

1 Corinthians 9:24-10:22 PM

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Good evening, folks. If you're brand new, my name is Aaron. I'm a minister at St. John's. I'd love to meet you afterwards. Come and say hi. Just two points here, just a heads up. First point, this is not, speaking of points, this is not a three-point sermon.

I'm just going to sort of talk through it, all right? So you have to sort of stay. You have to stay with me. Second thing I want to say is this is theologically so rich, this passage, and I won't get to talk about everything in it, so I'm really sorry if I disappoint you. If you sort of heard something, you're kind of geeking out about it in your mind, and I'm sorry if I disappoint you by not mentioning a particular thing you want to hear about.

Let's just crack on, shall we? My daughter, who I think is downstairs helping with the kids, Sadie, she's a very good runner, like a very good runner, and she's faster than most of the boys in her school. She's just started high school, and she likes, she particularly likes it when she runs past boys in a race, and she said to me the other day, there's some big school-wide race, and she just absolutely, she absolutely dominated, and I just said to her, how did it go? And she goes, oh, I just love seeing the look of misery on their faces when I, as a girl, just sprint past them. That'll make sense in a moment. We're in sort of 1 Corinthians at the end of chapter 9 and chapter 10, and Paul in this section of Corinthians is talking about idolatry. And right at the end of chapter 9, he talks about running, which would have resonated with them, because every two years in Corinth, there were the pan-hanalistic games. It was one of a number of different games that happened in this part of the world, including the Olympics, right? And it was a huge deal. There was boxing and running and wrestling, et cetera. In verse 24 to 27 of chapter 9, Paul starts by talking about this, and he says, look, runners, what do they do? They're just, they're not messing around. They're trying to win, and they all want to win, and they all want to get the prize, which is, you know, like the wreath. And how do they win, Paul says? He says, well, it's simple. They just take control of their life. They take control of all aspects of their life, like they go to the gym even when they're tired. And Paul says, this is my strategy for life. Verse 27, relating this to the Christian journey. He says, verse 27, I discipline my body, which means self-control in Galatians 5. It's the same word, self-control. I discipline my body, keeping it under control, at least preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

This idea of discipline, self-control, it means self-command. And I just want you to just note this fact that if you don't have self-control with a particular goal in mind, that doesn't mean your life is kind of just random and free-flowing and kind of beautiful and spontaneous.

No, it's, if there's no self-control, no self-control. I mean, you know this, right? Something else is controlling you. Something else will be guiding all your decisions. There'll be some appetite, some desire that will actually be in charge. And those desires don't tend to disappear, Paul implies. You have to overcome them with a great desire, with a mega desire. So it's not like, don't have these desires. It's like, no, have an appetite for one thing that trumps everything else. You just need a goal greater than all of these other things. So these athletes, they're not going to go to KFC because they know it's not good for them, you know. They want to sleep in, but actually they get up and exercise instead because they want the winner's wreath. And Paul says, that's what I'm doing. My great desire, Paul says there in that first little section, is I want people to know Jesus. Now likely he had other desires. He would have had sexual desires. He was like a normal person. He would have had sexual desires. He would have had, probably had the desire for a sort of a peaceful, calm life instead of being like beaten up and jailed and stuff. But he had this one really great desire. He wanted to tell people about Jesus. And that trumped all of these other things. That's this one thing, kept these other longings under control.

[4 : 56] I say no to these things so I keep doing this one really amazing thing. And what I'm going for is so much better than just like a crown of leaves.

Now why is Paul mentioning this? Because the Corinthian church thought they had everything together. They thought they were the best church around, they're the smartest, the freest, the most holy spiritist, you know. But actually they were in danger. They were proud, they were distracted, they didn't have their eyes on the prize, and they were at risk of disqualifying themselves, to use Paul's words. Remember, they were kind of uncritically just following their appetites and eating food sacrificed to idols. It didn't matter that it was hurting other Christians.

They were uncritically supporting others in their church or off in these really weird relationships. You remember a few chapters ago, this one dude had shacked up with his mother-in-law, and they were just like, oh, it's just cool, you know, grace, it's cool, don't worry about it, you know.

