

The Imperfect Church – 19
The Following Church
1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1

Introduction

This is a cup of water. I want to ask you a couple of really dumb, simple questions about it. What is going to happen if I shake this cup? Obviously water is going to come out. *Shake cup and spill water*. Now here's the next question: why did water come out? The easy answer is because I shook it. But think even more basic and simple than that. Why did water come out? Water came out because water was in it. Makes sense, right? If something else had been in the cup, something else would've come out.

Here's a truth we need to know...when you are shaken, put under pressure, do you know what comes out of you? Whatever is on the inside. The NT continuously warns us against the power of our "sinful nature." Part of our fallen nature as human beings is our shocking capacity to sin. We've all experienced this. Someone will wrong us and we respond in less than gracious ways. Someone cuts us off in traffic...look out! We overhear some gossip and find it easy to join in. We get asked a question and realize later how quickly and easily we lied to make ourselves look better. Because the reality of sin is in us, it comes out. All of us are capable of horrific things.

This is the truth that Paul has been hammering into the Corinthians for several chapters now. The Corinthian Christians are arrogant. Puffed up is their default posture. Because of their city's prominence, their wealth, their cultural savvy and wisdom, once they became Christians, they brought a boastfulness into their faith. And now as they are trying to figure out what it means to be a Christian, they are struggling to actually live out their faith. Their church looks strikingly similar to the pagans around them.

That has been clearly seen in their disunity, their sexual ethics, and now in this issue Paul's been dealing with for the last 3 chapters: eating meat sacrificed to idols. Some in the church are continuing their lifelong practice of attending feasts in the temples of the idols in their city. It's a normal part of the culture. Your boss's birthday party, the wedding of some neighbors, funeral of a friend...they all took place in the large banquet halls at the temples. The problem was that the meat eaten at these feasts had just come from the altars in these temples. Some worshiper of these false gods has offered an animal in honor of that deity, and now these people are eating it. Some Christians don't see a problem with that.

Others are horrified. How could a Christian, who has been saved out of pagan idolatry, waltz right back into the temple and eat that food? How could you participate in any way with something that is so anti-God? This disagreement led them to ask Paul what he thinks they should do. For chapters 8 and 9 Paul laid out his argument very clearly...don't do anything that could ever lead another believer into sin. So if your participation in these temple feasts could cause another believer to follow your example and lead them into sin, then restrict your freedom and don't go.

He switched gears in chapter 10 and began his focus on the danger of participating in these feasts. It's not just that you might lead someone else into sin, you are flirting dangerously close to sin yourself. In the first half of chapter 10 Paul walked through numerous OT examples of the Israelites wandering in the desert...they had been saved by God, delivered from their slavery, only to turn on God in rebellion and worship idols. Over and over again. Paul has told them...that is what you are doing...God has saved you out of your slavery to idols and to sin. Don't flirt with idolatry. If you play with fire you are going to get burned.

But they don't think so. These Corinthians Christians think they are stronger than everyone else. More mature than everyone else. More wise than everyone else. While other, lesser Christians, may not be able to handle going into the temples, we can because we are awesome. Paul's warning is summarized in 10:12 – **"If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall."** You think you are such a big deal, when in reality you are getting close to the edge and falling off. He is shaking the cup in the front of their face...you have a sinful nature, sin resides in you, and if you put yourself into situations where you are pressured or shaken by temptation, guess what's going to come out?!

