

“American” Idols

1 Corinthians 10:6-14

In this series on the Christian use of liberty, there is an underlying theme that comes to the surface again in today’s passage. Highlighting this theme can help us understand an overview of 1 Corinthians 8, 9 and 10. First, consider 1 Corinthians 8:11-12: **“¹¹ And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? ¹² But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.”** The word “perish” means “destroy.” The word “wound” translates a word meaning “to strike (with the hand or a stick) repeatedly.” These words are especially harsh when we contrast them with the Person and saving work of Jesus Christ (in both verses). Christ died for our sins and gloriously rose again. His victory alone is our door to heaven. Through His finished work, we also understand what it is to love our brother sacrificially.

This picturesque language of a beating comes out again in 1 Corinthians 9:26b-27: **“so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: ²⁷ But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached [the gospel] to others, I myself should be a castaway.”** The word “fight” translates a word referring to boxing. “Keep under” translates the word meaning “to strike under the eyes; to beat black and blue.” We are not to wound our brothers, but we do discipline our desires.

And then consider the words in 1 Corinthians 10:9-10: **“Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Nalso either murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.”** The word “destroyed” translates the same word “perish” found in 1 Corinthians 8:11. Here the word carries special force through the addition of another word meaning the same thing: **“destroyed of the destroyer.”**

These three illustrations help us to understand an overview of these three chapters:

The impact of your Christian use of liberty

- 1) on Christian brothers, ch. 8: Don’t let your liberty becoming a stumbling block
- 2) on the Gospel ministry, ch. 9, esp. 9:12, 22-23: Don’t hinder the Gospel
- 3) on yourself ch. 10: Don’t be an idolater; don’t grumble.

The Use of Old Testament Examples

“⁶ Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. . . ¹¹ Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” In verses 6 and 11, Paul explained his purpose in giving Old Testament examples to these Gentile believers. These were given so that

a.) we should not allow our craving for evil continue, and b.) we would be admonished – receiving understanding from Old Testament examples during the church age.

It is helpful to note a time when Paul mentions something similar: Romans 15:4 **“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the**

scriptures might have hope.” This appears near the end of a discussion of questionable things (Romans 14) which is similar to 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and 10.

The Commands and Exhortations

“7 Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. 8 Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. 9 Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. 10 Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.”

The lust (or “craving”) described in verse 6 caused a breach between Israel and the Lord and produced four serious transgressions: idolatry (v.7), sexual immorality (v.8), testing Christ (v.9) and grumbling (v. 10).

■ **Command:** Stop being an idolater as some of them were. 7

This present tense command should properly be translated as “stop being idolaters.” The quote, “**the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play**” refers to eating, drinking, dancing and pagan revelry.ⁱ (This word “play” is the word translated “caress” in the Genesis 26:8 LXX.) The quote above is from Exodus 32:6, and describes the actions of the Israelites as they worshiped the golden calf under Aaron’s leadership. Paul referred to this incident because “feasting before an idol was a precursor to idolatry, and if the Corinthians joined in the idol feasts they were in danger of being drawn into idolatry.”ⁱⁱ The danger of idolatry is repeated in verse 14. Why did Paul connect the dangers of lust with a command about idolatry? It is because we are all tempted to make lords out of our lusts. In Ezekiel 14:4, the Lord warned Ezekiel that the leaders were setting up idols in their hearts. This is especially important for us as Americans: our idols are hidden in our hearts. And we are tempted to live for our nerve endings rather than what is never ending.

How did the Israelites make lords out of their lusts?

○ **Exhortation:** Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them committed. 8

By the use of the word “us” in verses 8 and 9, Paul includes himself among those in danger. The danger of self-deception is very real, as we see in verse 12: “**Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.**” By using the word “us,” Paul came alongside the believers of all the ages and exhorted them. If Paul knew he was also in danger, then we should all heed his warning. Verse 8 refers to an incident of widespread sexual immorality in Numbers 25: “**Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.**” According to Numbers 31:16, this temptation came through the counsel of a soothsayer named Balaam: “**Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD.**”ⁱⁱⁱ (Please see the footnote below for an important note about Balaam.) His sensual temptation led to widespread destruction of many Israelites.

○ **Exhortation:** Nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them did. 9

Since Christ was the Rock that followed them (1 Corinthians 10:4), the Israelites tested Christ by their deeds. What did it mean to “tempt Christ?” “It has the meaning of seeing how far one can go and get away with it without getting punished.”^{iv} The reference to serpents in verse 9 tells us that Paul was referring to the incident recorded in Numbers 21:5-9. The people spoke against God and Moses.

