

“What’s Love Got to Do With It? American Idols.”

Today we’re wrapping up this series on the book of 1 Corinthians in the New Testament. This is actually a letter that Paul wrote to answer a whole bunch of questions that the Corinthian believers had about following Jesus. Paul writes to answer their questions and address some issues. Issues about conflict, sexuality, marriage, and other things.

But the overarching theme of 1 Corinthians is Paul addressing what it means to be holy. **To be holy means to belong completely to God.** So if you’ve surrendered your life to God and are trying to do God’s will in everything, then you are striving for holiness.

That’s the goal that Paul hold up for us. But at the same time we’ve got to remember that holiness is something that we’ll always feel the challenge to work on, to move toward. The Corinthians were striving to be holy, to fully belong to God. And they wanted to know what holiness looked like in various situations that were popping up in their world.

And one of those situations was whether or not they should eat meat that had been offered to an idol. I’m sure that that’s the question that has brought you to church today, that has been bothering you for years now. Okay, it’s kind of an odd topic for us because it seems so far removed from our daily lives. We’re not concerned about our meat supply having been offered to an idol--tainted with E.coli, or mad cow disease maybe, but not offered to idols.

Not a big deal to us, but a very big deal to Christians living in the Roman empire. This issue comes up in the book of Acts, the book of Galatians, the book of Revelation. Why was it a big deal? To answer that we’ve got get a glimpse of the culture of Corinth and how people practiced their religious beliefs. Remember that at that time Christianity was a tiny minority religion. Less than one percent of the population of Corinth was Christian at the time. In a city of around 100,000 maybe 200 were followers of Jesus. So those early Christians are surrounded by other religions. They’re surrounded by the worship of the Greco-Roman gods. Do you remember your Greek mythology? There were the 12 primary gods and goddess who lived on Mt. Olympus and then a bunch of other lesser gods who were all worshipped.

So as you walked into Corinth in Paul’s day, you couldn’t miss the fact that there were temples to these various gods all over the place. Athena over here, Hades over there, a temple to Artemis on this corner, one for Hannah Montana across the street. On the hill that overlooked the city was the gigantic temple to Aphrodite (or Venus) the goddess of love. You couldn’t miss it. Same with the temple of Apollo. Everywhere you would have looked as you walked down the street in Corinth there would have been temples, big and small and people stopping in to worship that particular god. Some were big enough for several people to enter, some just a small grotto for one people to stand in at the foot of the statue of the god and make their request.

So how did people worship these gods? Well, they didn’t come and sit in rows of chairs and sing songs of praise and listen to a message. They didn’t do that. Worship was very simple. When you wanted something from a particular god, you went to their temple and brought a gift. You’d give that to the priest of the temple who offered a prayer on your behalf. If you were taking a trip by sea you’d go to the temple of Poseidon and offer something like a goat to please that god and ensure a safe trip. Worship was all about bringing a gift.

What the priest would do is take that animal, slit its throat and pour it’s blood on the altar to that particular god. Then they’d butcher the meat and typically the priest would keep half the meat and the other half would be cooked and served to you and your friends in a temple feast.

So the priests got half that goat, but that was more than they could use. They’d keep a small portion to eat, then the rest was sold in the market. That meant, that if you lived in Corinth and were doing your daily shopping, when you went to pick up meat at your local butcher the meat you were buying had probably come from one of those sacrifices at a local temple. That raised questions for Christians around the Roman Empire.

So the Christians in Corinth wrote to Paul and asked him, “Is it OK for us to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol?” A second question they asked was, “What if we go to a friend’s house for dinner and they serve us a meal and we know the meat has been sacrificed to an idol? Should we eat the food they serve us?” A third question was, “When our family or friends invite us to go with them to a temple and take part in a feast, can we go and eat that meat?” Christians were divided on this issue.

One group said, “Idols are really nothing anyway, there is only one true God, so eat the meat! Don’t worry about it. Same if your neighbor serves you food that been offered to an idol. Eat it. Idols aren’t real. And if you’re invited to a temple feast, go! Idols are not real.”

But other Christians said, "Wait a minute. We're told in the first two commandments that we are to have no other god's before the one God, and we should make no images of God. How can we eat meat that's been offered to something that is so contrary to what we believe? How could we dishonor God by eating meat offered to the image of another god? Eating meat like that would be profaning God. So don't eat the meat in the market place. If your neighbor serves you food that you know comes from a sacrifice to an idol, don't touch it. And don't even think about going to a temple feast where you'll eat meat like that."

So the church began to divide along these lines. The people with more knowledge about theology and scriptures are the ones who seemed to say, "Idols aren't real so don't worry about eating the meat."

