

The Idolatry of Self

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

Good morning. In this morning's passage, the Apostle Paul is wrapping up a discussion of eating meat sacrificed to idols that started back in chapter 8. Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul has been addressing a variety of issues: division within the church, sexual immorality in the church, lawsuits among believers, questions related to marriage and singleness, and now the question of food sacrificed to idols. That's a pretty varied list of issues and questions, and yet Paul's advice has been remarkably consistent. He has more or less encouraged the Corinthians to make their focus Jesus Christ and to humbly consider others. In short, all the issues facing the Corinthian church are expressions of their old identity as Corinthians, and Paul is calling them to live out of their new identity as new creations in Christ.

And this has really been the case with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. As Pastor Grant showed last week, there was a danger that this practice would lead the Corinthian Christians back into the idolatry of their former lives, which Paul ultimately classified as participating with demons. But there was another, perhaps more insidious threat, which was that the Corinthians would make their Christian practice self-serving, all about their own rights, freedoms, and preferences. In other words, they were in danger not just of succumbing to the idolatry of Zeus, or Athena, or some other god of the Greek pantheon, but of succumbing to the most prevalent form of idolatry there is: the idolatry of self. And so, in our passage, Paul is going to once more call the Corinthians to forsake this idol of self for the good of others and the glory of God.

As I said, Paul is wrapping up an argument he's been building since chapter 8, so before we jump into our passage let's review where he's been over the last few chapters. In chapter 8, Paul began by making the point that our fellow Christians are more important than what we are allowed to have for dinner. Paul has been responding to various questions from the Corinthians in this letter, and, while this question may not be explicitly recorded in the text, the Corinthians were nonetheless asking, "Is it okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols?" But Paul basically answers their question by asking another question, which was, "What is your eating the meat going to do to your brothers and sisters?" In other words, Paul was making

the point that there is a more important issue at stake than what you can or cannot eat in good conscience. The more important issue is whether or not you're going to sacrifice one of your brothers or sisters for whom Christ died on the altar on your own rights, privileges, or freedoms.

And so, in chapter 9, Paul elaborates on what Christians should do when their rights, privileges, or freedoms conflict with the good of others by drawing on his own example. Here Paul begins by laying out all the various rights he could have insisted upon as an apostle and preacher of the Gospel. Then he says he didn't make use of any of them for the sake of removing every possible barrier between the Gospel and those whom he served.

Finally, after addressing the underlying issue of serving our brothers and sisters by giving up our own rights and privileges, in the first half of chapter 10 Paul returns to the original question and gives his answer, which is that the Corinthians should not be engaging in eating meat sacrificed to idols in the temples of Corinth. To make this point, he references a number of Old Testament examples of Israel's idolatry, and the consequences of that unfaithfulness, saying that part of the reason those stories were recorded was for us to learn from their example, learn what not to do. He concludes by saying that idolatry and the worship of Christ do not mix, and we can't expect participation in demon worship to be without effect in our relationship with God.

And that brings us to our passage, beginning with verse 23 which says, "All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up."

Paul begins this concluding section of his argument by quoting the Corinthian slogan, "all things are lawful", which he cited back in chapter 6 when dealing with the issue of sexual immorality. Apparently, one of the major issues in the Corinthian church was this belief that the grace of God meant that they could basically do whatever they wanted without consequence. In chapter 6, it was engaging in relations with temple prostitutes, and here Paul cites it as a possible response to him saying the Corinthian Christians should not eat meat sacrificed to idols in the temples. And, as he did in chapter 6, Paul responds to this objection by saying that just because a thing can be done, doesn't mean it's a thing that should be done.

Specifically, not everything that is technically allowable is helpful individually or beneficial for the building up of the community of faith in general. As Christians, we can sometimes get too caught up with the question, “Is such-and-such sinful?” Now, of course, we should be concerned with that question, but that is not the only question with which we should be concerned. Particularly, when the answer to that question is, “No, it’s not necessarily sinful.” We should be in the practice of asking some necessary follow-up questions, like Paul alludes to here: Is it helpful in building up my faith in Christ? Is it beneficial for building up the faith of those around me? Paul is making it clear that allowability is not the only criteria to be considered. Another criterion, as he’s already said in this letter, is whether or not it benefits others, as he says again here in verse 24.

“Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”

This verse echoes some of Jesus’ most important teaching. Particularly, it should cause us to think of what Jesus said was the greatest commandment: to love God holistically and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. In fact, this chapter of 1 Corinthians has a loose love God-love others structure to it. In verses 1-22 Paul essentially calls the Corinthians to be faithful to God (love God), and now in verses 23-33 he is calling them to consider and seek the good of their neighbor (love others). Moving into verses 25-26 he gives an application of what this seeking of our neighbor’s good over our own could look like.

“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.””

It’s important to note that while the topic Paul brings up here is related to the discussion in chapters 8-10 up to this point, it is a slightly different issue. The meat that was not eaten at the temples was eventually sold in the city markets, and this is what Paul is addressing here. Within the context of the marketplace, the meat may or may not be known to have been sacrificed to an idol, or the seller may or may not inform the buyer of the meat’s origin. So, Christians were left to decide if they should ask about the origin of the meat, or just eat what was available without asking questions. Paul encourages them toward the latter approach.

Back in chapter 8, Paul already alluded to the fact that the food itself is incidental, saying, “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we

do not eat, and no better off if we do.” So, the issue is not the physical act of eating certain meats. Rather, the real issue is the spiritual implications at play. Such as, are you destroying your brother by eating? Or are you participating in demon worship? However, for Paul, if you remove those two obstacles, and any others like them, there’s nothing wrong with the meat itself. “The earth is the Lord’s and fullness thereof.” It came from God, and so, all else being equal, it is good for the purpose He designed it.

Beyond the affirmation of the meat’s basic goodness though, Paul’s application here illustrates his call to seek the good of the neighbor. What’s a great way to love your local meat supplier? Buy meat from them, right? So, Paul is, in effect, saying, “Don’t create unnecessary obstacles to blessing your neighbor.” Verse 27 offers a different scenario, but a similar encouragement.

“If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.”

Here Paul brings up the scenario of a dinner party with unbelievers who, presumably, would have fewer scruples about the meat they were eating. Yet, again, Paul encourages the Corinthians to not ask questions. Notice though, that Paul makes it clear that the Corinthian Christians are not under any obligation to accept an invitation with which they’re uncomfortable. However, if they do decide to go, they should eat what they’re given without asking unnecessary questions.

Again, this seems like a basic expression of love to the unbelieving neighbor. No one likes the person who seems to have come to the party just to complain about the food, right? If you’re going to be a guest, you should honor your host by accepting what is given, unless your host goes out of the way to say something about the food. Paul addresses that scenario next in verse 28.

“But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—”

Presumably, if someone goes out of their way to tell you that the meat has been sacrificed to an idol, they have a reason for doing so, and that ought to be taken into consideration. The person Paul seems to have in mind is either the pagan host or a pagan fellow party goer. If such a one is informing a Christian about the

meat's origin, it implies that they believe Christians are not supposed to eat such food. The Christian then is left with two choices: 1) walk the informant through the theological reflection that shows Christians are, in fact, free to eat whatever food is put in front of them (which is always a party favorite), or 2) forgo the meat for the sake of communicating to this unbelieving friend that Christ is worth giving things up for.

Now, that may sound like a lot of hassle all on the basis of this unbeliever's misunderstanding of Christianity, but really consider the alternative. If you opt to try and explain the tension away to them, isn't there a good chance they will just think you're not a faithful Christian, and that Christ is not worth fervent commitment? Whereas, if you simply skip that part of the meal, you communicate the exact opposite. Remember, for Paul, it's all about seeking the good of the other person, particularly for the sake of drawing them to Jesus, as he's already said and will say again shortly. Before that though, in verses 29-30 Paul shows that just because you would forgo meat for the sake of another person's conscience in certain situations, doesn't mean you have to be subject to the consciences of others at all times.

"I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?"

What's remarkable to me about Paul's instructions in this passage is how he balances the incredible freedom Christians have in Christ with the Christlike consideration we are called to show to others. There are any number of specific things today to which we could apply this instruction, but the message is the same in every case: if it's not sinful, unhelpful, or destructive and doesn't lead another into sin, distress, or destruction, then you are free to follow your conscience before the Lord. I quickly add the caveat that all things should be done wisely, and ultimately, as we're about to hear, to the glory of God, but there is still an incredible amount of freedom to enjoy the good things that God has created in good conscience. The best guide to that enjoyment is to adhere to the rule of verse 31.