Their eye was not on the prize, it was on their own desires. Now, rather than Paul just sort of bringing the hammer down, at the start of chapter 10, he kind of eases into it.

Because he wants them to get these things under control. And what he says at the beginning of chapter 10, he goes, you know, God has been dealing with our people for a long time. Let me just remind you of a couple of stories, Paul says.

[6 : 24] And the big point is, these stories all have something in common. These guys kind of had it all going for them, and they crashed. So he zooms in on some Exodus stories.

If you don't know much about the Bible, the story of Exodus is basically where God's people were enslaved in Egypt, and God rescued them, and they went on this really big, long journey in the desert to the Promised Land.

And Paul picks a few episodes from this story. Remember again, the Corinthian church thought they were absolutely killing it.

And Paul says, oh, Corinth, you guys think you're absolutely unstoppable because, you know, you're kind of having these amazing spiritual experiences, and you've got these really clever, educated leaders and stuff.

And Paul says, well, remember the Exodus. These folks had God follow them in the form of a cloud. I mean, that's pretty great, isn't it?

[7 : 24] That's quite spiritual, isn't it? I mean, they had it pretty good. You guys think you've got clever leaders? These guys had Moses. That's a big name. And how about, miraculously, you guys walked, you know, these ancient guys, they walked through the middle of this ocean, this sea, to escape Pharaoh's army.

That's pretty great. Like, I know you guys have these great spiritual experiences, but how about that one? And how about when God miraculously fed these folks in the desert with bread from heaven, mana, and water, just like from rocks?

And then he says, those guys who had all of that, who could claim all of that, like you, Corinth, they're claiming a whole lot of stuff. Those guys who had all of that, verse 5, nevertheless, with most of them, God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Those people, Paul says, those people who ate the miracle food, who miraculously saved, who God was with in an incredible way, like two of them made it out of the desert.

The rest of them didn't make it. They were overthrown in the wilderness, Paul says. And what went wrong? Like, what happened to these folks? What went wrong? Then Paul digs a bit deeper into these stories.

[8 : 43] Basically, they gave into things. They lacked self-control. And Paul gives us a few examples in verses 6 to 10. Let me remind you of this passage.

I'll read it out to you again. Now, these things took place as examples for us that we may not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were, as it is written.

The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. We must not indulge in sexual immorality, as some of them did. And 23,000 fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.

Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Four ways these folks lacked discipline. They took their eye off the prize.

Something else became the thing they were, like, really into. Four things. Idol worship, sexual immorality, testing Christ, and they grumbled. Let's take a really quick look at each of these.

[9 : 43] Verse 7. Don't be idolaters. That's verse 7 of chapter 10. So this is a reference to, in the desert, the people got really bored. So Moses is up at the mountain at this point, doing something really cool.

And then Moses had a brother called Aaron. And he got, and I don't know what was going on, but he got people to collect all their jewelry together. And he made these golden calves. And people started dancing.

And then they drank a bit. And then they got a bit hammered. And then there was an orgy. So on a scale of one to a lack of discipline, like, that's really high.

It starts with idolatry, and then it just goes bonkers. And the golden calf story just sounds completely excessive and over the top and extreme to us, right? But there are normal parts of our life that are as dangerous as the golden calf incident.

A stag weekend that goes wrong. An office party. Paul says in verse 14, we've got to flee from idolatry.

[10 : 51] We've got to flee from this stuff. Look what happens. It not only dishonors God, you shipwreck your whole life. Now, flee from idolatry. That word flee.

We don't flee much. I don't know when the last time you fled from something. We don't flee. We don't flee much nowadays. When I thought of the word flee, what came to mind is action movies from the 80s, which always seem to feature quicksand and swarms of killer bees, which turned out having to be not a great problem in life, as it turns out.

But that flee image, when you think flee, think of that. You're being chased by a swarm of bees. You flee. You run for your life. Run from your life from these things.

