

Lent Lectionary

Warning Against Idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:1-14)

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A. Introduction

The text we are looking at today is 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. It is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to Christians in the city of Corinth (Greece). Paul's letter was a response to a letter the Corinthians had sent Paul regarding several controversial issues—marriage, divorce, sexual relationships, spiritual gifts, tongues, prophecy, the Lord's Supper, etc.

One of the questions the Corinthians asked Paul about concerned eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8-10). Although the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols is not an issue for us ... idolatry is.

Some of the Corinthians argued that going to pagan temples and eating meat sacrifice to idols was permissible because they had knowledge—*knowledge* that there was only one true God, idols don't exist, and what they ate didn't affect their relationship with God (8:1, 4, 8).

The *problem* was that other Christians in Corinth were upset that some Christians were going to pagan temples and eating idol meat (8:9-10).

Paul's *responded* by saying that Christians were free to eat whatever they wanted, except in two circumstances: (i) If another Christian was hurt or offended by eating such meat or (ii) if an unbeliever raises a question about it.¹

1 Cor. 10:25-29. ²⁵ Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience ²⁷ If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of [their] conscience. (NRSV)

However, Paul goes on to argue that "the Corinthians who attend these temple meals not only endangering the weak but also putting themselves in spiritual peril."²

¹ Paul solution sounds a similar to the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding gays and lesbians in the military.

² Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 159.

B. The Example of Israel (10:1-6)

1. Four Privileges

Verses 1-5 describe four privileges the Israelites had when they left Egypt.

a. Our ancestors were all under the cloud (v. 1)

First, Paul says, "Our ancestors were all (*panta*) under the cloud." This refers to God guiding the Israelites through the desert with a pillar of cloud during the day and fire by night (Exod. 13:21-22).

It may seem a bit odd that Paul refers to the Israelites as "our ancestors (fathers)" when he is talking to a predominately Gentile congregation in Corinth, who were not physical descendants of Israel.³

For Paul, the church is part of Israel. They have been grafted into the covenant people (Rom. 11:17-24). Faithful Christians and faithful Jews are part of the same people of God. Israel's story is our story.

b. All passed through the sea (v. 1)

Second, Paul says, "All passed through the sea." This refers to Israel crossing the Red Sea and being delivered out of bondage to the Egyptians. This is the great salvific event of the Old Testament.

Paul links Corinthians with Israel. Just as the Corinthians had begun to experience salvation when they left their pagan past, so also the Israelites began to experience salvation when they left pagan Egypt.

c. All were baptized into Moses (v. 2)

Next, Paul says, "All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." Again, Paul draws a connection between Israel and the Corinthians.

Just as the Corinthians were baptized "into Christ," so also the Israelites were baptized "into Moses". Paul coined the term, "baptized into Moses." That term is not found in Jewish sources. Paul is using the metaphor of baptism to link the Corinthians with the Israelites.

³ Hays, *First Corinthians* (1997) 160.

**d. All ate the same spiritual food ...
... all drank the same spiritual drink (vs. 3-4)**

Fourth, Paul says, "All ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink."

Just as the Corinthians ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink at the Lord's Supper—the next paragraph in 10:14-22—so also the Israelites were given manna from heaven and water from a rock (Exod. 17:1-7).

To make the correspondence complete, Paul says that Christ was present with Israel in the desert. The rock from which they drank "was Christ" (v. 4).⁴

The point Paul that is making is that Israel—whose legacy the Christians inherited—experienced powerful spiritual signs of God's favor and power.⁵

2. Catastrophe (v. 5)

The Israelites had divine privileges. But something happened. Verse 5.

10:5. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down [*katastrōnnumi*] in the wilderness. (NRSV)

The Israelites were "struck down" in the wilderness (10:5 NRSV). The Greek word for "stuck down" is *kata-strōn-numi*—from which we get the word *catastrophe*.

Katastrōnnumi can be translated "cut down" or "scattered over." We get the image of Israelites strewn across the Sinai desert. All perished in the desert except two, Caleb and Joshua. Even Moses didn't make it to the Promised Land.

3. Examples for us (v. 6)

In verse 6, Paul explains his strategy for reading Scripture.

10:6. Now these things happened as examples [*tupoi*] for us, so that we might not be cravers [*epithumētas*] of evil, just as they also craved [*epethumēsan*]. (JT)

⁴ Hays, *First Corinthians* (1997) 160. Paul was familiar with the Jewish legends about the rock, or well, that followed Israel through the wilderness. In Jewish tradition, the water was provided by divine Wisdom (Wisdom Sol. 11:4; Philo *Leg. All.* 2.86). Since Christ was often identified with divine Wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30), linking Christ with the rock from which the water came was an easy association.

