

1 Corinthians 9:24-10:22 AM

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Date: 28 January 2024

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[0:00] Well, we have a few things to talk about. If I were to give a title to the passage this morning, I think it would be a warning against pride. Because it addresses a common problem in the Christian life, the belief that we are beyond temptation.

And if we have fallen into temptation, the belief that we are beyond redemption. And both are forms of pride. 1 Corinthians is a letter that focuses on gospel application.

What does Jesus' death and resurrection mean for our lives? How do we live it out communally and personally? And in chapters 1 through 4, Paul starts off by addressing the fighting and the biting and the arrogance and the jealousy that's leading to division in the church of Jesus Christ.

And he calls them back to the foot of the cross where gospel unity is to be found. And then he moves on in chapters 5 to 7, and he addresses sexual immorality and the church's response to its many forms.

And for him, he calls them back to the foot of the cross where gospel purity is to be found. And then in chapters 8 to 10, Paul addresses idolatry and the church's rights-based living.

[1:12] Once again, he calls them back to the foot of the cross where gospel love is to be found. 1 Corinthians is one of those books where you cannot get away with it without God pricking some area of your life.

There's no stone of our lives that remains unturned by the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so when we come to 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and 10, we hear God speaking to us a word of warning for a church in a season of blessing.

Verse 13 chapter 10. Lest anyone who thinks he stands, let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

It's a word of warning. Now the major sin, I think, throughout the book of Corinthians is pride. I think this is the main thing underneath all the other sins that Paul addresses.

It's pride. And throughout the letter, all their other sins, their sexual freedoms and their boasting and their tribalism and their knowledge and their rights and their spiritual gifts, all these things for Paul, I think, are just bubbling to the surface of the more fundamental thing, and that's pride.

[2:24] Why? The Corinthians, we're told in chapter 8, are puffed up. They have the best preachers, and they know it. They have the most impressive theologians and theological knowledge, and they know it.

They have loads of freedoms and rights, and they know how to claim them and defend them. They have money, and they use it. They have electrifying worship services, and they enjoy them so much.

They have it all. But Paul says there's one thing you lack, and that's love. It's interesting that for Paul, the opposite of pride is not humility but love.

Peter and James, if you read their letters, they say God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. So there is a juxtaposition there. But for Paul, he says knowledge puffs up, makes us proud, but love builds up.

The opposite of pride is love. And in issue after issue, Paul shoots the arrow of the gospel of love into the heart of human pride.

[3:27] He wants to deal with it. And in these chapters, he's putting the final nails in the coffin. And one of the things about human pride is that it builds in us a sense of superiority over others.

So I think the very way that Paul designs this passage is meant to push against that. He wants us to learn from others in three ways. In chapter 9, verses 24 to 27, he says learn from the athlete's experience.

In chapter 10, verses 1 to 13, he says learn from Israel's experience. And then in chapter 10, verses 14 to 22, learn from the Lord's table.

And each one, he is shooting the arrow of the gospel into the heart of human pride. So shall we start? Chapter 9, verse 24, learn from the athlete's experience.

Do you not know that in a race, and the word is actually stadium, so it's this picture of athletes in the stadium and people watching them. Do you not know that in a race, all runners run, but only one receives the prize?

[4 : 35] So run that you will be the person that obtains it. Now, this is a stroke of pastoral genius by Paul. He uses the image of an athletic competition to describe the Christian life.

Life is like a race where you're trying to get the prize. And Corinthians would have loved this image because they loved their sports. A bit like America. They love their sports. And it's also true that where there is pride, there is competitiveness.

So think of C.S. Lewis. He has this wonderful observation in his book, *Mere Christianity*, about how pride expresses itself in competitiveness in our lives. He says pride gets no pleasure out of having something for its own sake, only out of having more than the next person.

It is the comparison that makes you proud, the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone. And so Paul, in the stroke of pastoral genius, taps into this competitiveness using an athletic competition as his image, and he says, I want you to live your Christian life as if you are competing for the one prize.

The question is, what is the prize? And if you look back at verses 22 and 23, Paul has already described it. He says, To the weak I have laid down my rights so that I might win the weak.

[5 : 58] I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. And here it is, verse 23, chapter 9. Notice how Paul is turning the Corinthian competitiveness upside down and on its head.