Later in the passage, Paul uses a picture of communion to help us. And he says, look, when you're doing that stuff, when you're messing around with idolatry, when something becomes the most important thing in your life other than God, or it could be like literal idolatry, start messing with other spiritual stuff.

He says, Paul says, you can't have communion with Jesus like we are going to do tonight. You can't have communion with Jesus. You can't commune with Jesus and then commune with demons. But that's what you're doing when you're worshipping idols.

[12 : 08] You've got to flee from this stuff. And then in a very sobering last line in verse 22, Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

It's like he's saying, do you really, do you just, are you trying to, do you think you can just mess with God? Sometimes when I'm out with my kids, if I see a really big guy, like a really big guy who's a huge, ripped, massive guy, I'll whisper to my kids, I'll say, see that guy there?

I could totally take him. Kids, I could totally take that guy. You just have to go, rugby tackle, you just have to go on low.

If you go on really low, use his weight against him. It's just physics, kids. I could totally take him. It's not true. Like, that's not true.

Like, I can't take these guys. Folks, we can't mess with God. Now, I know you're not out there worshipping Hermes and Zeus on the side, you know, but it is pretty easy to worship money and your rights and success in a city like this, isn't it?

[13 : 27] You're messing with God. This can derail us really spiritually. You're not disciplined. You're not exercising self-control. You don't have your eye on the prize.

You don't have something more precious to you than these other things. So, and that happens if we don't desire Jesus above all else. So we just, Paul is just, like, I know this sounds really heavy. Paul is just continually warning us because he sees this happening in Corinth, and I'm telling you, because it can happen in our lives as well. So just a quick pause just to situate us here in the passage again because this is not an easy three-pointer.

I'm just talking it through. So we're talking about the ways the people of God lost their way in the desert, lost their way spiritually in the desert. And Paul is reminding us of these stories because in the church in Corinth, they are also in danger of losing their way.

The first issue he brings up is idolatry. The next one is sex. Verse 8. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and 23,000 fell in a single day.

[14 : 29] This is a reference to a story in Numbers 25 in the Old Testament. So some of the men, some of the men, back in the days here, they were hooking up with these women from this place called Moab, which was this spiritually quite dark place, really upside down sort of spiritual place.

And then what would happen? So they're hooking up with these women, and then the women go, hey, you should come to our temple. You know, come. I've got this great kind of religion. It's kind of pretty saucy stuff. You should check it out. And they're really into it.

And, of course, just completely sideways. What's interesting about this is the first example is a golden calf, starts in idolatry, ends in sexual immorality.

This one starts with sex, ends in idolatry. But both examples, do you know, it's just, it's a drift. Like they just drift into it due to a lack of self-control, due to a lack of self-command.

And what's really interesting is they drift as a community. It's great swaths of people. It's like a community. It happens to a whole community.

[15:36] And you know this in your circles of friends. Peer pressure, it's a big deal, you know. We can fall, and amongst our friends, we can just fall into a pattern of thinking and behaving that just dishonors God.

And it's just a drift. And it's a lack of discipline. It's a lack of keeping your eye off the prize. So the third way now, the third way.

So we started with idolatry, sexual immorality. The third way that Israelites lack discipline and self-control is in verse 9. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents. I know, they're all these terrible stories, right?

So another Old Testament Exodus story. So the people of God are in the desert, and they start complaining to God. They're like, oh, why have you brought us here? We hate the miracle bread. You know, like, it would have been better back in Egypt. And they're testing God's patience. And snakes came and killed a whole lot of them.

[16:37] It's a brutal story. The point here is we can't treat God like he's our bro. And that we can just talk to him with attitude.

And presume that God won't push back. I mean, the Corinthian church, they kept sort of dipping their toe in actual idol worship.

And Paul is saying, you are testing the Lord. And this will go very wrong for you. Okay, finally, the fourth issue. Nor grumble.

As some of them did. And were destroyed by the destroyer. I know, like, it's just brutal, isn't it? This is verse 10. Another Exodus story. So the Israelites, like before, they're just getting really whiny and grumbly in the desert.