⁵ Hays, *First Corinthians* (1997) 161.

Here, Paul explains that Scripture provide examples (*tupoi*) for a certain purpose: "so that we might not be cravers [*epithumētas*] of evil, just as they also craved [*epethumēsan*]."⁶

The emphasis on "craving" alludes to Numbers 11 where the Israelites "craved" meat (Num. 11:4). Their craving meant they were dissatisfied with God and what God had provided. The story tells us that God grew angry at them and eventual had "a very great plague" to fall on them (Num. 11:33).

C. Warning against Idolatry (10:7-11)

In verses 7-11, Paul tells the Corinthians not to repeat the mistakes of Israel.

1. Four exhortations

a. Do not become idolaters as some of them did (v. 7)

In verse 7, the first exhortation targets the *central theme* of the passage as a whole:

10:7 Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." (NRSV)

This refers to the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. If you recall, God delivered Israel out of Egypt. Then Moses went up the Mountain to receive the Torah, but was delayed. The Israelites became very anxious and so they make a golden calf and worship it.

Paul makes an explicit reference to that event in verse 7.

10:7. It is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play" (NRSV; cf. Exod. 32:6).

Paul has selected the one verse that links eating and drinking with the most infamous idolatry in the OT. The Israelites feasted in the presence of the idol and they rose up to commit other offenses.⁷

b. Do not indulge in immorality as some of them did (v. 8)

In verse 8, the second exhortation is aimed at the Corinthians sexual immorality, which is mentioned throughout the letter (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 6:12-20; 7:2-5).

⁶ Hays, *First Corinthians* (1997) 162.

⁷ So Hays, *First Corinthians* (1997) 163-4.

10:8 *We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. (NRSV)*

Here, Paul alludes to the story in Numbers 25:1-9 where the Israelites had sexual relations with the women of Moab. Then the Israelites began to sacrifice to their gods, eat in their temples, and worship their gods. A plague hit and 24,000 died (Paul has 23,000).

The point is, the Israelites did precisely what the Corinthians are claiming was their "right" to do now.

c. Do not put the Lord to the test as some of them did (v. 9)

In verse 9, the third exhortation concerns not putting the Lord or Christ to the test.

10:9 *We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. (NRSV)*

Here, Paul alludes to Numbers 21:4-9 when the Israelites complain against Moses and God and harassed by snakes.

Num. 21:5. *The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." (NRSV)*

Psalms 78:18 *They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. (NRSV)*

Once again the issue is food. Just as the Israelites complained about their food, so the Corinthians complain about wanting to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Just as the Israelites put God to the test, so also the Corinthians are testing Christ.

d. Do not grumble as some of them did (v. 10)

In verse 10, the fourth exhortation concerns ingratitude toward God.

10:10 *And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. (NRSV)*

It is likely that Paul is alluding to Numbers 14:28-38. In this account, God is fed up with Israel's lack of gratitude and so predicts the death of everyone over the age of twenty, namely, the first generation to be brought out of slavery in Egypt.

2. Examples for us (v. 11)

Verse 11 repeats the warning of verse 6.

10:11. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. (NRSV)

From verses 7-10, Paul has heaped up examples from the Torah to demonstrate the God is not to be taken lightly.

Those who flirt with idolatry and "crave" (*epithumein*) idol meat will suffer catastrophe.

"The function of this section is to say that baptism and the Lord's Supper [spiritual food and drink] are no automatic guarantees of spiritual security."⁸

3. Admonitions and Promise

To conclude this section, Paul gives two admonitions and a promise.

a. Admonition: Watch out (v. 12)

The first admonition is Watch out!

1 Cor. 10:12. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. (NRSV)

The Corinthians are overconfident in their knowledge (*gnosis*). They boast about their spiritual superiority and authority. They think they can stand against any temptations or dangers associated with pagan temples. -

Paul sternly warns them not to be so cocky. He has told them that "our ancestors" fell in the wilderness (10:1) because they

- Flirted with idolatry (εἰδωλολατρί)
- Were made stupid by their cravings (ἐπιθυμίας),
- And then fell into utter catastrophe (καταστροφή).

⁸ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (Revised Edition, Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002) 80.

b. Promise (v. 13)

In a section that is full of stern warnings, Paul says something rather positive—a word of assurance or promise.

10:13. No testing [temptation] has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing [temptation] he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. (NRSV)

The word “testing” (πειρασμός) can mean:

- Temptation = seduction to sin
- Testing/trial = difficult circumstances outside our control; they “overcome” us

In verse 13, Paul reassures the Corinthians that as long as one is dealing with ordinary trials, God will help them. But they must flee from idolatry (v. 14), because there is no divine help when one dabbling in idolatry.⁹

So, verse 13 deals with the ordinary tests/trials—something that lies outside your will to control, the vicissitudes (variation of circumstances or fortunes) of life. These trials are experienced by everyone at sometime in their life.

