

The Bread, The Cup, The Body of Christ

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

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¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ The cup of blessing that 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? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ 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. ²² Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

If I were to ask you to summarize the story of the Bible in a “tweet” (140 characters), what words would you use? Yes, it is probably impossible to do, a fool’s errand, but go ahead and think about what words you may include. Perhaps you would use *grace, love, redemption, mercy, sin, repentance, atonement, justification, glory, or resurrection*. The list really could go on and on, and all of those words are important words.

One word that most certainly ought to be included is the word *holy*. The author of Hebrews says that without “holiness,” no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). The idea of holiness is incredibly important, central, in fact, to the Bible’s story. For the Israelites in the wilderness, and for Israel in Jerusalem, their lives literally revolved around the holiness of God as it was manifest to them in the most holy place, or the holy of holies. So, the closer you came to God, the closer you came to the holy of holies, the holier everything had to be, because nothing unclean or unholy can ever enter God’s presence. And this, of course, is the fundamental problem that the story of the Bible sets out to address. How can sinful man, unholy in his essence, ever see and know and live in the presence of a holy God?

From the first page of the Bible to the last, it is clear that the Lord created man ultimately to live in his holy presence. God created Adam in his own image, and before the Fall, Adam walked with God. He communed with God. He dwelt in God’s unmediated presence. But after the Fall, the first question God asks Adam is, “Where are you?” That communion Adam once enjoyed was now broken. Adam could no longer live in God’s presence.

This disruption of man’s communion with God is further exhibited in the book of Exodus as Moses asks to see God’s glory. God’s response is quite direct, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:20). God does allow Moses to see his back. He obliges Moses to a degree so that Moses would not be obliterated by God’s holiness. But the break in communion between God and man is nonetheless abundantly evident, even as the Lord passes before Moses.

Of course, when the tabernacle is constructed in the wilderness, and then the temple, the holiest place at the center, where God sat enthroned above the ark of the covenant, was a dark place hidden from the eyes of man, precisely because it was holy. In fact, when the ark of the Lord was brought into the holy of holies upon the temple's dedication in Jerusalem, a cloud covered the area, and Solomon said, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness" (1 Kings 8:12).

So, the holiness of God is the great problem that sinful mankind faces. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.

Yet, throughout the Scriptures, God promises that one day his people will see him, know him, and dwell in his presence. Job, for example, recognizing the promises of God says, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:25-27).

The "Redeemer" that Job speaks of is Jesus. Jesus is the answer to the problem of our sin and God's holiness. It is through Jesus that the promise of seeing God, of knowing God, of living in God's presence without being consumed, has been fulfilled. The author of Hebrews writes, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean" (Heb. 10:19-22). So, it is by the shed blood of Jesus that we are able to enter into God's holy presence.

The New Testament imagery is that the church, covered with Christ's blood, is now the very temple of God in which God dwells among his people and communes with them in fellowship. When we think of the shed blood of Christ, we ought not think only of our sins being forgiven, but also of the reality that we now really do have access to and fellowship with our holy God. We can now see God. We can now know God.

The book of Revelation captures this reality with its images of the saints, able to stand in God's presence, because of their robes washed in Christ's blood. In Revelation 7:14-15 we read, "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence." Because of the shed blood of Christ, the great problem of mankind has been solved, and God's people have been restored to fellowship with God in holiness.

All of this is important to see, because if we simply think of the Christian faith only in terms of our sins being forgiven, then we are going to miss the whole point of the Bible's larger story. It is not merely that our sins are forgiven (as glorious as that is!), but that once our sins have been forgiven, our communion and fellowship with God has also been restored. We have been granted access into God's presence. This is our end, to live in holiness before the throne of our holy God, forever!

Now, the Corinthians were pretty interested in the forgiveness of sin, but they were not at all interested in communion and intimate fellowship with their savior. They loved the idea of being saved from sin, but they also still loved the idea of sinning. So, in chapter 10 we find the Corinthians, not pursuing communion with God through Christ, but instead pursuing communion with demons through idols.

