their unbelief. That unbelief led them to participate in idolatry of various kinds, including worshiping a golden calf that Aaron fashioned with his own hands, or worshiping the idols of Baal with their Baal-worshipping wives. Today we see how Paul connects that warning to us, as he says to the saints in Corinth and at Antioch Community Church, “flee from idolatry!” I like the way JB Phillips translates this command in verse 14: “The lesson we must learn, my brothers, is at all costs to avoid worshipping a false god.” Paul will establish in this passage today that there is no middle ground here. None that is safe. And he is going to do that with a very simple flow of logic that should be accessible for every thinking person. And that’s how Paul prefaces his argument, by saying in verse 15, “I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.” I love that.
- Did anybody here have a mother or a father who would stop the car at the doctor’s office, or the shopping center, or the church, or a relatives house, turn around to the kids sitting in the back seat and say, “Listen! We are going in here and I want you to act like you’ve got...(right!)...some sense.” I never thought about it as a child when my mom or dad would say that, and I heard it OFTEN, but they were saying, “Son, I know you don’t have any sense...but at least ACT like you do!” That never made sense to me. 😊
- Paul says here, “I know you people do have good sense. Listen to what I say, and then judge for yourselves.” The implication is, Paul believed that they would see that what he said was good. And right. And they would act on that truth. Side note? We ARE to judge what people say, and decide for ourselves whether we agree with it or not. But what is our standard of judgment? The Bible. **Look at Acts 17:10-11.** We learn from that passage that it is not necessary to be a scholar or a seminary graduate to understand the word of God. The Jews in Berea were not praised here by Luke for their scholarship or their intellect: they were considered more noble than the Thessalonians because they received the word with eagerness and they examined the word with thoroughness. **In other words, the measure of how much we walk out of here with is determined in large part by how much we put into the task of hearing and receiving the Word.**
- Paul enters into a logical argument that examines the Lord’s Supper as participation with Christ and pagan sacrifices as participation with demons, with no middle ground. There is no place there to join hands and sing kumbaya. Let’s look at the text then under these main points: the covenant, the conclusion, and the command.
- **The covenant (vs. 16-17)**

- The Lord's Supper is participation (koinonia; fellowship, one with; sharing) in the body and the blood of Christ. It is a sign of the covenant we have with Christ. Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." If that was the new covenant, what was the old covenant? There are several times when God made a covenant with his people. Abraham was the first, and you can read about that in Genesis 15, when God told Abraham, "I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." He promised Abraham to make him a great nation, and then told Abraham to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon. They were cut in half and laid on the ground as an offering to God. Then God sent a fire pot and a flaming torch between the pieces of the sacrifice, and the Bible says, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram." **Look at Exodus 24:7-11.** I like that. They saw God, and they ate and drank. When we take communion and eat the bread and drink the juice, we see Christ, and eat and drink. Luke wrote for the Gentiles, so maybe that is why his account of the upper room includes Jesus taking the cup of blessing first, before the bread. They took the cup, then ate the bread, and then they took the cup of the new covenant. What was the cup of blessing that they took first? It was the third cup of the Passover, and when it was poured, then the meal was blessed and those participating could enter in. Jesus ate his last Passover with his disciples, and the first "Lord's supper" with them. When we take communion, it is not just a ceremony, just something we do on the first Sunday of the month. No! It is a deeply spiritual event where one of two things happen: either we eat and drink spiritual blessing and nourishment to our souls, or we eat and drink condemnation to ourselves. It is not to be entered into lightly, as we will see in the next chapter. When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are reminded that we belong to Jesus through the last covenant, the one that was sealed with his blood. It is a holy thing, and we are a holy people. Not only that, but communion reminds us...
- We are one. Verse 17, "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." Or, the one loaf. We do not have an isolated covenant with the Lord, but the Lord's Supper reminds us that we are in community. That's why we pass the communion plates, and each of you takes a piece of the bread, or in our case, a cracker. When we leave what the Word clearly teaches and move into superstition, water becomes holy and bread becomes something that only the priests can touch, so only the priest can place a wafer on your tongue. You are in communion in that case with the priest, and he is the mediator for that communion to reach heaven. But that is not what Jesus instituted for us.
- **The Conclusion (vs. 20)**
- Paul states the case for the covenant that is on display when we participate in the body of Christ by breaking bread and drinking the cup. He then says in verse 18 that those in Israel who still offer sacrifices participate in that sacrifice. They become participants, as it were, in a dead work. Is Paul referring back, also, to the sacrifices that were made in the wilderness to false gods? I think so! They entered into a participation with demons when they did that. Moses wrote this in what is called the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32: "They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded." (vs. 16) Why did they do it? "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth." (vs. 17)
- Sensitive people will see the progression that leads to the conclusion. Those who drink the cup and eat the bread participate in the body of Christ. Those who drink another cup and eat another bread, who practice any form of worship that does not exalt the living God and the Lord Jesus Christ, are participants with demons. There is no neutral ground, no common table, no safe place when it comes to giving our lives and our love to another. Paul says in verse 21, "You cannot drink from both cups! You cannot sit at both tables!" We cannot straddle the fence. I played that game for several years as a young believer. I wanted to be a follower of Jesus, but I also wanted to be like my friends in the world. I remember the summer day after my sophomore year in college, when I was serving as a youth pastor in my church back home. I overheard my older brother talking to a friend of his about me, not knowing I

was in the other room. He said, “Yeah, he’s the youth pastor, but he has a different side that he doesn’t let them see at church.” That hit me like a punch in the gut. My brother was right; I was playing a game. A very dangerous one. I thank God he had mercy on me.

- The message to that church in the first century was clear. Do not go to pagan temples and participate in their worship and their sacrifices. Corinth was dominated, in landscape and in the culture of the city, by the Temple of Aphrodite. It was a destination for tourists the world over. They came there not to take pictures but to worship. To indulge their flesh in a temple dedicated to lust. We don’t have pagan temples around here. Or, maybe we do. I heard a student speak a few weeks ago about a church in Raleigh she was a part of for a while... until she realized what it was all about. It is called “Church of the Earth,” and is just one of the places you can go these days and worship nature, and connect with the so-called god that is in you. You say, I wouldn’t be caught dead in a church like that! But we have pagan philosophies in the news, on the radio, on the TV, on the internet, on social media, and the spirit of the age invites us to come and imbibe deeply.
- What is the message to us? How does Paul’s warning to not provoke God to jealousy apply to us in Burlington? The obvious application is that we are to make sure that our lives are fully surrendered to Jesus. We are to make sure day by day that God has no competing interests in our hearts. We walk on a different path. We don’t follow the devil any more. We belong to God.
- **The Command**
- We end this passage where we began, in verse 14: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” Don’t stay there. Run. Get out of there. Now. Don’t wait.
- Prayer

Questions for Application:

1. How does this passage help you understand the spiritual implications of communion better?
2. Do you have a testimony of how God opened your eyes to “straddling the fence” and gave you a heart fully turned towards him? Or do you have a request for prayer about that struggle in your life right now?