Paul says when a test/trial “overtakes” us we have four things to rely on:

First, God is faithful. God is reliable. He created us for a purpose. He is unshakable in caring for our wellbeing.

Second, God will not allow you to be tested beyond your powers (δύναμαι); capacities or abilities. God created you. God knows your limits. God will not allow you to be overwhelmed.

Third, God promised that anything that overtakes you—with the exception of idolatry—you can endure. You can “carry it” or “bear up under it” (ὑποφέρω).

Fourth, when you are tested or tempted, God will provide the “way out” (ἐκβάσις). You should not expect God to remove all temptation or testing, but should respond by taking the way God provides.

c. Admonition: Flee idolatry (v. 14)

Paul says in verse 14:

⁹ Gordan D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians New International Commentary on the NT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1897) 460.

10:14. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. (NRSV)

10:14. Διόπερ, ἀγαπητοί μου, φεύγετε ἀπὸ τῆς εἰδωλολατρίας.

Everything in this passage focuses with laser-like intensity on this command. It parallels what James, the brother of Jesus, wrote:

Jam. 4:7. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (NRSV)

Jam. 4:7. ὑποτάγητε οὖν τῷ θεῷ, ἀντίστητε δὲ τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ φεύζεται ἀφ' ὑμῶν,

Flee from idolatry as if in a burning building. Flee from anything that comes between you and God, anything that you seem to trust more than God or instead of God.

E. Summary

The Corinthians argue they can go to pagan temples and eat meat sacrificed to idols. On the one hand, Paul says they can eat meat sacrifice to idols; they have freedom in Christ, so long as their behavior does not hurt other Christians. On the other hand, Paul warns them that if they go to pagan temples they are flirting with idolatry and, like the Israelites, idolatry will destroy them.

F. Reflections

1. The Danger of Idolatry

We are very much influenced by our secular world, which assumes there is no God or gods. If there are no other gods, we tell ourselves, we can participate in whatever customs or practices our culture deems normal and reasonable.

However, 1 Corinthians 10:1-14 raises a warning flag. It calls us to scrutinize our assumptions and the compromises we make with our culture. We are particularly vulnerable when we find ourselves saying, "No problem, I can handle it; I can be involved in this and still be a good Christian." We should remember Paul's warnings.¹⁰

According to Paul, there are two problems:

1. Idols have more power than we suppose.
2. Not taking the judgment of God seriously.

¹⁰ Hays, *First Corinthians* (1997) 172.

2. The Market as God¹¹

When we consider the current economic catastrophe that overwhelmed our nation and the world, we must consider that idolatry has had something to do with it.

When Jim Wallis writes about the Great Recession we are now experiencing, he says:

It is, plain and simple, a story as old as humanity: it is a story of idolatry. We have replaced God with the 'invisible hand' of the market, substituted "market value" for "moral value" and attributed all that was good and right to the power of the market to make it so.... The market has become our "golden calf," our idol of ultimate allegiance.¹²

An idol is something that takes the place of God. We trust it. We devote ourselves to it. And we are shocked when it fails. Today, instead of a statue of a calf, we have gold, hedge funds, mortgage backed securities, 401(k)s, and mutual funds.

Harvey Cox wrote an article in the *Atlanta Monthly* entitled, "The Market as God." He argues that we have elevated "the market" to a god-like status in three ways.

First, the market is all-powerful (*omnipotent*), with the ability to convert the natural world into commodities and real estate.

Second, the market knows all (*omniscient*). The market, and it alone, knows what we need, what we want, the price we should pay, and the price we should ask..

Third, the market is global (*omnipresent*), not just in the sense of a global free market economy, but the latest trend in economic theory is to apply market calculations to all areas of life—dating, family life, medical care, marital relations, the inner life, the genetic frontier, and child-rearing.

"Those who question the market 'god' are called heretics and lunatics and are burned at the stake on conservative talk radio."¹³

Both Wallis and Cox agree that "free market capitalism" has is the best way humans know how to create goods and services, but there are social, personal, and ethical values higher than the market.

¹¹ Harvey Cox, "The Market as God," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 283, No. 3 (March 1999): 18-23.

¹² Jim Wallis, *Rediscovering Values: On Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street, A Moral Compass for the New Economy* (New York: Howard Books, 2010) 27-28.

¹³ Wallis, *Rediscovering Values* (2010) 31.