

“The New Idolatry” 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Introduction

- There is an international mystery brewing in Paris, France. For some unknown reason the prototype for the kilogram, a 118-year-old cylinder cast from a platinum and iridium alloy, is mysteriously losing weight. In total, about 50 micrograms compared with the average of dozens of copies. The prototype and its copies were all made of the same material, all made at the same time, all kept under triple lock and key under the same conditions and yet the masses are slowly drifting apart. And Physicists from the International Bureau of Weights and Measures have no idea why.¹
- Apparently the kilogram is not the only standard to lose weight. *And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. Do these words mean anything to us anymore?*
- It's hard to escape Israel's blatant idolatry in Old Testament. Over and over again God says don't worship idols and yet in 2 Kings 17:12 we read, *They worshiped idols, though the LORD had said, "You shall not do this."* You'd expect things to change in the church age. They don't. The New Testament contains repeated warnings against idolatry. 1 John 5:21 warns, *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.* And from the passage we are going to look at this morning, 1 Corinthians 10:14. *Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.* And the question for us is, “what makes us think we're any different?”

Transition

I want to remind you that...

Proposition

- **God doesn't share his people with anyone or anything**
- Israel is God exclusive possession. The church is Christ's exclusive bride. What was true then is true now. Here. Today. For you. **God doesn't share his people with anyone or anything.** He wants all of you. He wants your whole heart. And anytime you set your heart on something so that your desire for that thing or person becomes more than your desire for God you've crossed the line into idolatry.
- However, idolatry isn't just wanting something or someone more than God. I love [Eugene Peterson's](#) paraphrases of idolatry when he says of verse 14; *So, my very dear friends, when you see people reducing God to something they can use or control.* In our day and age idolatry is no less real but so much more subtle.
- In the October issue of *Christianity Today* [Chuck Colson](#) tells the following true story. Colson writes, “A graduate of our Centurion program (an intensive course in biblical

¹ “A Kilogram Just Isn't What it Used to Be,” by Jamey Keaten, © *The Associated Press*. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed, Sept 12, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20744160/>.

worldview) sponsors a voluntary Christian club at her local middle school. Forty-three students eagerly signed up for the 13-week course. Everything went well until the students reached lesson 10, which led them through a series of choices to learn the difference between matters of taste and truth. One of the choices, ‘believing Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity’ flashed on the screen.”

- “Our centurion—I’ll call her Joanne,” Colson writes, “told me the students went nuts. She was shocked when seven of the eight small-group leaders, supposedly mature Christians, balked at distinguishing Christianity as true and other religions as false. Joanne urged them to talk to their parents or pastors, believing these authority figures would straighten them out. The next day, they came back with their answers—and they were appalling. One [of the small group leader’s] pastor said that no one can be sure of truth, that ‘it’s all perspective.’ Parents of the seven leaders agreed that their teens shouldn’t say that Christianity alone is true, because that could offend others. One girl had written a paper on ‘Why We Shouldn’t Hurt Others’ Feelings by Claiming Our Way is Right.’ Joanne was forced to shelve chapter 10. ‘They can’t teach what they don’t believe,’ she said.”²
- When we succumb to the idea that Truth is relative, that Jesus as the Way is only true if you’re a Christian; that’s idolatry. Colson puts it like this and pardon the French. “We worship at the altar of the bitch goddess of tolerance.”³
- This morning I’m operating on the assumption that human nature hasn’t really changed all that much in the past three thousand years. We are just as prone to idolatrous behavior now as those who have gone before us. Or, let me put it like this. God’s expectations, his standards, unlike the prototype of the kilogram, haven’t softened or changed or diminished.

Transition

From 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 I want to share with you...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two arguments against idolatry and for the exclusivity of your relationship to God through Christ**

Background/Setting

- At first glance, this passage doesn’t appear to be all that relevant to us. The whole problem in the Corinthian church revolved around meat sacrificed to idols at the various pagan temples in Corinth. We briefly discussed this issue back in chapter 8. If you’ll remember, in Paul’s day Corinth was blanketed with pagan McTemples on every street corner. And “in the ancient world [these] pagan shrines were the main suppliers of meat for human consumption. Most of the meat in butcher shops had come from animals sacrificed to idols. The gods received a token portion—usually not a choice cut—burned on the altar. After priests and priestesses took their portion and the worshiper and family consumed further portions, the remainder of the meat went up for sale to the general public.”⁴ The Corinthians had no qualms about getting this idol meat at the butcher or about going to these temples, participating in these meals, and eating this idol meat.

² *Christianity Today*, October 2007, p. 156.

³ *Christianity Today*, October 2007, p. 156.

⁴ Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, p. 364-5.

- The problem, as we think about applying what this text says, is that most of us have never faced this situation—as far as I can tell. This is still a real issue some Christians face in developing countries. But not for us. As [Daniel Doriani](#) says, “after all, how many North American Christians have ever sat down to a dinner served with this warning: ‘Before we begin, you might like to know that this roast was offered to an idol this morning.’”⁵ Chances are very good the ground chuck you get from Ed’s Family Foods hasn’t been sacrificed to an idol. Wal-Mart maybe. Just kidding.
- But that doesn’t mean we get off scot-free and we can just skip over this passage. We’re still susceptible to idolatry—all of us. Our circumstances may be different but the nature of the human heart hasn’t changed. This passage should be, and is, completely relevant.

Transition

If you haven’t yet done so, please open your bibles to 1 Corinthians 10 and let’s try to get a handle on the idolatry that had infiltrated the Corinthian church and learn something from it. Listen. [Verses 14-17](#). *Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.* The [first argument](#) against the Corinthian idolatry is the argument of Communion. Say what? That’s right, communion. Have you ever thought of Communion as an argument against idolatry? It is. Let me say it like this. [Life in community prevents idolatry](#). Let me see if I can explain.

