FLEE FROM IDOLATRY

1 Corinthians 10:1–11:1

Key Verse: 10:14

“Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.”

Where’s your heart? To answer, many people would point to the center of their chest. But that muscle pumping inside us, though it’s so vital, isn’t really our heart. Our heart is what we use to *love*. Whatever or whomever we love most is what’s really in our hearts. We human beings can be so foolish with our hearts, giving them away to the wrong things or people. So Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” In the previous passage Paul has just mentioned that we should “run the race” so as to “get the prize” (9:24–27). He was talking about living the Christian life in such a way that we end up winning the spiritual victory. He said it requires “strict training” and self-discipline similar to that of a champion athlete. But he didn’t go into the specifics the training. Now, in chapter 10 he tells us one of the most common ways people fail to make it to the end of our race of faith. The most common spiritual failure comes from idolatry. We need to be strict with ourselves not to give our hearts to an idol of any kind. Today we want to reflect honestly on what our idols might be, why we’re susceptible to them, and how and why we should accept Paul’s challenge. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In this chapter Paul reminds us of the Israelites’ experiences when God delivered them from slavery in Egypt; in verses 6–10 he’s going to go into more detail about it. But in verses 1–4 he begins with the great blessings God had given them. After escaping slavery in Egypt, they all had been “under the cloud” and passed “through the sea.” Simply put, it means God himself delivered them with his almighty power, and God had been present with them to lead them. They all had been “baptized into Moses,” meaning they’d experienced receiving God’s words and such great spiritual leadership from him. In verses 3,4 Paul also mentions the spiritual food and drink that the Israelites all “ate” and “drank.” It refers to the manna and quail God had given them every day in the wilderness and the water God brought forth from a rock. By referring to baptism and communion in these verses, Paul is reminding the Corinthians of how God brought them into the community of his people and gave them the greatest blessing of Christ himself, who truly satisfies our souls (Jn4:13,14; 6:35).

But why is Paul mentioning all these blessings? Read verse 5. It’s a shocking fact. Why was God not pleased with most of them? It was because they started grumbling against their leader Moses (Nu14:2). They had experienced God’s great glory, but they disobeyed God, tested him and even treated him with contempt. Through Moses’ prayer God forgave them (Nu14:20). But God also promised that none of them would enter the promised land; only their children would (Nu14:32,33). Though they presumptuously tried to undo what God said he would do (Nu14:44), in the end their bodies, in fact, were scattered in the wilderness, just as God had predicted (Nu14:29,32). Read verse 6. The key word here is “examples.” Paul repeats it in verse 11. How God responded to the Israelites is an example and warning for all believers of all time. The issue, Paul says in verse 6, is not what they were doing outwardly, but what was in their hearts. Paul warns us clearly not to set “our hearts on evil things.”

What are these “evil things” God doesn’t want in our hearts? The key one is the first one Paul mentions: “Do not be idolaters” (7). Idolaters are people who give their hearts to idols. Idolatry isn’t about statues; it’s about replacing God in our hearts with anything or anyone else. In his book *Counterfeit Gods* Tim Keller mentions “The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power.” These modern idols are seducing the minds and hearts of so many people. But the problem is even broader. An idol is whatever may capture our heart and give us a false sense of happiness and security. Technology can be our idol. Comfort, pleasure or convenience can be our idol. Self can be our idol. Even our lovely children can become idols. If an idol is in our hearts, we’re susceptible to all kinds of sins (cf. Ro1:21ff).

Paul puts it plainly: “We should not commit sexual immorality” (8); “We should not test Christ” (9); “Do not grumble” (10). Why not? Because in each case, Paul says, God responded swiftly with punishment. In one day, Paul says, 23,000 Israelites died. In the other incidents many were killed by snakes or by a destroying angel. Yes, God is graciously at work in our lives, just as he graciously saved and blessed the Israelites. But we should know that God will never be pleased with evil things in our hearts like idolatry, immorality, pride or even grumbling. God is able to bring his divine discipline on us swiftly. We tend not to listen, but we should take these warnings seriously. We shouldn’t abuse God’s grace and blessings.

Read verse 11. Paul says here that “the culmination of the ages has come” on us. He’s talking about God’s great world salvation plan, which he had from the beginning. God doesn’t want to punish or destroy us; he wants to bless us with the greatest blessing. God wants to give us his kingdom. God wants to use us in his great world salvation plan today. The only problem is, we tend to ruin everything with our own sinful hearts and behavior. Paul continues his warning. Read verse 12. Those who think they’re standing firm are those who think they’re okay. They think they’ve got everything under control. Basically, they’re overconfident. Self-confidence can be a good thing. But overconfidence is always our enemy. So many people fail at so many different things—in studies, in sports, in business, even in ministry—because in some way they were overconfident. Paul says here that when we’re overconfident in Christian life we’re especially vulnerable to spiritual temptation. The temptations to idolatry, immorality and the other sins Paul mentions can come upon us suddenly, when we’re overconfident. It’s humbling, but we need to be aware of how weak and vulnerable we are.

