

TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT

1 CORINTHIANS 10:14-11:1

A young pastor was to preach his first ever graveside burial service - for a destitute man with no family or friends. He was being buried in a pauper's cemetery.

Well, the young pastor, not knowing where the cemetery was located, made several wrong turns.

He got lost, and arrived an hour late. Of course, the hearse was nowhere in sight, but a shovel was stuck in the ground next to an open hole, and the workmen were sitting in the shade of a nearby tree having their lunch.

Yet the young pastor wanted to be faithful to his duties. So he walked over to the hole and found the vault lid already in place... He was upset and embarrassed by his tardiness, so to make up for it he preached as passionately and powerfully as he could. He wanted to give this man a fitting commencement into the afterlife.

When the pastor finished, he wiped the sweat off his brow, sprinkled dust on the vault, and returned to his car.

But as he was getting into his car to drive back home, he heard one of the worker's tell his partner, "Wow, that was amazing. I've been installing septic tanks for twenty-five years and I ain't never seen anything like that."

And the moral of the story is.. "When you go to preach a funeral make sure you show up at the right grave."

This was similar to Paul's advice to the Corinthians here in the second half of Chapter 10 - **when you go to worship God make sure you do so at the right altar!**

This is why Paul warns the Corinthians and us in verse 14, **"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."**

It's possible to seek God, and wind up at the wrong altar. Rather than worship and sacrifice to the true God, you end up at the altar of a false god, an idol.

This is what Paul mentioned earlier in Chapter 10.

In verse 7, he wrote of the OT Hebrews who followed Moses out of Egypt, **"And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play."**

Moses was on the mountain getting instructions from God, when the Hebrews grew impatient. They wanted a tangible, visible god. The true God requires we walk by faith, not by sight - but doubting people would rather *lock eyes* than *have faith*. Faith is harder than seeing.

This is the appeal of idolatry... an idol provides an immediate god we can see, or smell, or taste, or touch; rather than a transcendent God who is above us and rules over us. An idol - *even a modern idol - in the form of a celebrity, or a gadget, or an experience* - caters to our lusts and entraps us. Whereas, the real God has the power to elevate us over our lusts and set us free.

Author John Phillips writes a great summation of idolatry. **"It insults God and degrades man. Idolatry is hand-in-glove with**

deception, immorality, superstition, cruelty, and crime. It is false, through and through, and is a sure and certain road to hell. It is by far the most persistent and pervasive error on this planet.

Idolatry began early in the history of the race, and has been entrenched deeply in man's religious thinking ever since. It has its tentacles in all lands and can be found everywhere in the modern world. Paul tells us *flee from it. It is deadly.*" And the word translated "*flee*" is a strong word. It literally means, "*flee for your life.*"

Idolatry is not something to *toy with* - or *flirt with*.

And that's the motivation behind Paul's thoughts in Chapter 10. Some of the Corinthians were pursuing their liberty right back into idolatry. It's true we've been set free, *but not to dabble in what we're freed from.*

In the original language there's a article in verse 14. It literally reads, "*flee from THE idolatry.*" And "*THE idolatry*" is what Paul has spoken of since Chapter 8.

He's been addressing the subject of a Christian and the pagan Temple - eating meat sacrificed to idols.

Remember, thousands of animal sacrifices were offered in the pagan temples. Their priests could eat only so much of the chops, the remainder of the meat was sold to Corinthian markets and butcher shops.

And this is where the city's Christians shopped.

Was it right for them to buy ground round, knowing it had been offered to an idol? The local Five Guys served a good

burger, but what if that burger was once an offering to the Greek gods Apollo, or Aphrodite?

Paul addresses this subject in Chapter 8, “we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and there is no other God but one.” In other words, don’t worry about it.. *Meat is meat - an idol, just a block of wood or stone.*

A good piece of meat isn’t tainted because it was once offered to a worthless idol. If you’re not confusing a brother, *then enjoy your steak... just cook it first!*

Yet evidently, some of the Corinthian believers had carried their freedom too far. It’s not *what they ate* that was the problem, but it was *where and when they ate*.

It was the atmosphere that surrounded their eating.

Realize, in ancient Corinth the pagan temple was the place to be. It was the cultural, social center of the city.

There were activities every night... *not just religious services - but concerts, plays, Zumba classes, ballet lessons...* Before the concert they prayed to the idol...

The Zumba instructor put a pinch on incense on the altar before class to protect everyone from injury...

Weddings and family functions were also held at the temple, *and in honor to the pagan god...* All of these events included sacrifices and prayers to the idol.