The prize that they are to be striving for is sharing the blessings of the gospel with others. And this was the whole point of chapter 9 that Chris preached last week.

And the key thing here is Paul says you need to have one particular virtue in order to achieve this prize, and it's self-control. Verse 25.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

[7 : 05] That word disqualified means unfit for use. It's not thinking here of like unfit for eternal salvation, but I think unfit for gospel ministry. And it's an important point, because Paul is saying by highlighting self-control and discipline, he's saying that one way that we can undermine the gospel is by living in ways that do not reflect the message that we preach.

And Paul wants our lives to conform to that message. A few weeks ago, I was reading a biography of St. Francis of Assisi. He was a Christian who started kind of a monastic Franciscan movement in the 13th century.

Yes, it's a random thing to read on. And I was reading a biography written by somebody named Bonaventure, who was kind of a professor and pastor in the 13th century. And he wrote a chapter, a whole chapter, on St. Francis' preaching.

Not something that St. Francis is known for. Normally, he's known for his poverty, for his creation care, all these things. But for his preaching, he wrote a chapter. And I was stunned by it. He said that for St. Francis, what was of utmost importance to him was that the holiness of his life matched the truthfulness of his words.

And he said he would instruct any preachers that were learning to preach under him. He said he would require that his students first seek to live and practice what they preach before they persuade others with their words.

[8 : 38] And then there was this marvelous little quote that I haven't been able to get out of my head for the last few weeks. He said, lest we tear down with our lives what we build up with our words. Paul's very sensitive to this in the Christian life.

He's very sensitive to this possibility in his own life as an apostle and a minister. And he's very sensitive to this possibility in the church of Jesus Christ. And that's why he highlights this virtue, self-control.

And for Paul, this isn't something that you just buckle down and you white-knuckle it. Because if you go all the way to Galatians chapter 5, you'll notice that self-control is the last fruit of the Spirit. All the fruits of the Spirit start with love.

That is their origin. That is their fountainhead. That is the spring from which they all flow. But all the fruits of the Spirit need self-control as well because that is the directional purpose that is given. All the fruits and the gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit being oriented towards the right things for the right purpose in God's kingdom and gospel. So, self-control means, I think, for Paul, like the athlete saying lots of little no's on a daily basis because we are saying one big yes on a daily basis to something that's greater.

[9 : 55] The athlete will not eat sugar in order that its body will be fine-tuned. The athlete will not go to bed late in order that the athlete gets enough sleep and its body will have full energy.

The athlete will not compromise on its training hours in order to make sure that it is strong. And so, we find ourselves in a place where we may have to say no to the phone in order to say yes to prayer.

Or no to gluttony in order to say yes to the poor. Or no to sexual immorality in order to say yes to holiness. Or no to rights-based living in order to say yes to our weaker brother or sister in Christ. Here, Paul wants Christians in Corinth to keep their eyes and their hearts and their minds and their desires and their bodies on the one imperishable prize that God has held out for them.

It's the love of God and the gospel of God for others. Paul says, strive for that one thing that you may share in the blessings of the gospel with others.

[10 : 59] That is the goal of the Christian life. So, as he looks at the example of the athlete's exercise, he, I think, presents to us a couple questions that would be worth us considering.

Where in my life are you, God, inviting me to exercise self-control as an act of love and trust in you? And where are you inviting me to exercise self-control as an expression of love towards somebody else in my life?

First, Paul says, learn from the athlete's exercise. And second, he says, learn from Israel's experience. And this is, Paul gets a little intense here.

So we get into chapter 10, verses 1 to 13. Paul turns to the history of Israel and he highlights some of the most horrific pieces of it as a wake-up call for us.

He says in verse 1, I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of where your pride will lead you. It's kind of like the Titanic.

[12 : 09] The Titanic was thought to be that unsinkable ship. And as they're enjoying all the blessings of being on the Titanic in the darkness of the night, they have no clue they're on a collision course with a hidden iceberg.

And Paul is warning us against spiritual shipwreck. And in particular, he's warning those who are heading for it unaware. The Corinthians are unaware of the temptations that come with blessings. The temptations that come with blessings. Notice in verses 1 to 4, Paul recounts the blessings first. He says all five times. Our fathers were all under the cloud, image of God's presence and guidance. They were all passed through the sea, image of God's deliverance or redemption. They were all baptized into Moses and the cloud and the sea, an image of their new identity in this redemption. They all ate the same spiritual food and they all drank the same spiritual drink. And in all these things, it was actually Christ himself who was with them.