If you read the New Testament you'll see that the early church leaders disagreed on this, so where did Paul stand on all this? It's interesting that Paul found a way to navigate between the two views. The people in the church of in Corinth saw things in black and white, but Paul seemed to find the gray area in between. He said this in chapter 8, **"So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'An idol is nothing at all in the world' and that 'There is no God but one' (1 Cor. 8:4, TNIV).** That answers the question about idols in general.

Then Paul says **"Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.' If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience" (1 Cor. 10:25-27, TNIV).** There he answers the question about eating meat from the market and eating with neighbors who might be serving food offered to idols. He says, "Don't ask, just eat. It's OK."

But to the third question he says this, **"the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 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" (1 Cor. 10:20-21, TNIV).**

On questions 1 and 2, go ahead and eat the meat. On question 3, "Don't go to the temple and eat meat there in a ritual feast, that's going too far." Paul doesn't fully side with one side or the other. He's somewhere in between.

You might be saying, "Why do I care about any of this?" And that brings us to THE question. **What's love got to do with it?**

Look at what Paul writes, **"Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled...Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't they be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall" (1 Cor. 8:7-13, TNIV).**

Paul is doing something amazing here. He's saying, "There are no cookie-cutter Christians. I can eat meat offered to idols because I understand theologically why it's OK and it's not going to offend God for me to do that. But if that is going to cause somebody else to stumble in their faith, or go back to their pagan ways, or cause a faith crisis, I will not eat that meat."

Here's the principle, catch this: My personal pleasure and my personal freedom come second to building up my brothers and sisters in Christ. What's love got to do with it? What love has to do with it here is that it's not all about you! That just because you can understand that something's OK for you, if it causes somebody else to stumble in their faith, in their life, then you have violated the principle of love which is what holiness looks like.

So your primary concern is, "How will my actions affect someone else?" Not, "What do I want to do and what brings me pleasure?" This is really, really important and it relates to a whole bunch of real-world parts of our lives.

Is there anything in your life that you truly believe is OK, but by doing it, might hurt someone else? Might not be OK for them? Might cause them to stumble? And are you willing to refrain from exercising your freedom to build someone up rather than tear them down by your actions?

One of the classic examples of this has to do with alcohol. As United Methodist Christians we believe that it's not a sin to drink a glass a wine. Jesus changed water into wine, not Welch's. Now, historically in the 19th and early 20th century Methodist were tea-totalers. They saw the social evils of alcohol and believed that it was better to not drink than to be tempted or cause someone else to fail. Today we tend to say, "If you want a glass of wine with dinner, that's not a sin." But as a congregation we don't serve alcohol at official church functions because for some, one glass of wine leads to a binge and causes problems in the family and career and health. Having a glass of wine or drinking in moderation is not a sin. But we want to communicate clearly that you can have a great time and not have alcohol and if you choose to drink, be careful that you don't cause someone else to stumble and fall. Yes you're free, but love for the other must be the guiding principle.

One family in our church told me about their son. When he was young, well under-age for drinking, a neighbor invited him over and gave him his first beer and many more after that. He ended up becoming an alcoholic for quite some time. He finally overcame that addiction only to lose his life at an early age to cancer. That mom and dad felt, and probably continue to feel, like alcohol robbed them of precious years of the son's short life, because somebody introduced him to alcohol.

If you have a friend who struggles with this and you have dinner with them, could it be that because of that, even though you don't have an alcohol problem, you have ice tea instead of wine because you don't want to do anything that will create a problem for that person.

The question is, "Is it all about you and your freedoms and your pleasure at that moment, and how you understand theologically that this is OK? Or is it really about loving someone else and doing what builds them up and being careful about how your actions affect other people.

With the new Casino so close to Joplin, gambling is another example. I received an email a couple of weeks ago asking about gambling and its effects on people and the number of people from our church who talk about going to the casinos regularly, and should we be concerned.

My response was that for some people, gambling is an innocent past time, for others it's a death-spiral of addiction. The spiritual issue of gambling in general becomes one of putting your faith in chance to provide for your needs rather than putting your faith in God. And then there is the social impact gambling has and the potential it has to ruin lives. If people begin to choose going to a casino over spending time with their children, or connecting to others, or taking part in the life of their church, or intentionally building up their souls, then there's a problem. It has then become an idol in their life, it has replaced God and that's a dangerous place to be. If that doesn't happen to you, but someone sees you as a role model and it leads them down a path that destroys them, then you have sinned. At least one man I know can attest to the fact that gambling cost him everything. Everything.