And some of the Christians in Corinth felt a freedom to stay involved in these activities, even if they had to endure the rituals of the pagan prayers and sacrifices.

But there comes a point when a believer's use of their freedom can turn to foolishness. When you find yourself worshipping at the wrong altar you've gone too far - you've crossed a line. It's no longer an issue of *your liberty*, but of *Christ's Lordship. Is He Lord or not?*

And this is the point Paul makes in Chapter 10.

The believers in Corinth need to "*flee the idolatry*," lest they slowly get sucked back into its snare.

First, in addressing the Corinthians, Paul flatters them, verse 15, "*I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say.*" The Corinthians surely thought they were wise! They were proud of their knowledge.

Paul is hoping they'll have an open mind...

Then in verses 16-17 he begins his argument by illustrating how what happens at the altar of an idol is what occurs at the Lord's table - *during communion...*

What goes on at the pagan altar is spiritually similar to what happens at the Christian's communion table.

He writes, "*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*"

First, notice how the language here upsets a few erroneous assumptions made by churches. *Don't think a priest or pastor has to officiate a communion service.*

I love the wording, “*cup of blessing which WE bless... bread which WE break...*” Communion in the early church wasn’t a leader-led celebration.

Every member played a role. It really was *self-serve*. They passed a loaf of matzah and all pulled off a pinch. A common cup passed and everyone took a sip.

God didn’t want an official orchestrating or arranging communion, or it would limit its observance. Wherever believers gather in Jesus’ name they can *bless the cup* and *break the bread* - and fellowship at His table.

Communion really is a fitting named for what we do.

When we come to the table to eat the bread and to drink the cup we *commune* with the Lord Jesus. A mystical fellowship takes place at the Lord’s Table!

In communion believers experience God’s presence, and bond with one another. Spiritual work takes place.

To appreciate our *eating the bread* and *drinking the cup* at communion, you need to know how the ancients understood the act of eating and drinking in general.

A common meal was a sacred experience.

When two people took from the same loaf and drank from the same cup they became one. A relationship was fused. A bond was forged between the meal’s participants. This notion carried over into communion.

At His table we renew our oneness - our connections both vertically and horizontally - with the Spirit of Christ, and with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Roman Catholicism misinterprets communion as **magical** - that the bread and wine turn into something they're not - they literally become the flesh and blood of Jesus. *It's make believe to make people believe.*

Whereas, Baptist-like groups, on the other end of the pendulum, take communion as simply a **memorial**. The bread and wine are similar to a plaque - a granite headstone commemorating the death of our Lord Jesus. It marks an important event in our distant past.

But Paul is saying here that communion is neither **magical** or a **memorial** - it's **mystical**. Something spiritual takes place when Christians take communion!

Obviously, the bread and wine are still bread and wine - but eating and drinking are unifying acts.

At the Lord's table our connectedness to Christ and each other gets emphasized. It heightens our faith and awareness. Think of communion as a *faith additive* - it's a point of contact where we can release our faith.

Recall the woman who was hemorrhaging blood.

She worked her way through the crowd until she was close enough to Jesus to reach up and touch the hem of His garment. When she did healing was imparted!

And communion is our opportunity to touch Jesus.

At His table we're in close proximity. It's a charged atmosphere. As with an electrified sky, there's a greater chance for a lightning strike - and communion presents us with a special occasion to be hit by spiritual realities.

Once, a man and his wife were taking communion.

They received the bread and cup, and then bowed their heads in prayer. Out of the corner of mom's eye, she saw her five year old watching his dad intently.

She thought, "How sweet... *we're a good example.*"

But her sense of satisfaction was short-lived. Later little Seth asked, "What's in that stuff? You eat it and go right to sleep..." It's actually the contrary, communion is a wake-up call - it's an alarm. It heightens our spiritual sensitivities and enhances our awareness of God.

And to a degree the same was true of the Hebrews. Paul writes, "Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?"

A Hebrew approaching the altar in the Temple with his sacrifice wasn't just engaging in *ritual - a symbolic act*. It was interactive. The Hebrew was participating with God. The OT sacrifices were spiritual transactions.

The worshipper came to the physical side of the altar, but the Spirit behind the altar was also present.

In the OT Temple, and at the Lord's Table, the Spirit behind the altar is the Holy Spirit. But that wasn't the case in pagan temples. There was a spirit behind the altar, but it wasn't the Holy Spirit - it was an evil spirit.

