

Series: 1 Corinthians
Gray Areas Pt 5
The Idolatry of Christian Liberties
1 Corinthians 10:14-22
Tim Armstrong, Senior Pastor

Weekend 02.26-27.11

Let's thank Image from Mansfield Christian for leading us in worship this morning. Thank you. You can go ahead and have a seat. Now, Dan before you take off I have to ask you. Many of you might not realize that when you were right out of college you were hired by Mansfield Christian, Choir Director. Dan was actually my choir teacher when I was in high school and I remember you used to lead image 31 years ago. But I remember auditioning for Image and I didn't make image, did I? My, how things have changed. God's grace is enough (Dan). Thank you Dan.

Well, good to have you here this morning. Those of you who are parents and grandparents, friends of Mansfield Christian – thank you for being here, joining with us in worship today. We've had a great time of worship. Now we're going to transition and continue our worship by looking at God's Word so I want to invite you to open to the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 10 this morning. For those of you who are visiting we are working through exegetically, which means verse by verse, through the book of 1 Corinthians. We've been in it for about nine months now. We've made it all the way to chapter 10. It probably going to make it through the end of this year until we get to the end of the book. That's alright. What we're doing is we're just working through it and allowing God to dictate the topics of the things that we're learning; things that we talk about. And actually, the topic that we're in today is the topic of Christian liberties. It actually started in our study of chapter 8. It goes through chapter 9 all the way through to the end of chapter 9. We're just getting close to concluding this particular topic.

For those of you who are new or just as a reminder Christian liberties we've defined as any conduct not necessarily addressed in scripture. It's any conduct not addressed in scripture. Now, we understand that scripture gives us clarity on certain conduct issues and actions; those that we would say are black and white. There's not much to debate about but there are conduct issues that are not represented in scripture. Those we would call gray areas. And the issue with Christian liberties is to say, essentially, how do we know what is right and wrong if the bible doesn't specifically speak to that issue or speak about that conduct or action. So what Paul is teaching us through this study of chapter 8, 9 and 10 is essentially principles of how to answer that question – how to know what is right and what is wrong when it comes to the area of Christian liberty.

Now, as we come to chapter 10 Paul returns to a topic that actually launched the whole conversation on Christian liberties. He's returning to the topic of idolatry. It started in chapter 8 and the issue there was meat sacrificed to idols. Was it right to eat meat sacrificed to an idol. This time the issue is a bit different. What is the issue now? Well, in a nutshell the issue has to do with association. Association. Let me just explain what I mean by that. Many in the Corinthian church had been saved out of idolatry. You understand that by now. They came out of a Pagan background. They came out of a background where this was just their normal lifestyle to go to a temple to offer alms; to offer sacrifices to an idol; to a Pagan god. But as they became believers and as they grew

in their faith they started to have an understanding that really an idol was nothing. That's what Paul says in chapter 8, verse 4. He says they're really nothing. A meat is meat and that's not really an issue. And really the issue is whether it might bother someone else. The issue of the weaker brother and the stronger brother.

If you've grown out of that background Paul says you understand that really an idol is not something to be feared. It's also not something to be that concerned about, but, he then says that you still have to be careful of your association. You don't want to push your participation into a level of returning to idolatry. And essentially that's what was happening by the time we get to chapter 10 for many of the believers in Corinth. They were pushing their Christian liberties right to the edge and they were pushing it too far. What they were doing is they were returning to the temples, these Pagan temples, not necessarily to worship but to socialize. If you remember from one of the things we've learned about Pagan temples in the past, in Corinth especially this was an area when many people would gather, many people would socialize. It might be a place where you make business contacts; a place for entertainment. It was a place for a social center of Corinth. Just like we have meeting places today in our culture the temple was a meeting place. And these believer who had a sense of security and a sense of what idols were and weren't were returning to these temples essentially to maintain their social contacts. What Paul is saying is your association is becoming now a part of participation and idolatry and you need to steer clear of that. That's the sense that we get of 1 Corinthians 10, verses 14 through 22.