Main Points

- That Paul is referring to communion in this passage comes from his use of two key phrases in [verses 16 and 17](#). *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?* Communion. It’s pretty clear that’s what he’s referring to. By the way, what’s really interesting is that the word for cup Paul uses here is a technical term referring to the cup of wine drunk at the end of the Passover meal.⁶ Basically what Paul is saying here in words is what Jesus demonstrated with actions on the night he was betrayed prior to his crucifixion. Jesus is our Passover lamb. He suffered and died to atone for our sins. Pretty cool and something worth thinking about more deeply but slightly beside the point for the moment.
- Basically Paul appeals to the Corinthian’s experience during communion as an argument against idolatry. So the question is what happens during communion? Have you ever thought about that? What is communion? What does the communion experience mean? Well, on the one hand, it’s a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice. It’s a time to focus and reflect and think about what Christ did for us.
- But it’s also so much more than that. There is something sacred, even mystical, in gathering in Jesus’ name to eat a broken loaf and drink from one cup. Paul says when we eat; when we drink we *participate* in the blood and body of Christ. That’s the mystical part. There’s something going on, an unseen spiritual reality in the practice of communion. A few other translations have the word share. We *share* in Christ’s blood and his body. Literally, it reads,

⁵ Doriani, *Getting the Message*, p. 137.

⁶ Reinecker, p. 420.

and this is my translation. *The cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks, is that not fellowshiping with the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is that not fellowshiping with the body of Christ?* Koinonia. Fellowship.

- Paul understands Communion as a sacred meal of fellowship. Communion is the unique sharing of believers in the worship of the deity who is also present during the meal.⁷ Wow. For the Christian, there is nothing else like communion. Do you see what Paul's doing here? [Gordon Fee](#) nails it when he says, "There can be little doubt that Paul intends to emphasize the kind of bonding relationship of the worshipers with one another that this meal expresses."⁸ Communion builds community. [Verse 18](#). *Because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.* In other words, during communion there is not only this vertical thing with God going on, there is a profound horizontal bonding with one another going on—there is a building of community.
- Here's what it means for us. Community is a powerful thing. And things that create community, like communion, are powerful events. And what I think Paul is trying to communicate with these words about communion is that **life in community, represented by communion, is an antidote to idolatry**. Sharing life together as Christians is a powerful deterrent to idolatry. The more you spend life in Christian community, the more you share life together in Jesus' name, the less idolatrous you'll be. Maybe if we celebrated communion more frequently, maybe if we took more time to do the kinds of things that build community we'd be less prone to idolatrous behavior.

Transition

There is, however, a flip side. Look at [verses 18-22](#). And it's this. **Life in community, apart from Jesus, can be idolatrous**. Listen. *Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?*

- In these verses Paul gives *the* major reason why idolatry is so distasteful to God. Why? Because behind idolatry, even if the idols are dumb, mute things made of wood or stone, is the unseen reality of the demonic.
- In [verse 18](#) Paul brings up Israel and the sacrificial system as a positive illustration of the point he's trying to make. Leviticus 7, Deuteronomy 12 and many other passages in the Old Testament describe how certain sacrifices offered to Yahweh involved the worshiper eating part of what was sacrificed. And so in the case of the Corinthians, for them to eat a meal sacrificed to idols at a pagan temple—what's the difference? How could that not be construed as worship considering what they knew about sacrifices and the worshiper from the Old Testament? "These pagan meals were in fact sacrifices to demons; the worship of demons was involved."⁹

⁷ Fee, p. 463.

⁸ Fee, p. 466.

⁹ Fee, p. 472.

- Are the idols themselves anything to speak of. No. They're not real. Paul's question in [verse 19](#) begs the answer no. They're nothing. But just because the idols themselves aren't real doesn't mean that they aren't dangerous. In fact, it's just the opposite. Behind all idolatry is demon worship. [Verse 20](#). *No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God.*
- What's Paul's fear? Look at the latter half of verse 20. *And I do not want you to be participants with demons.* There's our word again. Share. Participate. Fellowship. Commune. Juxtaposed in these verses are two community building events. The Lord's Supper and the idol meal. They both build community. They both involve fellowship. They both involve participation. One worships the Lord Jesus Christ. The other worships demons.
- No, unlike the Corinthians, we don't face the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. Here's the danger. We all have a pull toward community. There's a reason things like My Space and Facebook are so popular. We are created for community—even if it's virtual. But not all communities are the same. Not all communities are beneficial. And the Christian's primary obligation is to form and create community in and around the name of Jesus. If your primary sense of community, because that's what was at stake in the Corinthian church, if your primary sense of belonging is found in some place other than the one body of Christ gathered in Jesus name then you're involved in the idolatrous, that is, the demonic. That's what Paul is getting at. Anything that fragments your loyalty to Christ through the solidarity of the body of Christ so that your community comes from something other than “in Jesus' name” that is by its very nature incompatible with Christianity and a declaration of idolatrous intent.¹⁰ **Life in community, apart from Jesus, can be idolatrous.**
- You need to ask yourself this morning, self, “where does my sense of community, my sense of belonging come from?” Where is the locus of your community? And more importantly does the answer to that question involve “in Jesus' name?”

Conclusion

- Let me ask you, what does the NFL really sell? Hint. The answer is not football. What does Pampered Chef or Mary Kay really sell? Not kitchen stuff. Not cosmetics. They sell belonging. Community. People gathered together to enter into an experience together. Are those things necessarily wrong? Not at all. But what's a shame is that most people

¹⁰ Thisleton, p. 777.