

## 1 COR 10:7-14—OVERCOMING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART

**INTRO:** Every one of us is unique: we each have our own DNA, our own particular address, our own job, our own particular likes and dislikes, etc., etc. Whether we are Christians or non-Christians, we all tend to focus on, find our meaning in, and live our lives for our jobs, our family, our likes, our dislikes, our wants, our needs.

All those things are important; they are what make up day-to-day life. But all those things mask a much greater depth of significance that pervades every choice we make and everything we do. By which I mean, our likes and dislikes, our thoughts and choices, reveal something of profound importance about us that we don't even realize. Every day our normal routine confronts us with issues—and confronts us with an overwhelming danger—of the most profound significance, but we don't see that it is even happening.

It's sort of like those "Magic Eye" pictures: On the surface the picture just appears to be a 2-dimensional colorful pattern with no particular meaning. But if you look at it the right way, all of a sudden you see that it is a 3-dimensional scene with meaning that had been there all along but you never saw it.

Today's passage of Scripture—**1 Cor 10:7-14**—is designed to try to get us to open our eyes to the true meaning and depth of what is going on in our lives. BTW, in the passage several times Paul refers to "some of them." When he does so he means the OT Israelites. **[READ]**

**PROP:** This passage is telling us that: **"Our life reveals our theology."**

Some people may say, "I have no theology." Oh yes you do—even if you're an unbeliever—and your life reveals what it is.

**O/S:** We will see this as we consider three aspects of today's passage: (1) the context; (2) the deadly danger that confronts us all the time; and (3) how to avoid that danger.

### **I. The Context**

In chs. 8-10 of 1 Cor Paul is dealing with something we don't even think about: eating food that had been dedicated and sacrificed to idols. This involved a number of issues: (1) the conscience of the Christian who ate meat sacrificed to idols; (2) the effect on others if they saw a Christian eating meat sacrificed to idols; and (3) whether Christians should go to public events in pagan temples and participate in pagan festivals dedicated to idols.

At the end of ch. 8 Paul urged restraint. He said in essence, **"If my eating meat dedicated to idols causes someone to stumble in faith, then I won't eat meat."** Some people in Corinth apparently interpreted Paul's self-restraint as an indication that he really didn't have the freedom and authority of a real apostle. They were looking at apostles like a lot of my African friends do: an apostle is a "Big Man of God" who can do whatever he wants regardless of its effects on others—rather than an apostle being a leader by example, a servant, who puts the welfare of others over his own rights—which is exactly what Paul was doing. That's why in **ch. 9** Paul said, **"I have the right to do all of these things, but I voluntarily don't use my rights so that nothing about my conduct will hinder the spread of the Gospel."**

That background leads to ch. 10 where Paul begins by talking about OT Israel as an example for us. In our passage, the examples of OT Israel in the wilderness all involved food in one way or another, because that's the underlying issue the Corinthians were confronting. But food is only an *example* of a *broader* issue that applies to *all areas of life*. It's like when we were in **ch. 7**: the context there was marriage, but Paul's point that **"Christ is primary and our circumstances are secondary"** extended beyond whether we are married or single to all areas of life. The same is true in our passage today. So, with that background we need to consider:

### **II. The Deadly Danger that Confronts us**

**A. What is the deadly danger that we all face in the choices we make and the things we do?** That danger is *idolatry*. Look at how Paul begins in **v. 7**: **"Do not be idolaters."** Look at how he ends in **v.14**: **"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."** The issue of idolatry frames this passage. Everything in between is an *example* of idolatry, a *warning* of the danger of idolatry, or an *encouragement* to avoid falling into the temptation of idolatry.

You may be thinking, "Excuse me. This is 21<sup>st</sup> century America, not ancient Greece. We all know, as Paul himself said in 9:4, "there is no such thing as an idol in the world." So what's the big deal?" It is true that the ancient Greeks and Israelites bowed down to statues of idols, and we don't do that. But if you think that's what idolatry is, you are quite mistaken.

What is idolatry? Idolatry is putting anything or anyone over God and Christ. Tim Keller puts it this way: **"Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate**

things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry.” It may be your family; it may be your job; it may be success, or riches, or sex, or looks, or anything. They all can be idols—and they all *are* idols when we elevate their importance over God and Christ.