Some people would go so far as to say that casinos look an awful lot like temples and just like Paul said about eating meat at a temple festival, "Don't do it. It's too closely associated with the worship of that god." He might say, "Don't go to the casinos, it's too closely associated with the worship of money, and chance, and it could easily become a problem."

It's not a sin to gamble, and it may be OK for you because you know theologically that it's not a sin. But why take the chance of addiction. Why take the chance of sending the message to somebody else that it's OK, somebody who could easily become an addict? A lot of you do go to the casinos regularly. I'm not picking you. Others of us do other things that take us away from family, church, and taking care of souls. Things like sports, shopping, video games.

Again the question is, "Is it all about you and your freedoms and your pleasure at that moment, and how you understand theologically that this is OK. Or is it really about loving someone else and doing what builds them up and being careful about how your actions affect other people."

I want to start wrapping this up with one other point Paul makes. In chapter 10 he says this, "**Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry**" (1 Cor. 10:14, TNIV). "Wait a second Paul, how am I going to flee from idolatry in Corinth?! It's everywhere! Temples and idols on both sides of every street. You'd have to move into the wilderness to avoid it because it's everywhere!"

But Paul's not saying, "Flee the city!" He's saying, "In the sea of idolatry you're in, don't devote your heart, your life, your time, to something that's not God."

Paul uses an interesting metaphor in 1 Corinthians chapter 6. He says, “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.” That’s interesting. They were surrounded by all these temples and idols, but your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

So here’s the question when it comes to idolatry—and this is very important: If we were to step into your temple and look into your heart and see the throne there in your heart, what would we see there? Who would be seated there? What is at the center of your life? The throne of our lives, the center of our lives, that’s our hopes, our dreams, our ambitions, it’s what we focus our attention on. What’s at the center of your life, your temple?

When I think about idols in our lives I think about a young man whose entire life has become about sex. And now that’s enslaved him and it’s literally destroying him. Lost his family, his job. You put the wrong thing on the throne in your temple and it has devastating consequences.

There’s the young woman who has the desperate need to be beautiful. She wants to be pretty so much that she’s willing to mutilate her body, do whatever it takes to be beautiful. But no matter how beautiful other people see her, she still looks in the mirror and thinks she’s ugly. You put the wrong thing on the throne in your life and it destroys.

There’s the man who was wounded by someone in the past and every day he wakes up thinking about how to get vengeance on the person who hurt him. Revenge has become the idol in his life.

Or men and women by the millions whose god is success. They desperately crave success, but somehow they’re never successful enough. Those who live for material possessions but never seem to be satisfied with what they have. Those whose quest is for pleasure, or satisfaction or freedom. That’s on the throne in their life. Sometimes we pull back the curtain on the temple of our lives and what’s on the throne is the company logo. We’ve offered our children on the altar of that god so that we could serve that god.

For some people what’s on the throne of their lives is their spouse or their children. A lot of us do that. It’s interesting, when your children are the most important thing in the world to you and they move away, what do you do then? They can’t be on the throne.

In my life I’ve put acceptance on that throne. Wanting so much for people to like me and think well of me that that consumes my life. At times it’s been material possessions. The quest for things, for comfort, has taken over the place on the throne of my life. And at those times I feel so empty, so shallow, so sick. Things are not right when you have the wrong god on your throne.

For years in our house we’ve had a simple way of reminding each other about what is on the throne. As Zoe began to grow up we heard her start to say, like all of us do, “I love my stuffed animals” or “I love chips and salsas”, or “I love my pink flip-flops.” Janet and I would say the same sorts of things. We started correcting each other by asking the question, “Can we really love toys?” “Can we really love food?” “Can we really love shoes?” We tell each other, “We can only really love God and people, in that order.” For us, it’s a tiny little reminder to make sure of who is really on the throne.

So I ask it one more time: Who do you love? If I were to pull back the curtain in your temple, what would I see on your throne? That’s the question of idolatry. Who do you love? And for today, that challenge is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here’s my invitation today. Remember it’s not about you, it’s not just about what brings you pleasure or what you have the knowledge to figure out is OK. But there are those times when you don’t do something because, even though it’s OK for you, it could harm somebody else. The bigger principle is that we’re called to love with agape love.

And the second invitation is this. If you’re like me and you’ve struggled with having the wrong god on the throne of your life, let’s simply say, “God, here I am. I’m yours, please be at the center of my life. Be the living Lord of my life. Guide and direct me. Help me to live a life that pleases and honors you.” If you’d like to do that just get ready to talk to God. Put your hands on your lap palms up like your getting ready to receive a gift. And let’s pray together. Pray it in your own way, or just echo my words...

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