

THE FOCUSED LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

In my judgment one of the most dramatic words that Jesus ever said to his disciples was, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," {Matt 10:16}.

Coming from Montana, where there are a lot of sheep, I must say I have never heard of a sheepherder who did that.

But this Shepherd does, and, of course, this immediately raises the question, "How are sheep going to survive under those circumstances?" The answer to that question will be set before us in the passage that the Apostle Paul is dealing with in First Corinthians 10, to which we come this morning.

We have just been looking at this section that answers the Corinthians' question of how to handle the problem of whether to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. The apostle had a lot to say about that, and he closed the section that we looked at last Sunday with these words in Verse 13:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. {1 Cor 10:13 RSV}

That is a great, encouraging word. It means that our problems are common problems, but our pressures are controlled pressures. There is always the supply of conquering grace given to us.

Now notice that the apostle goes right on, in Verse 14, to say:

Therefore,

(The first rule of Bible study is, whenever you find a "therefore," stop and see what it is there for.)

Therefore, my beloved, shun the worship of idols. {1 Cor 10:14 RSV}

It is clear from that the temptation the apostle had in mind when he wrote that encouraging word in Verse 13, "no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man," was idolatry.

Therefore, my beloved, shun the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say. {1 Cor 10:14-15 RSV}

There were, of course, idol temples in Corinth. On the hill behind the city was the temple of Aphrodite where 1,000 male and female prostitutes plied their trade in the name of the worship of Venus, the goddess of love. Within the city itself were scattered many temples; their ruins are still visible today. These Christians had once been idol worshipers, bowing down before these images, offering sacrifices to them, their lives being controlled by the fear and the philosophy of the Greek and the Roman pantheons of gods.

I do not think that the apostle is concerned that they are going to go back to bowing down to an idol. That is not what he means when he says, "Flee idolatry." (That is what this is saying: "Shun the worship of idols," is literally, "Flee idolatry.") What he has in mind is not bowing and scraping before an image, but succumbing to the temptation to enjoy again the atmosphere found at the idol temple. There were a lot of fun things going on with regard to idolatry that some of the Corinthians, at least, were hoping to be able to hang onto.

If you had lived in Corinth in that 1st century you would have recognized that the whole Roman and Greek citizenry of the city regarded the temple as the most exciting place in town. There you could get the best food, served up in the open-air restaurant. There they had the wildest music and all the seductive pleasures of wine,

women and song. If you wanted to enjoy yourself in Corinth, therefore, you went out to the temple.

I believe the apostle is concerned lest these Corinthians, in seeking to enjoy what would be normal pleasures of life, would be tempted to go back into it to such a degree that, ultimately, they would find themselves lured back into belief in these idols and their power. Idolatry is not something you do outwardly with your body. Idolatry basically occurs whenever anyone or anything becomes more important to you than the living God.

Defined that way, it is clear that even in the 20th century, this is the greatest temptation that every one of us faces. When we fall back into the place where something becomes of greater importance to us and more controlling in our life than God himself, we have succumbed again to idolatry. That is why this word of the apostle's, filled with affection and affirmation, is still relevant to us.

"Therefore, my beloved ones" ("the ones I love," is not a light term with Paul.) "Flee idolatry. I speak as to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say." That is not a sarcastic statement. He is not putting them down when he says that. He is acknowledging that these are sensible, thoughtful Christians, exposed often to the Word of God. They are able, therefore, to judge properly what is right and what is wrong if they refer it to the revelation of the Scripture, and so he is encouraging them to do this very thing. Paul is saying that there are certain atmospheres you can get into as a Christian in which you are not outwardly bowing down to an idol, but you are being captured by the atmosphere. It can get so strong and so controlling that the only advice he can give you, Paul says, is that when it gets that way, get up and leave; flee it; shun idolatry.

Now he is talking about avoiding the mentality that is associated with some of these things, not avoiding the people. "Avoid the temple," he is saying, "but do not avoid the pagans who go there." This is very wise and very balanced truth the apostle has given us here.

You can recognize how easily this kind of idolatry happens to us today. You can get so wrapped up in sports, for instance, that you live for them; they take over in your life. We are beginning to make national jokes about how families are split up by the football season, because people cannot take their eyes away from the tube when the games are in session. Your family suffers and everything else suffers so that you can follow that sport. When something begins to possess you in that way you are verging on idolatry. When what you own begins to own you, then it is taking the place of God in your life and you are on the verge of idolatry.