Idolatry primarily is a heart issue. The Bible recognizes this. Ezek 14:3 specifically says, “**Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts.**” Col 3:5 says, “**Consider the members of your earthly body as dead to . . . greed, which amounts to idolatry.**” Eph 5:5 goes on to say, “**no . . . covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.**”

Coveting and greed are matters of the heart. They affect everything, not just money: “**I want that success; I want that woman (or that man); I will do anything to get what I want.**” Or, on the other hand, “**If I don’t have that, my life is worthless.**” Those are all the attitudes and statements of idolatry.

**B. Look at the examples Paul gives us from OT Israel in vv. 7-10.** In v. 7 he quotes from Exod 32:6. The context there was Israel worshipping the golden calf—obvious idolatry. In v. 8 of 1 Cor he talks about immorality, not idolatry. Nevertheless, he refers to an incident that occurred in Num 25:1-9 when Israelite men began sleeping with Moabite women. Notice how that all began: [READ Num 25:1-2] Idolatry.

Back in 1 Cor 10, vv. 9 and 10 are similar. v. 9 refers to an incident in Num 21 and v. 10 refers to incidents in Num 11 and/or Num 16. Num 21:5 says [READ]; Num 11:4-6 says [READ]; Num 16:3, 13-14 say [READ].

What is going on here—and what’s the big deal about grumbling and complaining? Paul uses these examples because, in one way or another, they all mention eating or food. That links them with the issue that the Corinthians were facing. But far more importantly, the grumbling and complaining the Israelites were doing exposed the idolatry of their heart. Why? Their complaining revealed that they really didn’t love and trust God at all. They didn’t want him for *himself*. They only followed him for what they really wanted—what they thought he would give them, namely, “**a land flowing with milk and honey, an inheritance of fields and vineyards.**”

Idolatry might be the frank worship of other gods as happened in Exod 32; idolatry might be sex as in Num 25; idolatry might be food, ease, material wellbeing as in Num 11 and Num 21; idolatry might include jealousy of someone’s power or position as in Num 16. In all these cases, the people were being led by their own desires, lusts, appetites, and pride rather than by God. Regardless of what the specific issue is, the *root* is idolatry—because idolatry is putting anything or anyone over God and Christ.

How much like those Israelites are we? That’s the point of v. 11 in today’s passage. There Paul is saying, “**Look at their example and then look at yourself.**” At the end of v. 11 he emphasizes how important this is by saying these examples “**were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**” The word for “ends” is *telos* which can mean the chronological end but typically means “**the fulfillment, the goal, the completion.**” IOW, *we*—those of us who are united to Christ by faith—are what the whole OT was pointing to all along. *They* were the shadow; *we* are the reality, the fulfillment, the completion.

Therefore, Paul is urging us, “Don’t be like them.” They were supposed to be a light to the nations, but they never were. But now in Christ *we* are the light of the world. We who have Christ are the *only ones* who can reveal the truth and love of the living God to a lost and desperately needy humanity. If we abandon the true God for other gods, if we put our own desires, lusts, appetites, and pride over what God tells us, or instead of letting God mold and channel our wants and desires, we become idolaters just like they were. When that happens, we are sacrificing ourselves to gods who can never fulfill us or save us.

### III. How to Avoid that Danger

How can we avoid this danger? That is what Paul turns to in vv. 12-13. In these two verses he deals with two or three different types of Christians and also points us to the solution to the ever-present danger of idolatry we face.

**A. Different types of Christians.** In v. 12 Paul primarily is addressing stronger Christians, or perhaps overly confident Christians, who think “**idolatry is not a problem for me**” or even “**I’m strong enough, I can dabble in this or that area without getting burned.**” In v. 13 Paul implicitly addresses the person who feels overwhelmed with temptation or feels like he or she has been singled out.

**B. What’s the answer?** In v. 13 Paul tells both the weak and the strong, the confident and the overwhelmed, “**On your own you can’t win; and if you think you can stand on your own, you’re deluding yourself. But the answer doesn’t lie in you; it lies in God.**”

In vv.12-13 Paul reminds us that no temptation is unique to us. Everything that happens to us is just like what happens to everyone else. So don’t think that you’ve been singled-out for some unbearable trial. You haven’t and neither have I. One thing that means is that, for those of us in Christ, we can’t say, “**I**

couldn't help it" or "The devil made me do it." No. The devil might tempt you, but you have the ability in Christ not to do it, whatever "it" is.

On the other hand, if we are feeling strong and confident and not really subject to temptation. Paul says in **v. 12, "Be careful."** Jake Jacobs, an old singer-songwriter from Greenwich Village, has a song called "*Just a Stone's Throw*." In it he talks about a girl trying to make it as an actress who's supporting herself by waitressing and about an artist who's supporting himself by some menial job. One of the lines goes, "**Everyone I seem to meet is just a stone's throw from the street.**"

It's the same for us. We all have the same needs and are subject to the same appetites and desires as everybody else. We're just a stone's throw away from caving in to those appetites and desires and worshipping the idols of our heart—particularly since God is invisible but the things we want are not, and we physically feel the feelings of desire in our bodies.