Now, what I want to do is I just want to read this to you so you have it locked in your mind and then we're going to go through it and we're going to dissect it and understand what the text has to say to a modern culture, our church today. So, follow along as I read starting in verse 14. Paul writes, therefore, my beloved flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people judge for yourself what I say. Now, I want you to listen. From this point forward I want you to listen for seven rhetorical questions. They frame the argument that Paul is making. I also want you to listen for the word participation. You're going to hear that.

Verse 16. The cup of blessing that we bless is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? First rhetorical question. The bread that we break is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? 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. 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. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?

Alright, let's go back to verse 14 and let's just unpack the text. Notice how Paul begins. He says, my beloved. Now that's important because those words come before a very strict commandment. So he's starting gently with them. He's saying to them *agapetos* which is a way of saying, it's a form of *agape*. You know the word *agape*. My loved ones. Listen to me carefully. My loved ones. He's saying I'm expressing deep affection for you because I'm about to tell you something hard. Flee from idolatry. And the idea of fleeing from idolatry is set into the strongest language of the Greek New Testament. It's an imperative command. It's not only an imperative it's a present, active imperative which means that this is a command that takes forces from this moment on. This should be a habitual part of your life – a fleeing anything that has to do with idolatry. He says I love you but I want to tell you something hard. What you're involved with right now, your socialization is more than just association. It's participation. You're coming dangerously close and you're becoming an idol worshipper by your actions.

Essentially what Paul is saying, especially in verse 15 he says I want you to realize this. I want you to be sensible. I want you to judge for yourself which is another way of saying it doesn't take a genius to figure this out. Think about this. Judge. The idea of choose that which is good. Really, if you think about it this is a key to all Christian liberties. Isn't it? I mean, it's a call to be wise and to be judging carefully what we do. This is what Paul is saying. Be wise, judge carefully your actions. Don't push it right to the limit. Don't take it all the way to just the edge of sin. In fact, go the opposite direction. Flee as far as you can from this especially when it comes to the area of idolatry.

Now, notice. He gives them the reason behind this command. He uses the Lord's Supper as an illustration. This is where we picked up at verse 16 with the rhetorical questions. Notice he says the cup of blessing that we bless. Now, clearly he's speaking of the Lord's Supper. Just in context I'm not going to talk much about the details of the Lord's Supper because we're going to get into that in chapter 11. Let's just use it as Paul uses it as an illustration. He says, now according to them, is it not a participation? Now this word participation, used four times. Three times in this short section. Four times in the section altogether. It's the word *koinonia*. It means fellowship. It's a popular word throughout the New Testament. It's the idea of sharing in. Now listen. He's giving them a principle. He says, consider the Lord's Supper. Is it not a sharing in, a *koinonia*, a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break. Is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread. So what is he saying? He's saying when believers participate in the Lord's Supper, what do they do? They identify with Jesus Christ, right? That's what we do. When we come together and we share the Lord's Supper; we share communion what are we saying? We're saying we're identifying with the one who instituted this.

Now, he goes on. He enlarges the illustration. Verse 18. Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who ate the sacrifices participants in the altar? Now what is he saying here? He's saying think about the Jewish people. Think about them when they would go to the

temple to sacrifice to Yahweh. They would take their sacrificial lamb and they would offer it on the altar. They would also take a portion of that and they would give it to the priest and then they would take a portion of it and they would go home and they would eat it. And when they would eat it what were they doing? They were participating back in the sacrifice that happened at the altar. In other words, they were identifying themselves as God's chosen people. Now, where is Paul going? Where is he moving them at this point? Well, he's already said when believers participate in the Lord's Supper they identify with Christ. When the Jewish people participated in the sacrifices at the altar they identified with God. Essentially what he's saying is you Corinthians. When you go to the temple, what you see is just mere association; socialization. When you go to the temple you're identifying with the idols of that temple. You're identifying with the idolaters of that temple.