And they're just going, you know, life was better when we were slaves. Maybe we should just do that again. It's the attitude of this. It's God, what you have for me now is not good enough.

[17:39] I just, my old life was way better. I want to go back to my old life. It's a great temptation, isn't it? You know, you come to faith.

You're doing well. You're making good decisions. You're kind of, you know. But you do have to give some things up. Maybe you previously enjoyed. They were out of God's will.

Good for you. But the great temptation is to look back on that when you're like, oh, yeah, but there were some really great things about that old life.

I kind of wish I could keep doing some of that stuff again. Wish I could go back to that life. That was pretty great. I could sleep with whoever I wanted. I could spend my money on whatever I wanted. I could say whatever I wanted.

You know, like, that was pretty great. And God, to be honest, I'm kind of frustrated with the life you have for me right now. That's a great temptation, is it?

[18:36] Grumbling. You know, actually, the Old Testament does talk about, this is one of the big reasons they were not permitted into the promised land. You know, they're there for 40 years in the promised land. God let a whole generation die.

Let a whole generation die, apart from two, before he let them into the promised land. After reminding the Corinthians of all these tragic stories, he says to them in verse 11, Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction.

In other words, this is all here because he's trying to convince the Corinthians, like the desert wanderers, that they are in spiritual danger. They think they're awesome. They're having these great spiritual experiences.

They've got these kind of cool leaders, but they were full of pride, presumption, and they were really in danger of disqualifying themselves in lots of different ways.

And Paul is saying, look, remember these stories. I'm looking at you, and I see a lot of red flags, Corinthians. You know, the engine light is on. You've got to do something. Do not go down this path.

[19 : 49] It ends badly. And then there's this little summary here in verse 12, which is perfect. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands, she stands, take heed, lest they fall.

So self-assured. And Paul says, you will fall like the people in the desert, and you will fail to inherit what God has for you.

So, those are the warnings. What's really lovely, though, is straight after that, there's this really encouraging word which we finish on. Verse 12 and 13. Let me remind you of what it says.

Isn't that wonderful news?

After this kind of these hard lines, it's just such wonderful news, isn't it? Just two really quick things to say about this. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to people. That means whatever you are going through, whatever that is distracting you, where you don't have self-command, where you don't have control in your life.

[21 : 09] The Lord is saying to you, this is not unusual. You're not alone. Whatever is going on for you, you might feel great shame about it. You are not alone.

Get some help. Talk to somebody. Come and speak to me. Come and speak to Chris. Come and speak to Lorna. Come and speak to Mark. Speak to your hungry lady. Chat to somebody. What you're going through is common.

Don't do this alone. Second thing. It seems like Paul is saying when it comes to temptation, there is a way through it. In other words, whatever you're going through, you actually have a fighting chance.

You feel like something's just got its grip on you. Folks, I just want to remind you, you have a fighting chance. Look, I think about this. This is a pretty full-on example here.

But I think of this as like people who are addicted to pornography. Some of you folks have given up. You've just given up. You kind of think, oh, this is just, you know, this is just my thing.

[22 : 17] And I'll always have this problem and I'll never get over it. So I'm just going to kind of settle in and just kind of, you know, just this constant cycle of just feeling really bad about myself.

And you hate yourself for it. And you've given up trying to stop. Folks, there is a way through this. There is a way through. There is a godly way through this. You need Holy Spirit help. You need the support of your community. So again, come and talk to some people about it.

Let me finish up. Self-control, like I said right at the start, it's one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5. It's very important in the Christian life. But you have to know what the prize is.

You have to know why you're saying no to some things and yes to other things. Because, you know, the threat of just giving up and giving in is always present. So how do you cope?

[23 : 14] How do you deal with all these things? And how do we flourish in this Christian journey? You've got to keep coming back to Jesus and making him your great treasure in life.

And we will do that tonight when we take communion. When we take communion, our faith will be nourished. We'll be reminded in this really sensual, kind of tactile, physical way of what Christ has done for us.

And when we do that, my hope is that he becomes more beautiful to you. And all these other things begin to lose their attraction. Amen.

Amen. Take care. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.