When you begin to worship some of these great sports figures, when you learn all you can about them and spend your time pursuing information and contact with some of them, you are being drawn into the same thing that the apostle is concerned about here in Corinth, and that is a form of idolatry. You may be worshipping Mohammed Ali, who proclaims himself to be "the greatest," or perhaps Howard Cosell (the least), and that is idolatry. Perhaps it is the atmosphere of the cocktail lounge that you enjoy, and you find yourself wanting to go there.

Be very careful, Paul says, you are being assaulted by a temptation to fall again into idolatry. Though being there is not necessarily wrong, if you begin to succumb to the atmosphere, if it begins to possess you again, you are in trouble; that is idolatry.

This is how subtle and silken some of these pressures can be. When disco dancing becomes more than recreation but is something you look forward to every single week, and you cannot put it aside and other things go because of it, then it becomes idolatry. Skiing can do the same thing; and gambling, when it becomes a fever is a form of possession that takes over the life. Fishing can keep you away from your ministry. Television robs you of Bible study. When you feel yourself growing weak over the mention of the name of some rock-and-roll artist, you are falling into idolatry. Gourmet eating that demands your attention and your money is a form of idolatry. These things are not wrong in themselves, but it is easy to fall prey to them. They lure you on into more and more involvement until, before you know it, they are more important than God. That is idolatry. You have a new god before you know it, a new love and a new master.

The apostle now goes on to outline three reasons why idolatry is so dangerous. The first is suggested to us in Verses 16-21 where he says, in effect, that any form of idolatry will displace your love for Christ.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the practice of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. {1 Cor 10:16-21 RSV}

Clearly there are some things in life that are mutually antagonistic, and one of them has to do with the matter of what you worship. As Jesus put it, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other," {Matt 6:24, Luke 16:13}. You cannot mix them, that is what he is saying. One of the great and continuing problems of the Christian life is that we want to make a deep, sincere, wholehearted commitment to Christ, expressed in the Lord's table, and at the same time fully enjoy and give ourselves over to everything that is in the world. This, the Lord says, you cannot do. John says the same thing: "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world," {1 Jn 2:15-16 KJV}.

This is one of the great problems of life today, as it was in Corinth so many years ago. We are to deal with this on the basis of who we basically are; that is why the apostle begins with the table of the Lord, because it is the central act of Christian worship.

What do we do when we celebrate the Lord's table, when we pass the cup and we break the bread? Well, according to this and other Scriptures, we are reminding ourselves, and anyone else observing, of who we basically are. What we are saying is, "We died with Christ. When Christ shed his blood something died within us as well, and that something was the old, self-centered life that wanted to be the center of attention and have everything revolve around it. We resigned our commission as Lord of the universe when we died with Christ." That is what it means. When we pass the bread and take of it and eat together, we are saying, "We have found a new source of strength. We no longer live by self-esteem, but by the approval of God, the righteousness granted and gifted to us by God. We feed on that. We rest on it. We feed on the truth that God unfolds to us in his Word. We feed on the strength that Christ himself gives us to love even the unlovely. We draw on it. We eat it. We take it in, moment by moment and day by day. That is who we are. We basically and fundamentally belong to God." As we all do this, we are sharing together, and declaring, therefore, that we all partake of the same life. We all possess the same life, and that means we are one body, united in one family. That is what the Lord's table means. To take it in any other way than a realization of that is to be mechanical and ritualistic and fundamentally shallow in our Christianity.

Paul says you can see the same principle at work even in the Jewish sacrifices. Verse 18, "Consider the practice of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?" What they eat is telling others who they are. That is what we do too, he says, in the Lord's Table. "What we eat is telling ourselves and all the world who we are." Paul is basically saying, "What you eat is a manifestation of who you are." He has in view, of course, eating the meat offered in the sacrifices, or eating the bread and the wine of the Lord's table. These are symbolic manifestations by which we are saying, "We take this in; we eat this; we live by this, and therefore that is who we are."

But now it goes beyond the mere physical act of eating something. You can "eat" things other than food. You are always taking in things, living by them, needing them in order to exist and function. That is what the apostle is saying is the danger of staying around and being trapped by the atmosphere and the lure of much of these otherwise innocent activities. You begin to live by them; you begin to demand them; you must always have them or you cannot be comfortable. This is what is deadly about somebody who constantly has to have something new in his life in order to remain happy. That is what is deadly about a teenager who has a transistor radio going all the time. He cannot be anybody without that music blaring at him. That is the deadliness of it; that is the danger. It is idolatry. It is "eating" something that is telling the world who you basically are.