[13 : 13] And so Paul recounts all the blessings that they have experienced in God himself. And then in verses 6 to 10, he recounts all the temptations that they experienced in the wilderness, even after having experienced these blessings.

And four times, he says, some of them. So notice, five times all of you have experienced blessings, and then four times some of you fell into temptation. Verse 7, do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written, and then he quotes from when they were celebrating the golden calf that they made in Exodus 32.

Verse 8, we must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and 23,000 fell in a single day. Verse 9, we must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents.

And then verse 10, nor should we grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. So all the blessings we've experienced, all the potential temptations that come to those in blessing, and then right in the middle of it, verse 5, nevertheless, with most of them, God was not

pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

This is a devastating picture. It's a picture of a people receiving all the blessings of God without doing the will of God, and therefore not experiencing the pleasure of God.

[14:44] David Short has been remarking in recent months that he feels that St. John's is in a season of blessing as a church. I think he's probably right.

He has a few more years of experience to be able to say that. People are becoming Christians.

People are inviting neighbors and friends. The youth group is growing and thriving.

Young adults groups starting up. The choir is leading us in praise like they've never led us before.

Young interns are becoming godly preachers. Giving is growing.

King's Cross Church plant is growing. A spirit of joy in our meetings is tangible. The thirsting for the word of God is strong.

And David said to me, this is maybe the most talented and gifted staff he's ever worked with in his life. So many signs of blessing for which we should be thankful. But I think God's word to us here through the Apostle Paul would be in the midst of blessing, there is real spiritual temptation.

[15:49] Israel's example should be an example for us, their experience. We could fall into the temptation of idolizing our blessings and our strengths.

We could end up growing self-absorbed and impatient and inward-looking. We could fall into the temptation of giving ourselves credit for the blessing that is happening instead of God himself.

We could fall into the temptation of having taken a public stand on sexual morality. We could end up hiding the sexual immoralities that have grown within us. We could end up putting Christ to the test, meaning we question God's plans and provision for our lives when things get tough and we experience walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

We could end up grumbling, experiencing all the blessings that God has given us, and yet we can see all the things that we have not received. And that's what stirs in our hearts.

And Paul wants to say to us, this is a dangerous place to be. Do not go there. Verse 12, he gives us a warning against spiritual pride.

[17:01] Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. In other words, don't think you are beyond temptation. But then in verse 13, he says, if you have fallen into temptation, don't think you are beyond redemption.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to humanity. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. But with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it.

The ultimate picture of redemption, I think, is in the Christian life, is the Lord's table. And this is where Paul takes us next. And so Paul takes us from learn about the, from the athlete's experience, to learn from Israel's experience, to learn from the Lord's table.

And this is in verses 14 to 22. And here, I think Paul finally hits the nail on the head when it comes to eating food offered to idols.

He says, don't think that what you're eating is neutral or in any way compatible with your life in Christ. Learn from the Lord's Supper, he says.

[18:25] Food is about fellowship. And notice the language of participation that shows up about six times in the passage. Verse 16. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?

The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Verse 17. Because there is one bread, and we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Verse 18. Consider the people of Israel are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar. Verse 20.

No, I don't imply that what pagan sacrifice, I imply that what pagan sacrifice, they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. And finally, verse 21.

You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. All throughout this section is the language of participation, which is about fellowship and communion.

[19:26] Food expresses and fosters fellowship. The meal that we eat together at the Lord's table, which we will next week, expresses and nurtures our communion with Christ.

And so Paul is saying to consciously eat food that has been offered to some other God, that has been offered to idols, is to enter into communion with demons, something that is anti-Christ.

We know that the idols are nothing. But we also know that their power in our hearts and our minds and our lives is wrapped up in a demonic activity that wants to break down the communion and fellowship that we have with Christ.

And so Paul says, communion with Christ, the Lord's table, is incompatible with communion with demons, eating food offered to other idols. And so he says in verse 14, therefore, my beloved, and notice the tender affectionateness of Paul's language here, my beloved flee from idolatry.

There's a popular Christian book going around right now in North America that goes by the title The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry. And one could entitle chapter 10 The Ruthless Elimination of Idols.