You might be thinking what's the big deal? I mean, we've already established that idols are nothing, right? Paul said that. Is he changing his mind now? Is he backing up? Look at verse 19. What do I imply then? What food offered to idols is anything or that an idol is anything. No. He doesn't go back. I imply, new concept here, that what Pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. Do you hear what he's saying? He's saying when you go to the temple you're not just going. Even though you know those idols are carved by human hands. Even though you know those idols are really nothing but when people worship them it opens up an entire demonic realm that although the idols themselves may just be wood or stone carved by human hands when humans put worth and value into them the demonic forces captivated by that opportunity then use that as an opportunity into something much darker. He's warning the Corinthian people. He says, don't go there. Don't do this. Even though you understand they're nothing this is a house, nonetheless of demon worship.

And we need to understand that. We need to understand that in our culture today. We understand that demons are very active in scripture. We understand, for example that we see in Mark 5:13 that they would enter the body of animals. We see other stories where they enter the bodies of humans. Luke 8:30 where we see that they associate themselves with black magic. Acts 19:19 we see they masquerade as the spirit of the deceased people. But that is still going on today. It's not something that is just contained within the New Testament. Any type of idolatry then is essentially linked to the occult; essentially it's linked to demon worship.

One of the things that people will often ask me is do you believe in ghosts? In fact, I had a little boy come up to me not long ago. Wide eyed. Pastor Tim – do you believe in ghosts. And I went nooo. Just to kind of get him going, pulled him in. What do you mean? No. I don't believe in ghosts. You can be assured and scripture tells us this. In fact, Jesus taught about it when He taught about Lazarus. He said, that when we die as believers we go immediately to be with the Lord or as non-believers we go immediately to a waiting place awaiting of judgment and there is a chasm that cannot be crossed. We

go to a place that will contain us and we cannot come back to this place. So when we die we enter a sense of life that is now separated from this particular life. So, they cannot come back here. Nor can we go there until we have experienced death. So we have clarity on that issue. But what about all of these paranormal activities? I mean, we've got data that there are sounds and movements and there's this whole wave of paranormal type of research of hauntings? What do you make of those? Well, the scriptures give us clarity on that, don't they? If we invest interest in that what do we find? That demons can masquerade themselves as the spirit of deceased. What does that tell us? It tells us we should have no part of that today just like Paul was telling the Corinthians you should have no part of that back then. He's saying you should flee from that because it's a connection to idolatry. It's a connection to the demonic forces. Essentially, what Paul is saying is that when you Corinthians attend these rituals you're participating in something other than the true worship of God. And that is idolatry. So he's admonishing them.

Look at the middle of verse 20. I don't want you to do that. Have you ever said that to your children? Looking at them with sternness. I don't want you to listen to that. I don't want you to watch that. Their eyes kind of glaze over and it's that parental protective nature. That's exactly what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. I know something that you don't know. Don't do this. He says, by the way, you can't have it both ways. Look at verse 21. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake. In other words, you cannot participate. What happens? He says, essentially what happens is you cannot love God and love demons at the same time. You can't have it both ways. Flee.

You might be looking at the text and you might be thinking alright. I understand the text but what does it have to do with me? Really. What does this have to do with me today? I don't go to a temple. I don't worship an idol. I believe idolatry continues to be one of the greatest sins of humanity today. It's because we like to shrink down idolatry to the smallest element like going to a temple, worshipping a stone god. Who does that in our culture today? Nobody does. But when you expand idolatry to understand its full biblical impact then you have a completely different mindset of what it means to be an idol worshipper.

What I want to do with you today, very quickly. I want to give you four statements to round out your understanding of idolatry. I want to help you understand how to make this text practical to you today. Four statements. I'm just going to warn you. They get a bit more severe and personal as we move through the four statements. So, let's start out rather easily and just kind of give us a basic understanding of idolatry.