Paul writes in verse 19, "What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything?" Of course, the answer was "no." Chapter 8 explained that meat sacrificed to idols was just meat.

The idol is nothing divine, and neither is the offering.

But there is a real, spiritual entity behind *the worship of that idol*. When an idolater came to a pagan altar to offer a sacrifice, make no mistake about it, there was someone there to receive it - *not the idol, but demons*.

Remember, before Satan's fall, he was Lucifer, the archangel, but he exalted himself as equal with God. He boasted, "I will be like the Most High." The Almighty had to toss the Devil and his cronies out of heaven.

And since that time the Devil and his demons have tried to steal worship from God. That means every idol is ultimately his initiative. *Evil spirits are behind idolatry*.

And this is what Paul acknowledges in verse 20, "Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons." Idols are idols, and meat is just meat. *But idolatry is demonic*.

The Corinthians needed to know you can't just walk into a pagan temple as if nothing spiritual is going on.

Demons are dancing behind the sacrifices... Devils are pulling the strings. Not that they care if the idol is worshipped. They could care less about the idol.

But whenever an idol is worshipped that means *God is not* - and that's satisfaction enough for a demon.

Here's a modern-day example...

A fortune cookie is nothing but a tasty mixture of flour and sugar - with a silly pre-packaged message inside.

But if you take the message seriously as having a bearing on your future - or treat it superstitiously as if it has an influence over you - then that floury convection becomes a type of spiritual *sorcery*. You're trying to supernaturally foresee the future apart from God and His Word, and the Bible calls that sin - even witchcraft.

Realize, the message inside doesn't corrupt the cookie. A piece of paper doesn't contaminate flour and sugar. The cookie is still a yummy treat... *that I'll eat*.

But I never read the paper. I throw it away.

I don't want any part of a pagan prediction. I'm sure demons like to use fortune cookies, or Ouija Boards, or Horoscopes to draw people into deeper deceptions.

I'm trusting my life and future into God's hands.

Recently, a young lady came up to me after church, and told me she'd visited a psychic to have her palm read. She did it on a whim - just to be entertained.

She probably figured **correctly**... my future isn't written in the lines of my palm - and a psychic doesn't really personally possess mystical powers... *So what's the harm in entertaining yourself with a palm reading?*

It was like the Corinthians going with their pagan friends to entertain themselves with the activities of the temple. *The idol is nothing, and the meat is just meat.*

But this lady, *and the Corinthians*, failed to see what was behind the pagan activity. Whenever there's a spiritual

attempt to predict the future apart from God and His Word, the Bible considers it “*sorcery*.”

Demons are behind the effort and can influence the participants. The lady I spoke to was confused over what the psychic told her. Surely, it was a Satanic deception. When you *go* where God says *no* - beware!

And this was the danger the Corinthians were risking. Eat meat sacrificed to idols, at Five Guys or at home, and it’s no big deal. But eat it as part of a pagan ritual and you invite the demon behind it out to play!

Verse 21, “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?”

Paul is clear, it’s one or the other! How can you truly be devoted to Jesus, if you’re flirting with demons.

Remember what had been going on in the church at Corinth. The Corinthian Christians were free from superstition. They knew idols and meats were nothing.

But they were taking their freedom too far. They were trying to stay connected with the pagan culture around them, and didn’t realize spiritual factors were at play.

Their involvement had spiritual implications.

When the company they worked for brought in the pagan priest to dedicate the new store opening, they attended... When the family gathered at the temple for the nephew’s coming-of-age party, they participated...

They bowed in prayer to the idol like everyone else.

It's commendable to want to relate to our unbelieving neighbors. That's being like Jesus. Recall, our Lord was known as "a friend of sinners." *How are we going to win people to Jesus if we're afraid to be their friend?*

Yet it's one thing to be a friend, and quite another to participate in an activity that betrays our Christian faith and values. People around us need to see our concern for them, but be just as sure of our stand for Christ.

Say I have a friend who's homosexual. It's great that I'm in his life. I'm a true friend who wants to see him come to know Jesus. He knows he can trust me.

But what if he decides to marry another man, and invites me to the wedding. Suddenly, it's no longer just about our friendship. Now it's about my views on the Christian understanding of marriage. My attendance at the wedding could be seen as an endorsement for same-sex marriage. This is why I need to draw a line.

The Corinthians were putting *their relationships with their pagan friends* ahead of *their stand for Christ*.