Consequently, we need to assess ourselves. There is nothing wrong with having various wants and desires. But how do we know when those wants and desires have become our idols? There are a number of things we can look to. Let me mention three self-assessment considerations:

- First, what makes me feel personally significant and secure, and what guides my choices? Is it God or is it some God-substitute: success, money, family, status, popularity, beauty, or something else? One clear indication of this is: Is there something so important to me that I have to have at all costs? Do I think, "If I don't get that—that job, that person, that whatever—my life is worthless"?
- Second, one Christian thinker said this, "Your religion is what you do with your solitude." IOW, the true god of our heart is where our thoughts naturally go when there is nothing else demanding our attention. What is it that occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about? Maybe it's developing a plan about advancing your career. Or material goods like a dream home. Or a relationship with someone. One or two daydreams do not equal idolatry. But the question is: What do we *habitually* think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of our heart?
- Third, since Jesus said "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," look at how you spend your money. Keller says, "**If God and his grace is the thing in the world you love most, you will give your money away to ministry, charity, and the poor in astonishing amounts. For most of us, however, we tend to over-spend on clothing, or on our children, or on status symbols such as homes and cars. This reveals our idols.**"

So we need to assess ourselves—where our hearts, minds, affections, and desires really are. And we need to be brutally honest in doing so. Discuss this with your spouse: he or she can see things you may not see.

Then, since idolatry primarily is an internal matter, replacing our idols with the Lordship of Jesus is likewise primarily an internal matter. Idolatry, like any sin, can never be remedied simply by repenting and trying harder not to do it. In times of stress, or loneliness, or temptation, we will always default to our idols. The key is to *replace* our idols with the true Lord, Jesus Christ.

Col 3:2-3 tells us, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Regarding these verses, Keller says, "**This entails joyful worship, a sense of God's reality in prayer. Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol. That is what will replace the idols of your heart. If you uproot the idol and fail to 'plant' the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.**"

Is this easy? No. That great hymn "*Come Thou Fount*" says it perfectly, "**Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love.**" John Newton, who wrote "*Amazing Grace*," said, "**I find that to keep my eye simply on Christ, as my peace and my life, is by far the hardest part of my calling. It seems easier to deny self in a thousand instances of outward conduct.**" IOW, we often tend to focus on trying to obey rules of outward conduct, but the *key* is setting our heart, our minds, our thoughts, our affections on *Christ* as our peace and our life. *That* is the road to freedom from the idols that control us.

Remember: v. 13 promises us [READ "God is faithful . . ."]. Two commentaries that I read say that the "**way of escape**" suggests an army that is surrounded, but there is a narrow mountain pass through which it can make its escape. It may not be easy, but it is possible and doable.

To me, v. 13 gives new meaning to what Jesus said in Matt 7:13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate . . . For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Jesus *is* the gate. Jesus *is* the way of escape. When Paul says in **v. 13** that "**God will provide the way of escape,**" he has already done that in Jesus! That is why, if we find our peace, our significance, our security, our joy in *him*, our idols will lose their grip over us.

There is one last thing of vital importance: Overcoming the idols of our heart is not something that we have to do on our own. Remember: Jesus—in the person of the HS—is not just "out there" somewhere, but is *living inside of you*. The OT Israelites only had the presence of God *around* them. But we, if we are in Christ, have the actual presence of God *inside* of us. The same Spirit who dwelt in Jesus and guided him dwells in you and is guiding you. He has given us the ability to truly live like the "new creations" we are if only we will draw on Him. As **Phil 2:13** says, "**It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.**" Draw on *His* power.

**CONCL:** Our lives are fundamentally theological at their very essence—and our life reveals our theology. IOW, all our thoughts, choices, hopes, and desires reveal who or what we *really* worship and are really committed to: it is either Jesus Christ or some form of idol. There is no third alternative.

We think our idols can save us—they can't. We think our idols will give us the satisfaction we crave—they won't. They will only enslave and ultimately abandon us. Jesus alone saves us and gives us the satisfaction, fulfillment, security, and significance we all long for. If we truly take the Gospel into us, our lives will be transformed from the inside-out. We will no longer be idolaters at heart but will start reflecting Jesus Christ himself, and people will see it.