Idolatry, number one is worshipping any form as a replacement of God. It's worshipping any form as a replacement of God. Essentially, what I'm saying here is idolatry can be worshipping the true God, our God, Yahweh in a wrong way. Idolatry can be worshipping the true God in a wrong way. We see that where? In the story that we talked

about a couple weeks ago. Exodus 32. What did we have before us in Exodus 32? The people of God were leaving Egypt, right? Wandering in the desert. They come to the base of Mount Sinai. Moses goes up and he receives the Law. He's gone for some time. What do the people do after a period of time? They start to wonder, where is Moses? Moses, by the way was their link to God. He was the conduit to God. So when Moses was gone they were getting a bit nervous. What do we do now? Our leader is gone. He's not showing back up. Maybe he'll never come back. So what do they do? Well, in Exodus 32. You don't necessarily have to turn there but if you remember the story they turn to Aaron, the high priest and they say Aaron, make us a god? Aaron should have known better. He says alright. Give me your gold. Give me your jewelry, your earrings and he melts it down and he does what? He makes a golden calf, right? Now, we see them worshipping. We think - you know what they did - they just exchanged gods. No, that's not what they did.

Let me read the text to you. Verse 4. Aaron received the gold from their hands, fashioned it with a graded tool, made a golden calf and then said this - these are your gods oh, Israel who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. What is he equating? See, if he would have stopped at the first sentence we would have said ok. They just changed gods. We understand that. That's idolatry. Simple idolatry. No. This is depth to idolatry you have to understand. He's saying these are your gods, oh Israel; the same god who parted the Red Sea. The same god who released you from bondage. This now is your God. This is a replacement god in a sense. You are now going to now worship the one true God but you're going to worship in a different method. It's exactly what I said. It's the idea that idolatry is worshipping the true God in the wrong way. The danger is, you and I can do that today.

Do you know how we do it? When we expect and form and fashion God after our own concept of expectation. Did you ever think about this? What do you do when you come here to worship? You come here for what reason? Is it to give or is there a sense of receiving? The grace of God allows us to receive any experience but we come for the purpose of giving, don't we? You see, if you come with the expectation of what you can get out of it then you're worshipping the true God in the wrong way.

I remember I had a lady many years ago come up to me and she said I never really feel like I've worshipped God until I'm brought to tears. And I challenged her on that. And I said, really? So, unless there's some sentimentality in your experience you really don't think you've worshipped? She agreed with that. Say is it because you come here and you have this overwhelming sense of your own depravity of a holy God? Is that what brings you to tears? Or is it because when you come here you've had an anticipation of repentance and now you see the grace of God; you see the mercy of God? Is that what brings you to tears? Or is it some type of sentimentality, some type of emotionalism that you have to work up because that's the feeling that you want? If you come hear for a feeling you're worshipping the true God in a wrong way and you're making it as an idol. You're making it as a form of idolatry.

So, number one – idolatry is worshipping any form as a replacement for God. Number two – idolatry, exactly what you would expect, is worshipping anything other than God. It's worshipping anything other than God. First, was worshipping the true God in the wrong way. Second is worshipping anything other than God. By the way, this is what I tell my teenage daughters when they're infatuated with Justin Bieber. I said now be careful. Because, really, the scriptures tell us we shouldn't worship anything like angels, Colossians 2:18. We shouldn't worship anything like demons or Satan, Revelations 9:20. We shouldn't worship men, Psalm 106:28. We shouldn't worship the environment, mother earth or anything like that. Where does this all come from? It comes because man has always wanted to drag God down to his level.

Paul talks about this in Romans, chapter 1. Why don't you turn there for a moment. Romans, chapter 1. Whenever you're in the book of Romans chapter 1 is all about the indictment of humanity. It's very simple to understand the first two chapters of Romans. Romans is everything about the righteousness of God and the unrighteousness of men. So we have here an indictment on humanity but inside this indictment we find out why. Now, the whole section is verse 18 through 23. I'm just going to read 23. Verse 18 through 22 tell us about the wrath of God leading up. Verse 23 says this, they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man. What did Romans tell us? Romans says, verse 23 – what is the heart of man. We want to do what? We want to exchange, don't we? We want to change out our God. We want to bring God down to our level. We want to make God like mortal man. That is idolatry, isn't it?