The apostle goes on to say some really revealing things here. He says, "Am I simply trying to argue that idols are nothing?" "No," he says, "I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons." What is behind all of this lure of otherwise innocent things? The apostle's answer is, demonic control. We have to face this as literally and realistically true. Paul speaks in other places of principalities and powers, the invisible spirits who obey the god of this world.

Is that not a revealing statement? The god who is behind all the organization of secular life is the devil, and subject to his control is a whole host of wicked, evil spirits engaged in a process that you can call by no term other than "mind control." They are controlling the thinking, the attitudes, the desires, the habits of thousands and millions of people. Why? Because their objective is death.

We have just had a very vivid demonstration of this {during} this last week in the story coming out of Guyana concerning the terrible tragedy at Jonestown. This has stunned the world. Why? Because everywhere people are asking, "Why do otherwise innocent people get drawn into this kind of thing. How can they be trapped in such a way that they no longer have the ability to resist a sentence of death that is levied upon them? How can 900 people voluntarily take their own lives, and the lives of their children?" The answer is, demonic control. There is no doubt about it. That is what is behind it.

Jesus said the devil is a liar and a murderer {cf, John 8:44}. What he is after is the physical destruction of human life. If the devil had his way we would all be wiped out before tomorrow morning. That is why we ought to give thanks for the protection of God every day that we have not been destroyed by the malevolent, evil spirit who is in charge of this world. Every now and then he succeeds in accomplishing his objective. How does he do it? By deceiving. He is a liar. He deceives people into thinking they are going to get something great, they are going to achieve their dreams and fulfill all the hungers of their life.

A man just described to me between the services this morning how his wife is now struggling with this very thing -- she is trying to fulfill hungers by running after the will-o'-the-wisp of the world. This is the deadly danger we fall into when something begins to replace the love and the grace of God in our life. That is idolatry.

Paul says that worship is an absolute thing; it is total. You cannot serve two masters. Either you will show that you belong to Christ or you will show that you belong to the god of this age, the god of this world. You cannot mix the two.

Then he tells us the second reason. Not only is your love for Christ threatened by idolatry, but, as he says in Verse 22,

Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? {1 Cor 10:22 RSV}

Any form of idolatry awakens the jealousy of God. All through the Old Testament we are told that God is "a jealous God," {Exod 20:5, 34:14, Deut 4:24, 5:9, 6:15, Josh 24:19}. What does Paul mean by that? Is God subject to capricious whims in which he gets angry if anybody looks at anything else? No, God's jealousy is a proper jealousy; it is a love so intense for the object of his love that he is angry when something threatens it, and he will act. He will not stand idly by and let you drift away into some idolatrous preoccupation with something of the world. He will strike at it; he will destroy it. And if your affections are so entwined with it, you are going to get hurt in the process; you will find yourself crushed and hurt and crying out to God, "Why do you do this to me?" But it is an act of love from a jealous God who will not allow you to drift into that kind of preoccupation.

The third thing the apostle says is that any form of idolatry becomes a stumbling block to our brothers and our sisters:

"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. {1 Cor 10:23-24 RSV}

We cannot be like Cain who said to the Lord, "Am I my brother's keeper?" {Gen 4:9}. Yes, we are our brothers keepers. We have a responsibility not to harm or injure the spiritual growth of another brother or sister. These words are lovingly warning us that when we find ourselves wanting something so bad that it interferes with our love and desire for the things of God we are in danger; we had better watch carefully lest we awaken his jealousy and we find ourselves subject to the ruthless discipline of a God who loves us.

That is the danger of idolatry. Let me summarize it. Idolatry of any form denies our commitment to Christ, provokes and awakens the jealousy of God, and injures our brother or sister who is trying to work out his or her problems as well. And yet what the apostle is saying is to be carefully understood. At this point many Christians, knowing the dangers that are in the world and the things of the world, immediately jump to the conclusion that the way to defend against it is to get away, and stay away, from certain things that are destructive, that are strongly tempting.

Many Christians do this. They cut off all communication with their neighbors and their friends who are not Christians. They will not have anything to do with them. They build themselves a little "Bible city" where they can escape all the dangers of being assaulted by any worldly temptation. When that happens, you run right into another form of worldliness. Christians who live that way end up carnal, worldly-minded, filled with pride and self-righteousness that turns off thousands from the Christian message. That is not what Paul is saying.