In v. 14 Paul says, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” Here Paul speaks tenderly to the Corinthians, calling them his “beloved,” reminding them that they are dear to his heart, that he cares about them, and that he doesn’t want to see them flirting with danger. So his passionate, pastoral plea is for them to flee idolatry.

On the question of food offered to idols, the Corinthians faced two problems. First, what should they do about food sold in the marketplace, or served in friends’ homes, that had been offered to idols? On this question Paul permitted them to eat it, as long as they were not being a snare to the conscience of another. The second problem was this, what about not just eating the food, but actually participating in the feasts and festivals in idol temples? It seems that some of the Corinthians remained fully engaged with the idol worship scene, even after they had become Christians, so Paul urges them to abandon all associations with idolatry at all costs. It was exceedingly dangerous for them.

The essence of what Paul says in v. 15 is, “Let’s think reasonably about this,” and then in vv. 16-18 he reminds them of their corporate communion with Christ. He says in v. 16, for example, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?” And here his point is not to say that when we drink from the communion cup that we are actually drinking Jesus’ blood; but, we are actually communing with Christ. And, we are communing with Christ corporately. Thus v. 17, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” At the communion table, we have a foretaste and a picture of our eternal end, God’s people together communing with God through Christ. Here we see that God has not merely forgiven our sins, but he has called us into his holy presence, to feed on Christ and to see his glory.

In vv. 19-21 Paul reminds them that there is nothing inherent in the food that is problematic, the food is nothing, but the practice of pagan sacrifice is significant in that it is demonic. He says, “No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants 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” (vv. 20-21). So, the food is not the problem, but the demonic worship of idols is. Paul permits them to eat the food, but they cannot in any way participate in idol worship, pagan festivals, or meals at the temples. Finally, Paul tells the Corinthians that the Lord is a jealous God, a mighty God, and not to be trifled with. “Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” (v. 22).

Now we may ask, so what? What does this mean for us today? We don’t live with the cultural temptations of literal idol worship, so how does this passage apply to our own context?

First, we must see Paul’s call for the Corinthians to flee from idolatry as a call for us to flee from every sin. It is easy for us to yawn at passages like this because most of us don’t have idols sitting around our homes. Our friends generally don’t worship idols, nor do they invite us to pagan festivals. But it is abundantly clear that at the heart of every sin lies idolatry.

We see this in Romans 1, for example, where Paul indicates that any time we exchange the glory of God for something else, any time we place God second, any time we attempt to dethrone God and rule in his place, it is ultimately idolatry. In his concise summary of the essence of sin, Paul says, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). This is

idolatry, therefore we can't just yawn at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians as if it doesn't apply to us today. Inherent in the call to flee idolatry is the call to flee every sin. So friends, flee from sin.

Think about the last time you were really, really terrified of something, as if your very life was in danger, and your instinct was to flee. I can remember being overseas on a mission trip, in a third-world country, out late at night on a dark road, alone, and meeting two large strangers on the street in the dark. They ultimately posed no threat, but it was a terrifying situation nonetheless, and my instinct was to run, to flee the other way. And this is how we should think of sin. Instead of welcoming it and embracing it under the guise of Christian liberty (as the Corinthians were doing), we should flee from all sin, both great and small, as if our very lives depended on it.

Already Paul has warned the Corinthians to flee from sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18), and he warns Timothy to flee from the love of money (1 Tim. 6:11) and youthful passions (2 Tim. 2:22). The message is clear. Sin is dangerous. Flee from it!

Next we must also see that Paul's call for the Corinthians to flee *from* idolatry is inherently a call to flee *to* the Lord in holiness. If we merely think of the Christian faith in terms of our sins being forgiven, we really will miss the whole thrust of the Bible's story. The forgiveness of sins is not an end in itself. Instead, we are forgiven and declared righteous by God so that we might live as God's holy people in God's holy presence. So, just as zealously as we flee from sin, we need to flee to God in holiness. After all, without holiness, no one will see the Lord.