"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

This is what it all comes down to for Paul, and what he believes it should all come to for anyone who considers themselves a follower of Christ. First, Paul references the specific situation: glorifying God in eating and drinking. If no one says anything about the origins of what you're eating and drinking, then glorify God by accepting it without question so that you might not create any unnecessary obstacles to relationship and the Gospel. And if someone does say something, then glorify God by skipping that particular part of the meal, so as to leave no room for doubt that Jesus Christ is worthy of absolute devotion. Second though, Paul expands this admonition to be guided by what brings God glory to a rule for all of life. "...do all for the glory of God" should be the guiding principle of life for every Christian. And that principle calls for an utterly countercultural and often counterintuitive approach to relating to other people, as we see in verses 32-33.

"Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved."

According to Paul, Christians should be people-pleasers. I suddenly feel like I've said a bad word. People-pleasing gets a bad rap in our culture, often for good reason, there is a lot of unhealthy people-pleasing to which we are prone. But apparently there is a version of it to which Christians are called. Let's tease out what that is.

The key is to understand the goal of pleasing others. Notice Paul says this right after telling us to seek God's glory in all things. That's important context. Then notice that the end goal of this radical consideration of others is "that they may be saved". More important context, because this is what differentiates good people-pleasing from unhealthy, bad people-pleasing.

Unhealthy people-pleasing is all about getting people to like me. It's the kind of stuff Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount in regard to things like prayer, fasting, and giving. The religious leaders did all those things in order to be seen and honored by others. It's being willing to say or do anything for the sake of popularity, regardless of what is good. That's not what Paul is calling us to do.

What Paul's talking about here is all about getting people to love God, not us. This means that there will be some things that Paul, and any who would imitate

him, will not bend on, like taking part in temple rituals that would align him with demons and encourage others toward the same. But outside of those things that militate against the glory of God and the good of others, Paul tells us to bend over backwards in considering others.

And this applied to whoever the “others” may have been. Paul specifically mentions unbelieving Jews, unbelieving Greeks, and his fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord. For Paul, when he was with unbelieving Jews, as Stan mentioned a couple weeks ago, he’d happily go without bacon. When he was with unbelieving Greeks, he’d take the bacon, and any other meat offered without question. When he was with weaker brothers, he’d go without anything that would cause them to stumble. The goal for Paul was helping people into deeper relationship with Jesus, whether they already knew Him or not, all to the glory of God, and whatever he had to do to make that happen was fine with him. And why was Paul so committed to this radical, others-focused service? Because Jesus was committed to the same thing.

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

Paul was simply following Jesus’ example, and we are called to follow that example too.

Can I point out something that is really obvious when you stop to think about it? The “every man for himself” or “look out for number one” approach is the most foolish approach to life I can imagine, and yet we are all prone to it. I don’t care who you are, do you really like the odds of 1 against 8 billion? That’s what a self-centered approach to life is.

You know what sounds a lot better? Me seeking the good of each person with whom I come in contact, and all of them reciprocating. Suddenly, there’s a ton of people looking out for my needs, and I’m just responsible for the needs of the few with whom I come in direct contact. Isn’t it obvious that that is the better approach to life in this world? Doesn’t that sound like a world you want to live in?

That is the world that Paul and Jesus envisioned. That’s what the world would be like if everyone sought the good of one’s neighbor over his or her own good. That’s what the world would be like if everyone loved one’s neighbor as oneself.

Now, obviously, we don't live in that world currently. So, how do we get there? There's only one way: imitate Christ and anyone who is like Him.

The only way to live in a world full of people who are collectively looking out for one another's needs is to start looking out for other people's needs more than your own. Otherwise, we're all just waiting around for someone else to make the first move, to do what we are unwilling to do. But this is what the Church is called to be: a community of people saved by God's grace who are striving by that grace to imitate the love of Jesus to one another and the world around them.