Today we are going to finish up this section of 1 Corinthians with Paul's final argument to them. He's been trying to persuade them to stay away from this idol stuff. Now he is going to hit them pretty hard with why that is, and then give them some very practical advice on how to live Christianly in their culture. As we've said before, we don't face idol food issues today, but we do have to face moral gray areas. Those things in life that God has not spoken directly to or about in the Bible. Those things God has spoken directl to or about are not gray, they are black and white. We simply have to follow his direction. But in the gray areas, how do we live Christianly? 4 Pieces of helpful advice:

1. REMEMBER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS (V. 14-22)
2. LOVE TRUMPS FREEDOM (V. 23-24)

- 3. ENGAGE THE LOST WORLD AROUND YOU (V. 25-30)
- 4. DO WHAT HONORS GOD AND HELPS OTHERS (V. 31-11:1)

1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1 - ¹⁴ So, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. ¹⁵ You are reasonable people. Decide for yourselves if what I am saying is true. ¹⁶ When we bless the cup at the Lord's Table, aren't we sharing in the blood of Christ? And when we break the bread, aren't we sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ And though we are many, we all eat from one loaf of bread, showing that we are one body. ¹⁸ Think about the people of Israel. Weren't they united by eating the sacrifices at the altar? ¹⁹ What am I trying to say? Am I saying that food offered to idols has some significance, or that idols are real gods? ²⁰ No, not at all. I am saying that these sacrifices are offered to demons, not to God. And I don't want you to participate with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink from the cup of the Lord and from the cup of demons, too. You cannot eat at the Lord's Table and at the table of demons, too. ²² What? Do we dare to rouse the Lord's jealousy? Do you think we are stronger than he is? ²³ You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is good for you. You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is beneficial. ²⁴ Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others. ²⁵ So you may eat any meat that is sold in the marketplace without raising questions of conscience. ²⁶ For "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." ²⁷ If someone who isn't a believer asks you home for dinner, accept the invitation if you want to. Eat whatever is offered to you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸ (But suppose someone tells you, "This meat was offered to an idol." Don't eat it, out of consideration for the conscience of the one who told you. ²⁹ It might not be a matter of conscience for you, but it is for the other person.) For why should my freedom be limited by what someone else thinks? ³⁰ If I can thank God for the food and enjoy it, why should I be condemned for eating it? ³¹ So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God. ³³ I, too, try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what is best for me; I do what is best for others so that many may be saved. **11** ¹ And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.

1. REMEMBER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS

He begins with a simple command: flee from the worship of idols. This is interesting considering they think they are standing strong in the face of temptation. Paul doesn't encourage them to stand, he tells them to run! For a fight with idolatry, the wise course of action is not to go into idolatrous temples and try to stand strong. Run away from them.

David Garland writes, "Idolatry is like radioactive waste: it requires them to bolt from this area immediately to avoid contamination and certain death."¹

It is at this point in his argument that he hits them with his most powerful theological reason behind not participating in the temple feasts...you are already feasting with Jesus. Notice v. 16 – "When we bless the cup at the Lord's Table, aren't we sharing in the blood of Christ? And when we break the bread, aren't we sharing in the body of Christ?" When we gather as The Church and take communion together, what is it that we are actually doing? Though there is no inherent power in the bread and juice, eating that meal together has powerful connotations to it. We gather to eat a meal in honor of the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. In so doing, we "share" with Christ in that meal. The word he uses for "share" is *koinonia*, usually translated as fellowship or partnership. When we take the bread and the cup in remembrance and honor of Jesus' sacrifice, we partner with Jesus. Because we are acknowledging that Jesus has done this, it has saved us, and we are now united with him.

What a powerful argument for people who are at a spiritual meal in honor of the sacrifice offered to a pagan god or goddess. What is Paul saying? When you go into that temple and eat that feast, you are partnering with that idol. And his argument goes on in v. 17-18 saying that not only do you partner with Jesus, but with one another. Communion unites us all together as God's one people. So for those in the temple feasts, not only are you uniting with pagan gods, you are uniting with all the idolaters. That has become your "church." That is who you are worshipping with. Do you think that's wise?

He doubles down in v. 19-22. Though it has seemed so far that this practice of eating idol meat isn't that big of a deal, because after all (as he repeats here in v. 19) idols aren't real. True. But demons are. V. 20 – **I am saying that these sacrifices are offered to demons, not to God. And I don't want you to participate with demons.** These temple feasts are not morally neutral. They aren't as gray as they'd like them to be. William Barclay writes, "At such a feast, it was always held that the god himself was a guest. More, it was often held that, after the meat had been sacrificed, the god himself was in it and that at the banquet he entered into the very bodies and spirits of those who ate...The person who sacrificed was in a real sense a sharer with the altar; that person had a mystic communion with the god."²

¹ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 474.