Listen to how Paul deals with the problem of idolatry (specifically, marriage to non-Christian pagans) in 2 Corinthians:

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:16 – 7:1).

Here we see that we are called to be holy, called to "go out from their midst and be separate from them and touch no unclean thing," because holiness is our ultimate end. So Paul speaks of "bringing holiness to completion." And, quoting from Isaiah 52, he suggests that as we pursue holiness, then God will welcome us and be a father to us. Our pursuit of holiness is not a type of works-righteousness. We are saved by Christ's righteousness, not our own. But we are saved to be holy. Thus Paul grounds his call to holiness in the fact that we are recipients of God's grace and gospel promises. He says, "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement..." (2 Cor. 7:1).

Next we learn that we must receive the Lord's Supper for what it is, a corporate participation in the body and blood of Christ. When Paul says "a participation in" (v. 16), the Greek word is "koinonia." It means *fellowship*. One of the reasons that our weekly observance of communion is so important to us is that we are truly and spiritually

“fellowshipping” with Christ. We are “united” to Christ as we feed on him in faith at His table. Here, for one brief moment, the gospel comes to fruition in a more full way. Here, for one brief moment, we literally taste and see that the Lord is good.

Next, we need to recognize the subtle dangers of the demonic. Sometimes we have an over-blown, sensationalistic view of the demonic, and often our views are based on numerous influences from popular culture. When we think of Satan and demons, we tend to think more in terms of the latest movies we've seen or books we've read, and less in terms of Scripture. If, however, we cleared our heads of many of our cultural influences, we would see that biblically speaking, one of the most prevalent forms of demonic activity is simply leading people away from worshipping the one true God.

In Corinth, the demonic manifest itself in the hugely popular, socially acceptable practice of idol worship. What was an everyday activity for the average Corinthian, part and parcel of their culture and life, was in reality one of Satan's subtle distractions to lead people away from God. We may say that anything that distracts us from worshipping God, holding God first in our hearts, and pursuing holiness, is demonic.

We see this idea in visual form in Revelation 13. There we read about a beast rising out of the sea. This beast most likely represents some form of worldly power (such as Rome). Later, a second beast comes and its goal is to get everyone to worship the first beast. The point here is not for us to look for a literal pair of beasts coming from the ocean. Instead, it is that any time people put their ultimate hope and trust in worldly powers, securities, and governments (the first beast), they are already worshipping the beast. The book of Revelation makes plain (it "reveals") the more subtle realities that are happening in our world right now, such as Satan's desire for us to worship anything but God.

This is why Paul expresses a strong sense of urgency as he calls the Corinthians to flee idolatry. This is why we need to feel a strong urgency to flee all sin. As the old Puritan Thomas Watson once said, “When lust or rash anger burns in the soul, Satan warms himself at this fire. Men’s sins feast the devil.”¹ When we fall prey to the subtle attacks of the demonic against us, Satan's heart is warmed and our souls are endangered.

Finally, we need to see God's jealousy both as a warning and as a blessing. In v. 22 Paul reminds us that God is stronger than us. The warning is implicit. If we provoke God to jealousy, we will not escape his judgment. Falling into sin and idolatry is particularly dangerous, not merely because Satan has his way with us, but especially because we run the risk of falling under the judgment of our all-powerful, jealous God.

But, God's jealousy is also a blessing. Although we often think of jealousy as sin, jealousy can be a virtue. What kind of marriages would we have if jealousy was not a possibility? God's jealousy over us is something to rejoice in. Because God is jealous, he has not left us to other gods, but has redeemed us for himself alone. In Zephaniah we are given a beautiful picture of just what God's jealous love for us looks like, "The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing" (Zeph. 3:17). With this picture in mind of God singing over his elect with love and joy, we are reminded again of the full scope of the salvation he has blessed us with through Christ. We are saved for God! We are his people, he loves us, he is jealous for us, and because of this, we are called to flee all sin and idolatry.

¹ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2000), 134.