It was a slippery slope... At first, here's all it was, "*we can still go to the temple...*" Then it grew, "*oh, if we come to the temple we can go to the altar...*" Finally, it was "*if idols are nothing, a sacrifice is meaningless...*"

But now there's no difference in the behavior of the Christian and the pagan both sacrificing to the idol.

Paul reminds us that when we're flirtatious with the spirit of this world we *"provoke the Lord's jealousy."*

If Kathy started flirting with the mailman it'd provoke me to jealousy, *and rightly so!* I love her. I'm committed to my wife. And I expect her to be committed to me.

Anything less is unacceptable. You can't be married to me, and flirt with the mailman! And you can't be committed to Jesus and cozy up to contrary spirits.

If Kathy wants to be married to me, I want her to be crystal clear with the mailman... *"return to sender."*

Yet compromise with the spirit of this world is becoming more and more prevalent in today's church.

Churches adopt the premise that *to reach the world* they need *to be like the world...* It's true that culturally, we should be *relatable*. But spiritually and morally we need to remain *unbendable*. We need to draw a line.

When the pagans around us see no difference between *their lifestyle* and *our lifestyle* it's a problem.

Ultimately, it's not what we have in common that leads a person to salvation, it's the difference. We have what they lack - *truth, love, joy, purpose - and Jesus!*

Paul helps the Corinthians in verse 23, by raising the bar on their behavior. When faced with a situation they were asking, *"Is this allowable? Am I free to engage in this activity?"* And if the temple was nothing, and the meat was just meat, the answer was usually, "yes."

But Paul suggests there's a different question we should ask. Not just *"is it allowable?"* but *"is it helpful?"*

He writes in verse 23, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.” This is the Christian ethic.

This is an amazing masterpiece in morality! No other religion has anything like it. It's as free as free can get. God gives us carte blanche. Do whatever you want!

“All things are lawful for me.” You can't get any freer than that!... God frees us from laws and rules. Our conduct is no longer based on a set of commands. It's now focused on a goal - to love Christ, and love others.

Now the determining factor for what you and I do and don't do is whatever helps us achieve that goal... Paul writes, “All things are lawful... but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful... but not all things edify.”

The word “edify” means to build up! If an activity doesn't *build up my faith in Christ* or *build up my brother's faith*; then it's nothing but a needless distraction, that has no place in the life of a Christian.

If an activity causes my own faith to *fumble*, or my brother's faith to *stumble* then it should be off-limits.

A Christian has a new priority. It's no longer *how long can I get by...* or *am I within the legal limits...* or *how far can I go up to the edge...* It's not *is it lawful, but does it edify...* Will it *build me up* and *build up others*?

The Corinthians had been too cavalier about their involvement in the pagan temple and their meats sacrificed to

idols. They were flirting with compromise, and sending mixed signals to the people around them.

If a weaker brother saw me eating Temple meat at Five Guys, he could take it a step further and eat meat from a pagan altar. What was *my liberty* now becomes *his sin*. Tragically, I've sabotaged my brother's faith.

This is why Paul writes in verse 24, **“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.”**

Here's what we all need to consider - none of us live out our faith in a vacuum. The church is a community and we all watch one another - we effect each other for better or for worse. *We build up, or we tear down.*

GK Chesterton once said, **“To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it.”**

You can do the right thing in the wrong context, and it become a sin. There's a greater question than *is it right?* It's *“will this help or hinder the faith of others?”*

Paul puts this all together in the next few verses...

He begins in verse 25, **“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; for *“the earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness.”*”**

So if you're barbecuing for yourself and your family, and you know that meat is just meat regardless of its history; then fire it up! Grill and chill to the glory of God!

Hey, if you look deep enough you can find an evil association with just about everything. The cell phone company you use handles calls between drug dealers, and

mafia associates - does that mean we shouldn't use a cell phone? Of course not, cell phones also save lives, and connect friends, and do an awful lot of good.

So many things in life become good or evil based on their particular context. In the right setting, *the meat sacrificed to a pagan god - or a glass of wine - or an article of clothing - or a game of cards* - is no big deal.

It's just meat and you're free to feed it to your family.

And, "If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake..."

Notice again the assumption - you're a good friend to an unbeliever, so much so, that they would invite you over for dinner. Nothing Paul has said should discourage us from building bridges to non-believers.

And if while you're there, nothing is said about the origin of the barbecue, then eat! Chew and be happy!

As Psalm 24 teaches "*the earth is the LORD's...*" thus meat is a gift from God, meant for us to enjoy!