² William Barclay, [The Letters to the Corinthians](#), 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 107–108.

Though Paul is clear, these gods are not real gods, and these Greeks are deceived in thinking that they are...that doesn't mean that there isn't something behind the idol. David Garland continues, "Idols are merely the images for fictitious gods conjured up from human myth and legend, however strongly most people still believe in them. The Corinthian cosmology, however, was only partially correct. They had not accounted for the fact that the hollowness of the idols is completely filled with the evil work of demons."³

When Paul says that these sacrifices are offered to demons, not to God, he is quoting Deuteronomy 32. Here are verses 16-21a –

- ¹⁶ They stirred up his jealousy by worshiping foreign gods;
they provoked his fury with detestable deeds.
- ¹⁷ They offered sacrifices to demons, which are not God,
to gods they had not known before,
to new gods only recently arrived,
to gods their ancestors had never feared.
- ¹⁸ You neglected the Rock who had fathered you;
you forgot the God who had given you birth.
- ¹⁹ "The Lord saw this and drew back,
provoked to anger by his own sons and daughters.
- ²⁰ He said, 'I will abandon them;
then see what becomes of them.
For they are a twisted generation,
children without integrity.
- ²¹ They have roused my jealousy by worshiping things that are not God;
they have provoked my anger with their useless idols.

Sounds much like what Paul is saying here. These idols aren't a big deal, but there is evil spiritual power behind it, driving people away from God. Why in the world would you ever participate in that? Notice when he said in v. 20 that he didn't want them to participate with demons, that word for participate is *koinonia* again. You are partnered with Christ, therefore you dare not partner with demons. Jesus is Lord. So as you navigate the gray areas of your life, figuring out how to make wise, Christian decisions, the first determining factor is this: Jesus is my Lord...what does that dictate?

2. LOVE TRUMPS FREEDOM

³ William Baker, "[1 Corinthians](#)," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 149.

10:23-24 - ²³ You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is good for you. You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is beneficial. ²⁴ Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others.

He has already told us in chapter 6 that this is their church's slogan: I am allowed to do anything. Literally translated, "I have the authority to do anything." I can do what I want, you can't tell me what to do, you're not my mom. A very immature, and very dangerous, way to live your life. They are highly concerned about their freedom to live as they please. While you may technically have it in your power to do something, that does not mean you should. Could ≠ Should. Just because you have a desire to do it, and the means to get it done, does not equal Christian freedom. Not everything is good. Not everything is beneficial. The word he uses for "beneficial" is the word for building a house, a construction term. Not everything builds. Some things tear down. And with that, he closes out a part of his argument he began in 8:1 by saying that knowledge puffs up but love builds up (same word). Our primary concern is not what we can do, but on how we can best build up those around us.

3. ENGAGE THE LOST WORLD AROUND YOU

Paul now turns to helpful, specific counsel. And here is what his counsel is not: the world around you is sinful, so withdraw from it, go live in a cave, and live out your days in holy seclusion. If we aren't careful, that could be an easy conclusion to draw from all this: so many decisions are gray, there is so much temptation in our world, the only way I can remain untainted by all this sin is to stay away from sinners. Well, if Jesus had thought that, we'd all still be lost and headed for Hell. Jesus came to a lost and sinful world, entered into it, and saved it. Paul's counsel for us now is not to retreat away from the world, but to courageously enter into it with Christian convictions.

Though actively participating in temple feasts crosses a line into idolatry, what about the meat that was sold in the markets for private consumption? It had all been offered to idols too. Eat it. Enjoy it. Why? As he quotes the OT again in v. 26, because everything belongs to God. So you are free to enjoy God's good gifts as long as you don't cross into sinful attitudes or actions.