[20 : 40] And part of me wonders if we dealt with our idols in the Western world, maybe that would deal with some of our hurry. Paul here is applying the first commandment to our Christian lives.

You shall have no other gods besides me. And I think Martin Luther, the great 16th century reformer, is really helpful here because he realizes that any time we hear the word idolatry, we will automatically think of little statues or figurines that we can put up on the wall.

And that will feel like, oh, what does this really have to do with our lives? But Martin Luther is really wise in understanding that idolatry, if we know that idols are actually nothing, then what's the power that they're holding?

Idolatry is something that's generated by the human heart. And so Luther says in one of his larger catechisms when he comments on the first commandment, do not have any other gods before me, he says, a god is a term for that to which we look for all good and that in whom we find all refuge.

Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in something with your whole heart. And he says, he says to us, it is trust and faith of the heart that make both God and idols.

[22 : 01] Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God. He continues, the intention of the first commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of heart, which flies straight to the one God and cling to him alone.

I want you to cling to that word cling. What this means is, God is saying to us, see to it that you let me alone be your God and you never search for another.

What God is saying is, whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me. And whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me.

There's that word again. It's like an image of a child crawling to its parent and clinging to them. I myself will give you what you need and help you out of every danger.

Only do not let your heart cling or rest in anyone else. So idols are incompatible with our life in Christ. Why?

[23 : 08] Because Christ has everything we could ever need and Christ is everything we could ever want. And I think, friends, this is what kills human pride and idolatry at its root.

It's the loveliness and the sufficiency and the mercy and the beauty of Jesus Christ. The way we flee idolatry is we cling to Christ.

If you're struggling with an arrogant, self-absorbed attitude, you cling to Christ until he shares his humility and his patience and his gentleness with you.

If you're struggling with sexual immorality, you cling to Christ until he meets your unmet longings for intimacy and belonging and love. If you're struggling with questioning God's plans and his provision in your life, you cling to Christ until he teaches you how to trust the Father and say with him to the Father, not my will, but your will be done.

If you're struggling with grumbling, a grumpy spirit, a grumpy heart, you cling to Christ until you hear him say, as he said to Paul, my grace is sufficient for you.

[24 : 18] My power is made perfect in your weakness. And if you're struggling with a crippling anxiety or fear, you cling to Christ until you hear him say, my peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you, not as the world gives do I give.

Let not your hearts be troubled. I think Martin Luther was right. Every form of idolatry is a matter of the heart. And in 1 Corinthians 10, Christ speaks through Paul directly to our hearts, and he says, see to it that you let me alone be your God, and you never search for another.

Crawl to me and cling to me and let your heart rest in no one else. I think this is why the passage ends in verse 22 with two short yet startling questions.

Verse 22. Shall we provoke the Lord? And here the Lord refers to Jesus Christ. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

And the implied answer in the Greek is no. You see, jealousy is language used throughout the Old Testament to describe what a spouse feels when their partner commits adultery against them.

[25 : 30] It is a piercing pain that evokes a torrent of love and righteous anger. Our idolatry, Paul says, provokes the Lord to jealousy. Jealousy is that deep desire for covenant faithfulness and love from the one that you have loved and you have committed yourself to at all costs.

This is why it is connected to what Paul said earlier in verse 13 about God being faithful when we face trials and temptations that feel beyond our ability. God is jealous because he longs for intimacy with you and faithfulness from you.

He will share his people with no other gods, no other idols, no other demons, and that is the root of the assurance of our salvation. It's that God is jealous for our love.

In James chapter 4, the brother of our Lord was struck by this aspect of God. He reminds the Christians of how adulterous they've been in their sins, but then he speaks a word of assurance. And he says, do you not suppose that it is of no purpose that the scripture says, God yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell within us? And then James says, but he gives more grace.

[26 : 47] And that's the gospel of Jesus Christ for us today as God shoots his arrow into our human pride. Is that more grace? Yes, he's going to come to judge the living and the dead.

Yes, Jesus is going to come. And his judgment upon Israel in the wilderness may also come upon you if you do not repent of your pride and idolatry. But right now, today, he says, flee idolatry precisely because I am offering you more grace.

Are we stronger than he? The answer is an emphatic no. Christ is stronger than our pride. My brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.