That's the only way, but you should know, it's not an easy task. It's a high and difficult call. It means you will serve those who will not reciprocate, at least initially. It means you will fail at times. Those are two realities that mark the Christian life in this world, which is why the New Testament speaks to them so often.

It's a difficult call, because ultimately, it requires the tearing down of the idol of self. Because Jesus called us to bless and pray for our persecutors, turn the other cheek, and love our enemies. And at various points in the New Testament we are called to overcome evil with good, rejoice in suffering, and bear reviling as Jesus did, without reviling in return. Those are difficult things to do, and because we still "live in a sinful world and a sinful flesh" (as Reuben said during our praise time), we will fail to carry out that call at times.

But because we will fail in those things, we are given the grace we need to deal with those failures. We're given the promises that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, that where sin abounds grace abounds all the more, and that when we confess our failings we are faithfully and justly forgiven, and God will ultimately cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The Gospel is designed to deal with our failures as we seek to carry out the call to which we've been called in Christ.

And here's the thing, as we seek to imitate Christ, do you know what happens? With each failure, we come to understand to a greater extent the grace of God that covers us. And also, slowly but surely, we do in fact become more like Jesus in actuality. It's sort of a "fake it, 'til you make it" or "failing upwards" approach. Our experience is often that of failure, and yet when we look back, we can see that through that process we have in fact become more like Jesus. And as

that happens among His people, more and more people will be drawn to Him resulting in the increase of His glory. In short, as we seek to imitate Christ, we move toward the world, or the Kingdom, He envisioned and exemplified.

So, here's our main idea: Christians are called to imitate Christ and glorify God in all things, and particularly by drawing people toward salvation through selflessly seeking the good of others in every possible way. These are the three things every Christian should be passionately seeking. To imitate Jesus. To draw others into deeper relationship with Him. All to the glory of the Father.

By way of application, I think this means that most of us simply have too many hills we're willing to die on, which ultimately create obstacles to drawing others into salvation, imitating Jesus, and glorifying God. I have no idea what hills each of you specifically needs to forfeit, so I would simply encourage you to spend some time with the Holy Spirit asking Him what they are. But I am going to ask some questions right now to hopefully help identify areas where the Spirit may want to continue His working of making you more like Christ. These questions aren't meant to be guilt trips, but simply aids to conversation with the Spirit.

First, are there any relationships in your life that are broken or strained due to an issue of less importance than salvation and the glory of God? I recognize that most things are of less importance than salvation and the glory of God, but that's kind of the point. So, if there are those kinds of relationship present in your life, is there anything the Spirit would have you do to seek the other person's advantage and open the way to relationship and the Gospel?

Second, are there any issues of less importance than salvation and the glory of God that you find yourself obsessing over? When you bring these issues up, does it seem to help or hinder others' relationship with you and Jesus?

-Third, and finally, is there anything you are more passionate about than relationship with Jesus and the glory of God? There's nothing wrong with having passions. You should have passions, but not passions that are greater than your passion for Jesus and the glory of God. So, does your passion help or hinder others' relationship with you and Jesus?

Again, none of these questions are meant as a guilt trip. They are simply a way of considering areas of our lives in which God may be wanting to continue His

good work of making us more like Christ. If nothing came to mind for you, that's totally fine. If you did think of something, then please understand conviction is an invitation to a deeper experience of the eternal life Jesus came to offer any who would have it.

If you are here and have never received the grace of God that is based on Christ's life, death, and resurrection on your behalf, then please don't try to do what I've suggested. You need God's Spirit dwelling within you. You need to understand what it is to rely on His grace to cover your sins before you attempt to imitate Jesus. As much as it might be helpful for your relationships in some ways, you can't earn God's favor or even fix yourself through your own efforts. It is God's favor that *enables* us to become more like Jesus under the direction of His Spirit. And so, we don't work *for* salvation; we work *from* salvation. If you're curious about what that means, I, or one of the other pastors, would love to talk to you about that. Just know, the love and grace of God are offered to you free of charge. You don't have to do a thing to earn them, in fact, you can't do anything to earn them. They are simply a gift.

For those of us who have come to a saving knowledge and experience of that love and grace, how could we want anything other than to imitate the Lord who sought our good over His own, even to the point of dying on a cross for our salvation, all to the glory of God? May we imitate Him.