"But (Paul continues) if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols..." Obviously, if someone at your pagan neighbor's house mentions this technicality, *you know it's an issue for them or they're testing you.*

In their minds they're equating it as a compromise and they want to see how you'll handle the situation.

So Paul tells us, "Do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "*the earth is the*

LORD's, and all its fullness.” Notice, he quotes the same verse *to not eat*, as He when he justifies *eating* in verse 26. *Is this a contradiction? No.*

He's simply saying the same rationale applies to eating, or not eating. Since *“the earth is the Lord's”* all things, including meat, should be used for His glory.

If it glorifies God to eat, then eat. If it glorifies Him to not eat, then don't eat. All of life is about glorifying God.

He goes on, *“Conscience,” I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience? But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks?*” Paul is concerned about the Christians in Corinth setting themselves up for unjust criticism.

If my liberty is going to be interpreted by someone else as *a moral lapse*, or as *poor judgment* - or worse, as *a betrayal of Christ* - *why even go there?* Is it worth smudging the cause of Christ and your own witness?

As Christians it does matter what people think of us!

Don't be a rogue Christian and think you're justified in living as you please regardless of the impression you leave others. Especially, those we're called to lead to Christ. God has left us on this earth to be His ambassadors - that means our reputation matters!

If my goal is to *love God*, and *build up others* - then there'll be occasions when I'll want to eat - just as there'll be times

when I'll push my plate aside. And if my heart is right I'll be able and willing to do both.

When it comes to our liberties, it's true, *"If you're not free to put it down, then you're not free to pick it up!"*

This not only applies to meat sacrificed to idols, but to alcohol, tobacco, certain fashion styles, forms of recreation and entertainment, various traditions, and a whole host of other potentially offensive activities.

Here's the big question, *will it build up my faith and the faith of others?* If there's a doubt, do without.

Verse 31 is the governing principle for all a believer does or does not do, *"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."*

The great Puritan preacher, Jonathan Edwards, came up with two lifelong resolutions. There were only two precepts he lived by... He wrote, *"Resolved first: That all men should live for the glory of God. Resolved second: That whether others do or not, I will."*

Think of all the rules, and laws, and resolutions in life mankind could eliminate if everyone adopted this one... *"Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."*

Paul wraps up the chapter in verses 32-33, *"Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God..."* Notice, the three groups of human beings Paul mentions... **Jews, Gentiles, and Church.**

Someone this past week asked me *where is America in God's plan?* He was trying to equate God's handling of OT Israel with His treatment of America today.

But we're really talking apples and oranges.

For the first 2000 years of history God dealt with the Gentiles as a whole... For the next 2000 years He interacted with the Jews His chosen people, and will forever... But now for the last 2000 years He's been calling out from the Gentiles, a new nation, the Church.

Yes, God blesses and judges all nations... And He's made a special case of Israel... But today, God isn't looking for that kind of relationship with a nation - a political entity. Instead He builds a spiritual kingdom.

He's calling out a Church - His brand new nation.

Today, when God looks at humanity He doesn't see Americans, or Nigerians, or Canadians. He sees Jews, Gentiles, and the Church. And as Christians we should be on guard against needlessly offending all three...

If your Jewish friends invite you for dinner, don't be insensitive to their Law and take over a plate of pulled pork... If your Gentile friends want to take you out for a burger, don't act holier-than-thou, and tell them you can't go because your fasting - *don't put religion above relationship or law above love...* And if your church friends ask you to go for coffee, don't order a beer and tempt the recovering alcoholic who's with the group...

Paul says, "Give no offense, either to Jew or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all *men* in all *things*, not seeking my own profit, but the *profit* of many, that they may be saved." Every activity on our daily planner,

every weekend diversion - every duty, every pleasure - should be evaluated...

Does it promote the Gospel... Does it build up the faith of Christians, and nudge non-Christians closer to Christ? If it does, *go for it*. If it doesn't, *say no to it*.

This is how Paul lived his life... Here was his plumb line... not just what's allowable, but what's helpful!

And this is how Paul was able to make the statement he makes in verse 1 of chapter 11. He writes, **"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."** Wow, that's a little different from what we so often hear from our leaders, even from parents who say, **"Do as I say, not as I do."**

Paul's desire was just the opposite, **"Watch what I do and it'll confirm what I say."** The church will have a far more powerful witness in the world when Christians are of the calibre where they can make that statement.

What about you? Can you say **"Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ."** You can begin on that statement - if you make it your desire to glorify God in whatever you do!

Is it helpful? Does it edify?... Make that your goal.