What he is saying is, "Your only defense to handle these kinds of problems is to keep your commitment to the Lord Jesus at a white-hot pitch, and then you are safe out in the world."

Paul now turns to certain practical guidelines that are very helpful, because he wants to enable people to live right in the midst of life the way it is. So still taking this problem of eating meat offered to idols, he says, in Verse 25:

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 everything in it." {1 Cor 10:25-26 RSV}

Translated into our terms of idolatry, what Paul is saying is, "Do not run away from life. Live right out in the midst of it. Do not try to avoid being normal, natural people enjoying the normal, natural things of life around you. You will never escape by trying to get away from the temptations. They will pursue you wherever you go. So enjoy life, and do not raise over-scrupulous questions, always trying to examine everything with a microscope as to whether it is going to be dangerous or hurtful to you. Relax. God knows where you are. He has put you there and provided a world for you to enjoy, so enter into it and live it to the full."

But what about when you are invited to the home of a non-Christian? Paul goes on,

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. {1 Cor 10:27 RSV}

I am so glad he put that here. That indicates where we are to live our Christian lives -- right out in the midst of the world, just the way it is. It is clear that separation to Christ does not mean isolation from non-Christians. Our fellowship is to be with Christ; our friendship is to be given to the non-Christians around us. That is very important. Christians who refuse to do that are only deceiving themselves. They are disobeying the command of their Lord to "go forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," {Matt 10:16}. We are to go and we are to enjoy ourselves without asking questions. Paul says, "If somebody asks you, then go." Now nobody is going to ask you if you are an uptight, self-righteous, legalistic Christian. If that is the case, do not worry; you will not get any invitations into non-Christian homes. You will only get them if you are an open-hearted, friendly, outgoing person who understands that people are struggling and in need, and you see through the veneer and the facade of their lives to the empty, lonely, hurting hearts behind. Then you will get an invitation to a home, and if you do, Paul says, "Go, and enjoy it, but be careful; remember your basic commitment is to Christ. Nothing must compromise that."

Verse 28:

(But if some one says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then out of consideration for the man who informed you, and for conscience' sake -- I mean his conscience, not yours -- do not eat it.) For why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? {1 Cor 10:28-30 RSV}

If someone makes an issue over the matter then refuse to go along. If someone makes it obvious that you are being tested to see whether you are willing to go the whole way with the world or whether you really belong to Christ, then make the issue crystal clear right away. Do not go along with what they want you to do because they are making a test out of it, or their own conscience may be troubled by it. For their sakes do not do it. Your conscience may be clear; theirs is not.

The latter part of Verse 29 and Verse 30 is often taken to be contradictory to what we have just said, but what it really means is, "Why should I exercise my liberty to eat or drink or whatever, and thus arouse condemnation from others? Why should I expose myself that way?" So Paul is encouraging here this refusal to go along with something, lest, in doing it, you expose yourself to some condemnation from someone with a troubled conscience. This is really what Paul is saying in Romans 14:16, "Let not then your good be evil spoken of."

He closes with a rule of thumb for all occasions:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, even as I am of Christ. {1 Cor 10:31-11:1 RSV}

What a wonderful, powerful life the Apostle Paul had! The effect of it is still changing the history of the world twenty centuries later. Why? Because he had a "focused life." There was one thing he wanted to accomplish, and that was the glory of God. He says he had the highest of motives: "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," so that God is pleased. And do it his way and for his reasons. That is the thing to aim at. The practical guideline is, "Do not deliberately offend anybody." Now you cannot help it at times because you have to be faithful to Christ, but when you can, do not offend them. Try not to offend the Jew, or the Gentile, or the Christian.

Finally, you have a wonderful example both in the Lord himself and in his apostles. They gave themselves to help others; they put the good of others before their own desires and thus made an impact on their generation and the world ever since.

Prayer

Lord, we live in a dangerous world. You have made that very clear to us. We often forget it; we often think that we can go along with many of these things and we find ourselves beginning to be drawn away, to lose our fervor for the things of God. We begin to think of life as the worldlings around us do, to seek after the same values they do. Help us at that moment, Lord, to flee idolatry. Help us to understand that we are where we ought to be, even in feeling the temptation, but that our only safeguard is to renew our fellowship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Guard us in those moments, that we may be sheep in the midst of wolves. We ask in his name, Amen.

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