■ **Command: Do not grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. 10**

Verse 10 is likely a reference to Numbers 16. Korah, Dathan and Abiram were destroyed with their families. They led the people to grumble and complain about what God had not yet provided the food they wanted (Numbers 16:13-14). Once again, this was a very timely warning for Corinthians who wanted the meat offered to idols.

Applications

- ✓ v. 12, **The danger of self-deception:** “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Those who think they are standing perfectly fine need to look again for they are in danger of falling.
- ✓ v. 13, **Comfort with a note of caution:** “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

When you consider the caution raised in verse 12, you can see the intent of verse 13. Should we live in doubt as to whether the Lord can and will bring us through trying times? No! He is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted more than we can bear. He will provide a way of escape so that we will be able to endure it. But there is a note of caution here. It is found in the words, “**common to man.**” The comfort is that every temptation is “common to man.” The caution is that every temptation is “common to man.” This caution is evident by the command in verse 14.

- ✓ **Command: “Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.”**
- ✓ **Learning how to see our “American” Idolatry**

John MacArthur wrote, “Churches and philosophies have developed that virtually make gods of success, love, social service, self-image or simply mankind. Anything that takes our first loyalty and allegiance is an idol. Many people who would not take a second glance at a carved idol will sacrifice health, time, family, moral standards and anything else required in order to achieve the idol of success or recognition they want.”^v All of us need to carefully examine our hearts to look for the idols of the heart (Ezekiel 14). You may be tempted to worship your children, the perfect car, or your idea of the perfect house. Haggai 1:4-6 identified the materialism of those who focused more on their beautifully paneled houses than on God’s house. Perhaps your “American idol” is “comfort food.” “Pastor Darrin Patrick, in his book Church Planter, writes, ‘I am shocked at the number of [pastors] who are either addicted or headed toward addiction to alcohol.’”^{vi}

Think of it this way. Your heart manufactures idols so easily that it is as if it has a liquid silver lining always ready for a new idol. Any sensation, any thought, any taste, any smell, anything you see or touch can rise up through that lining to harden in place as an idol.

Consider the words of Colossians 3:5, “covetousness which is idolatry.” The Israelites lusted for their favorite foods; the Corinthians craved the idol’s meat; our idols are what we covet. How would we

recognize “coveting” – the kind of craving that destroyed many Israelites? Let’s look at a New Testament passage that explains the caution to us. 1 Timothy 6:8-10, **“⁸ And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. ⁹ But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. ¹⁰ For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”** You can see the warning of devastating destruction in verses 9-10; this springs from the love of money – the root of all kinds of evil. Piercing sorrows, destruction and perdition are the outcome of **“foolish and hurtful lusts.”** How can we be sure that we aren’t dominated by these dangerous cravings? Verse 8 declares, **“And having food and raiment [clothing or covering] let us be there with content.”** Are you content? Or does your heart always insist that you want to have, need to have more?

Let’s take this passage to heart and flee from our “American” idolatry.

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ⁱ Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 10–16*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 20. citing Robertson et. al and Gordon Fee

ⁱⁱⁱ There is real danger in the story of Balaam. Balaam only went to King Balak with God’s permission (Numbers 22:18). He claimed that he only spoke the words that God gave to him (Numbers 22:38; 23:5, 12, 16, 26; 24:4, 13) and even included a beautiful prophecy of Jesus Christ (Numbers 24:17)! Ultimately, the people of Israel slew Balaam for his deeds (Joshua 13:22). 2 Peter 2:15-16 tells us that leader whose eyes are full of adultery are following the greedy way of Balaam (see also Jude 11). Yet there is still another note about Balaam that ought to cause our church great concern. The Lord warned the New Testament church at Pergamos in Revelation 2:14 *“But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.”* This tells us that there are teachers like Balaam that are alive today, teaching the Word of God, sometimes with great accuracy. But their approach to ministry is actually greedy and sensuous, seducing God’s people into sexually immoral ways!

^{iv} Ronald Trail, 21. Citing Lenski, Ellingworth and Morris

^v John MacArthur, 1 Corinthians, the MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Chicago: Moody Press, 1984. p. 223

^{vii} Shane Idleman, “Should Christians drink alcohol?” Christianity Today, August 9, 2017 accessed at <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/should-christians-drink-alcohol/111675.htm>