First, what did we learn about idolatry? Idolatry is anything where we worship the true God in the wrong way. But a second aspect of idolatry is the idea that we're going to completely change out our God. That, up to this point this is what you would expect, isn't it? When we talk about idolatry this is what you would expect. But idolatry becomes more personal.

Third statement: Idolatry is elevating above the worth of God. Did you catch that? Idolatry is elevating anything above the worth of God. What did the Prophet Ezekiel condemn the children of Israel, why did he condemn them? He condemned them, Ezekiel 14 because they had made idols in their hearts. Now, they had not gone out and they had not carved out little figurines and bow down and worship them. What is he saying? He's saying that they allowed something to become of greater importance in their heart than God.

This is where it becomes personal. Have you ever had something of greater value? Possessions. Have you ever had a possession where it's all you ever think of? It's either something that you want and in anticipation and you work for it and you dream about and you think about. Have you ever had a possession that once you gotten it now you want to

hold on to it and protect it. What has happened? You have elevated the worth of something beyond the worth of God.

Another thing you might elevate is self. Sometimes self is something that we can elevate. Self is above everything else. You know how we do that in our society? We do that with body image. Have you seen this? It's where our image and our desire to project something is greater than anything else in our lives and we work for it; work tirelessly with effort, move towards it. What has happened? We've made ourselves God.

Another thing is sports teams. Now I'm getting real personal aren't I? You ought to think about it. We wear the uniforms. We wear the insignias. We rally behind them. If we're not careful we elevate a love of a sport and the team more so than our God. Can I tell you something that is going on in my own life that I'm watching right now? And I think those of you who are parents will relate to this. I have to be very careful not to have my children become my idols. You know where I'm consumed by my children; consumed by the welfare of my children; overcome by the love of my children; where I love them more than I love my God. Do you remember the hard words of Luke, Luke 14? Jesus says if you don't hate your mother and your father and your brother and your sister and He's using the word as in comparison. Another way of saying this is if you don't love me more than you love anybody else including your own life, remember what He says? You can not be my disciple. Why? Because we serve a jealous God. He wants to be the center of our world. Because in that center you're going to experience and He knows this, greater contentment and peace through Him than through any other thing you might choose to replace Him with.

One last statement. Idolatry is not only elevating anything above the worth of God, it is desiring anything God has given to someone else. Ever been there? It's called to covet. It means I want what you have. I want what I don't have because you have what I want. That's coveting. And if you want to find the passage there's many of them but Paul is pretty clear. In Ephesians 5:5. You could also look at Colossians 3, the parallel passage. But in Ephesians 5:5 Paul just lays it right out. He calls this idea of coveting nothing less than idolatry. Let me read it to you. He says, so you may be sure of this. Whenever you read that sentence you need to stop and take notice because you can be sure of this. This is going to come about. That everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or is covetous that is an idolater and no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ. Hard words.

Who among us has not wanted something that somebody else has but he says you're setting yourself up to idolize that which the Lord has not yet given you. Who among us is not guilty of idolatry? You see when we it in the broad spectrum we now see it in a whole new light. It's not something contained in a point of history that happens in a temple when you bow down to some man made trinket. It's much broader than that. And so, what should we be asking? What is God's attitude towards idolatry? Deuteronomy 7. God says, idolatry is an abomination; a hatred. I hate idolatry.

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So what do we go back to? We go back to the pastoral words of the Apostle Paul. Flee, pheúgō. It's the idea of run with haste. Move it completely out of your life. Run with haste away from anything that smacks of idolatry. Why? Because God wants your sole worship. Why? Is it because God's this ogre and He wants all this attention? No. God knows He can provide for you which you can not provide through any other false means. What do you desperately want in your life? A connection to God. A peace. A sense of contentment. You can not get it outside of Him. He says place me first and you'll receive it.

Idol worshippers. We're all guilty. Run to the heart of God. Forsake it. Anything that would move your desires away from Him. Pray with me.