With that, he now gets very detailed with potential scenarios: you get invited into the home of an unbeliever and they serve meat to eat. Well, go if you want to. You don't have to, but you can. Eat freely without issue.

Again, you are in the home of an unbeliever with a chance to help them know Jesus...this is a great opportunity. Your freedom shouldn't be limited and you can enjoy a good gift from the Lord. But, you may ask, what happens if you know for a fact the meat has been sacrificed to an idol? He deals with that next. Someone, and we aren't told who, informs the Christian that the meat is in fact idol meat. Now, don't eat it. In a case like this, apparently ignorance is bliss. While we don't know who has told the Christian about the meat, it comes from someone who apparently has a conscience issue with it. Two potential options: 1) another Christian has informed them, so in the name of love for this brother or sister in Christ, don't eat the meat (as taught in chapters 8 and 9); 2) the unbelieving host tells them. Now if this is the case, we don't know their motivations for telling. Perhaps it is innocent, perhaps for the purpose of putting the Christian on the spot...regardless, the result is the same. You have an opportunity to stand for Christ in the midst of idolatry...do it.

Let's translate this into a contemporary setting today: The Bible does not condemn the drinking of alcohol. It condemns abuse and drunkenness. So alcohol with a meal or with friends is more gray than black and white. Is it sinful to drink? Clearly, no. There is no command that would be violated if you did. So let's say you are at a friend's house for a cookout and some sort of adult beverage is served. If all lines up with scripture, you can participate if you want. You don't have to, but you can. But...what happens if someone comes in who has a history of abuse and is in recovery? Everything has changed. Now your drinking has become much more than a drink. Your love for this person and desire to help them stay sober trumps your freedom to drink. Engage the world around you, but be wise with how your freedoms affect the people around you.

4. DO WHAT HONORS GOD AND HELPS OTHERS

10:31-11:1 - ³¹ So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God. ³³ I, too, try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what is best for me; I do what is best for others so that many may be saved. **11** ¹ And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.

v. 31 is one of the most well-known verses from the letter. And often pulled out of context. As we navigate the moral grayness of the world around us, God's glory gets to win. Our primary concern is how our lives project God to a watching world. So as we make decisions, it matters what those decisions say about the God we worship.

v. 33 is such a helpful summary...don't do what is best for you...do what is best for others too. This lines up with what Paul told the Philippians, to not only look out for your own interests (though there is nothing wrong with that), look out also for the interests of those around you.

So as we make decisions, it matters how those decisions affect the people around us. So maybe a helpful grid for us can be this as we face decisions:

- Since Jesus is my Lord, what does that dictate about this decision?
- Is love guiding this, or is my own selfish gain?
- Will this help me rightly engage the lost around me, without sacrificing my Christian witness?
- Does this bring glory to God?
- Will others be genuinely helped?

Now, maybe you caught it, but I want to highlight something: if Paul's line of reasoning here sounds familiar, there is a reason for that. He uses the exact same line of reasoning he used in chapter 6 about sexual ethic. Look at this comparison:

10:14: Flee from idolatry.

6:18: Flee from sexual immorality.

10:16–17: The Lord's Supper represents that we are one body with Christ.

6:15–17: Your bodies are members of Christ; you cannot become one body with a prostitute.

10:23: I am allowed to do anything, but not all things are helpful.

6:12: I am allowed to do anything, but not all things are helpful.

10:31: Do all to the glory of God.

6:20: Glorify God in your body.

So here is the conclusion: No matter what we face, if it is sinful, we run from it. We seek after Christ, not after sin. Why? Because we have been united with Jesus, and therefore united with his people. We don't want to unite with any other spiritual power, or with anyone other than God's people. And while we have freedom to do a lot of things, that does not mean they are good things to do. Regardless of what it is about, God's glory always wins the day.

So when the cup gets shaken, we don't want sin to come out because we've been in foolish environments making foolish decisions. We want the glory of God and love for others to spill out all over the world.