Though Paul has given some very strong warnings, he also gives comfort. Read verse 13. It says temptation can “overtake” us. It can come over us like a physical seizure until we’re paralyzed and held tightly in its grip. Another problem is that when we’re being tempted, we can think of ourselves like a victim, like nobody understands. We compare ourselves with others and ask, “Why me?” But Paul says, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to mankind.” It means whatever it is, so many others have already experienced that temptation. We shouldn’t exaggerate what we’re going through. Then Paul turns our attention to God. God is faithful. He doesn’t give up on us when we’re struggling; he’s right there to help us. It says he won’t let us be tempted beyond what we can bear. We may think our temptations and suffering are unbearable. But God knows us better than we know ourselves. It also says God “lets” us be tempted. Why? It’s to help us. God wants us not to remain weak, but to be stronger, go deeper, become more useful. Finally it says that in the midst of our temptation God provides a way for us to endure it. Instead of making excuses or giving in, we should be looking for God’s help and God’s way.

Read verse 14. Though he’s been stern with them, here Paul calls the Corinthians “my dear friends.” Despite their discouraging attitudes and behavior Paul loves them and wants them to win the spiritual victory. Again he mentions “idolatry” as our most serious spiritual danger (7). Notice Paul doesn’t say “Repent of idolatry” or “Fix your idolatry” but “Flee from idolatry.” “Flee” means run away. It’s a strong word. Why does he use it? It suggests even more about idolatry. Idols can have a strong power over us. They can take over our hearts and minds until we’re out of control and out of mind. Idols have power over us to lure us into making very foolish choices and going in the completely wrong direction. So we should run for our dear life away from any kind of idol. “Flee” tells us not to compromise in any way. It tells us to gird our hearts, with a kind of protective spiritual armor, against idols of all kinds. Do you have spiritual armor around your heart? Many people think they’re too dignified to have to run. But in a real emergency, anybody will start running. We need to regard idols in our lives like emergencies, like buried grenades ready to blow us up and maim us. We should not be playing around with idols, but running away from them.

In verses 15–22 Paul goes on to reason with the Corinthians about this issue of fleeing from idols. He starts off by mentioning the Lord’s Supper. He says that through communion we “participate” or have fellowship with a spiritual reality we cannot see. What is it? It’s Christ’s blood and body, his most precious sacrifice on the cross for our sins. We also participate with our fellow believers in this invisible spiritual fellowship in Christ. In the same way, Paul says, if we go into an idol’s temple to eat, we’re actually participating in something we also cannot see. What is it? It’s fellowship with demons. Paul says in verse 19 that the food sacrificed to an idol is nothing, and the idol itself is nothing. But behind idols are the spiritual reality of demons. Though we live in an age of science and people tend to ignore spiritual realities, the devil and his demons are still very real. It’s the most ignorant and foolish thing to offer our hearts to him, in even the slightest way, because the devil is out to ruin us. Paul asks in verse 22, “Are we trying to arouse the Lord’s jealousy. Are we stronger than he?” Playing around with any kind of idol provokes God to start dealing with us.

In the last part of today’s passage Paul continues with the overconfident attitude of the Corinthians. He again quotes their saying, “I have the right to do anything.” It’s a partial truth about God’s grace. God’s grace indeed makes us free to do anything. But Paul says not everything is beneficial or constructive. We need to evaluate all that we do, to see if it’s contributing to the good of others. In verses 25–30 Paul comes back to the specific issue of food sacrificed to idols. They could eat it if it was sold in the marketplace. They could eat it if an unbeliever offered it to them in a meal. But if that person mentioned how it had been given to an idol, they should not eat it. At the same time, they shouldn’t overdo it and constantly be afraid of violating someone else’s conscience, but be thankful to God for whatever provisions he was giving them. Then Paul concludes. Read verse 31. In whatever we’re about to do, we should be asking ourselves, “Does this glorify God?” If we’re not sure, we should stop. Read verse 32. The second major principle for our behavior is not to cause anyone around us to stumble. It could be a legalistic person, a godless person or a church person. Read verse 33. Paul himself lived by these unselfish principles: Glorify God, and save others. All our choices in life and ministry should be guided by these same principles. Paul says in 11:1 that this unselfish way of life and thinking is the example of Christ that we all should be following.

Read verse 14 again. May God help us be aware of the reality of idols in our hearts and lives and in the world we experience around us every day. May God help us really take to heart his word to “Flee from idolatry.” In this way may God help us glorify him, be a blessing to others, and win the spiritual victory in the end.