2-11-24

1 Corinthians 10:1-14 (2)

Last week we considered the first few verses of this chapter. Paul makes it clear that during the Israelite exodus from Egypt and the following 40 years in the wilderness, that they experienced the foreshadowing of all that the Corinthian Christians hold dear. They experienced a baptism while under the cloud and passing through the Red Sea; they partook of a Lord’s supper of spiritual food when they were given the manna; and they experienced a spiritual gift of Christ in the form of water coming from a rock.

However, Paul tells them, and us, in verse 5 that with most of them God was not well-pleased. This was demonstrated by how many of them were laid low in the desert. When Paul says “most of them”, that is a bit of an understatement. In the book of Numbers, chapter 1 verse 46, we are told that the result of a census taken was that 603,550 men age 20 and over came out of Egypt. It is safe to assume that there were an equivalent number of women in that age range. And these numbers did not include the tribe of Levi. Out of all those people, only two, Joshua and Caleb, entered the Promised Land.

Over 1.2 million of God’s chosen people perished in the wilderness because of unbelief and rebelling against God. Let that sink in; because God is unchanging. He still takes our obedience to Him very seriously. He is God; we are not. We are His creation, so yes, He does get to make the rules. The truly good news for us is that His rules are not arbitrary; they are all according to His character. And His character is good and perfect and holy.

What about God’s great mercy? Well, recall that the reason the people wondered in the wilderness forty years and died there was because they refused to enter the Promised Land the first time God told them to. Dying in the wilderness was the consequence of that sin. Does that mean that all of them perished eternally? I don’t think so. During that time of wandering, with lots of time to think, with lots of time to see the sacrifices, with constant exposure to Moses and the priests and the Levites, they would have had a chance to come to faith in God in the likeness of Abraham. Certainly not all of them; many remained obstinate toward God; but surely, some of them gained forgiveness and eternal life through faith.

A lesson for us: In Christ we are forgiven our sins; but we may still suffer lifelong consequences from them. Once again, in the parallel that Paul draws between the Israelite and Christian experience, we see that baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and even spiritual gifts don’t save us. Only faith in Christ does that. Keep in mind those terrifying words of Jesus in Matthew 7: *Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’*

That word “lawlessness” is important. Jesus will refuse to have anything to do with someone who practices it. Consider that Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 refers to the antichrist as “the man of lawlessness”. We must balance the unacceptable tendency of lawlessness in our lives with the idea of Christian liberty. The phrase “Christian liberty” is not in the Bible; but the concept is. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus; not by following the law. We are under the commandment to love; not a bunch of rules we must adhere to. Unfortunately, our carnal minds will twist “Christian liberty”; we want that to mean we can do whatever we want. Obviously, if we truly believe in Christ and follow the commandments to love; we can see that this is not the case. That would be lawlessness.

Christian liberty must be guided by Scripture and by a Holy Spirit filled conscience. In this world we will always face grey areas. Sometimes we have to make decisions where there is no clear answer. Some examples might be who to vote for in an election, what college to attend, whether or not to take a particular job; once Scripture has been applied then there is no sin in the decision for the Christian.

In the Corinthian church, some were being gluttonous at the Lord’s Supper while others went hungry; some were getting drunk; some folks were consuming food they knew had been sacrificed to idols, even practicing idolatry; others were engaging in sexual immorality or accepting of it in the church. They were using Christian liberty as an excuse for lawlessness. Paul is warning them away from these things and using Israel’s acts of lawlessness as examples. They needed to realize that God took these things seriously and even those who were His people were not immune to the consequences.

Paul tells us in verse 6 that the things that happened to Israel are written in order to be examples for the Corinthians and for us. That is an important thing to realize about the Bible. The accounts that are recorded for us are not just there to be stories for our amusement. And they are not simply history. First, they demonstrate the glory and majesty of God; but then, they are there for our instruction. As Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16, “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.*”

Paul goes on to say that the reason for these examples is so that we Christians wouldn’t crave evil things like the people of Israel did. A craving is a strong desire for something. A craving is not always a bad thing; we might crave to know Jesus better. But the Israelites in the wilderness craved evil things and we can see that by their actions. Accordingly, we must be careful about craving evil things.

Cravings, of course, start with thoughts. We think about something we want and don’t have. This is where the Christian must understand the importance of what we think about. It is an easy thing to think about something we shouldn’t, believing that just thinking about it is okay; as long as we don’t do it. Here’s the problem: just thinking evil thoughts is sinful; and sin always increases, so after thinking long enough, you will physically commit the sin. And satan will make sure you have the opportunity.

A big part of craving is dwelling; we will dwell on the things we crave; and that is where the sin comes in. All of us have evil thoughts come into our minds, usually at a most unimaginable time; there is no sin in that, but we must not dwell on them. As we are told in 2 Corinthians 10:5, we must take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

As I mentioned a moment ago, sin increases. When we crave something evil and we dwell on it, we end up in idolatry. Whatever we dwell on becomes our idol because it will take the place of God in our hearts. As you read the book of 1 Corinthians you see the primary focus of Paul’s letter is sexual immorality and idolatry. We need to note that sexual immorality becomes idolatry. Scripture is very clear that God does not tolerate idolatry, as we begin to see in verse 7.

*Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.”* I think we are all familiar with the account of the golden calf in Exodus 32. Within a couple months of the LORD bringing the people out of Egypt through the Red Sea, crushing Pharoah’s armies, providing manna for them to eat, providing water for them out of a rock, and displaying His great power before them in blazing fire and smoke on Mount Sanai, thundering out His ten commandments; the first of which being “You shall have no other gods before Me”; the people hadn’t seen Moses for 40 days and wanted a god they could see. So they forced Aaron to make a golden calf.

It is a great testament to God’s patience and mercy that He didn’t obliterate them all immediately.

This was an obvious case of idolatry; the Israelites had created a graven image and worshiped it. They built an alter and offered sacrifices of burnt offerings and peace offerings. These had nothing to do with sin but were reverting back to Egyptian practices of trying to appease gods. This great sin of the people was so well known that Paul didn’t even have to mention the calf.

The quote he made is from Exodus 32:6 and demonstrates the points that Paul is trying to make. *“The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.”* The people had cravings; they continually dwelt on things they didn’t have and wanted. The first thing was a god they could see. It didn’t matter about the awesome display of God’s power they had witnessed time and again. They wanted to be able to look at something to worship. This was something they had in Egypt.

Another problem was food. As you read through Exodus, the people often complain that they missed the food they had in Egypt: they wanted the flesh pots, the leeks, the onions, and the melons. In Numbers 21:3, they even refer to the manna as “*miserable food*”. They dwelt on what they didn’t have instead of what God provided and it became idolatry. Before the golden calf, they partook of food they desired.

The fact that they stood up to play has two overtones. In Exodus 32:19, Moses saw that they were dancing. The indication is that they were dancing in a circle. While we can’t be sure about the Israelites, dancing in a circle was part of a ceremony for the Greek god Dionysus and its equivalent in other cultures. Regardless, it was part of pagan idol worship. The second overtone is that of immoral sexual behaviour. Again, something often associated with idol worship and clearly against God’s moral standards.

What we have is the Israelites engaging in pagan rituals worshiping a false god; this golden calf. They are giving it the credit for bringing them out of Egypt and providing them with food and water. What a slap in the face to the good God who gave them all these things. Again, it’s a wonder He didn’t wipe them out.

While God didn’t directly punish the people, punishment was brought about through God’s appointed leader, Moses. Moses ground up the golden idol, cast it into water and made the people drink it. Not all the people participated in this so next he called some of the faithful people to him. The tribe of Levi gathered to him and at Moses’ command, they killed 3,000 of those who had participated in the worship. However, God later told Moses that He would smite all those who had committed this sin and blot them out of His book.

Some of the people in the church of Corinth were eating food and engaging in immorality that was associated with idolatry; all in the name of Christian liberty. Paul brings out this example from Israel’s past to remind them of what a dangerous thing they are doing. It is obvious that the people of Israel who participated in this ritual were not fully committed to God. Those in the church who did these kinds of things had likely not properly committed to Christ. They were in danger of having their names blotted out of the Lamb’s book of life. Not that they were losing their salvation; it was that they never had it.

Those in the church that were young Christians were in danger of being influenced by those who were practicing lawlessness. They could be led astray and their relationship with Jesus could be damaged. Because of our love for each other, we need to be careful that we don’t damage another’s relationship with Jesus.

Idolatry is a terrible thing in the life of a Christian. And it is easy to fall into it. I don’t think any of us will ever be dancing around some statue and singing its praises; but in this busy life it is so easy to let something push its way into first place in our lives. It can even be a good thing: our spouse or children, our jobs, our hobbies. While all of these things are good gifts from God, none of them can come before Him or they have become an idol.

Take some time and consider what you think about most; what has your attention. What do you dwell on? Is there anything you dwell on that has become a craving? Even something you never intend to have happen; is it something sinful? Even though we properly confess that there is no other God than the God of the Bible, other things can take possession of our hearts. And then, we are guilty of idolatry.

We’ll continue our study next week, Lord willing.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we are so often drawn to those things we can see and touch. They are more real to us in our physical world than the spiritual world. In Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, we know that the spiritual world is very real; but our carnal nature draws us to the physical. We are easily misled into idolatry.

Lord God, You and You alone deserve first place in our hearts and in our lives. You should be first in our thoughts. Jesus, You deserve first place in our affections and adoration. Holy Spirit, You deserve first place in our attention. Please help us as we strive to make these things reality in this life.

Keep us from idolatry. Help us to take our thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ. May we think on good and righteous things. May we dwell on our God and on the kindness of Jesus our Lord and King. Keep us on the straight path to the narrow gate, that we may enter Your Kingdom, where we may worship You without distraction forever.

We pray in Jesus’ name

Amen