

# Flee from idolatry

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## **Flee from idolatry!**

*A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 30th January 2005*

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

(1 Corinthians 10:14-22)

## **Introduction**

This passage is summed up by the first verse in the passage, "Therefore my dear friends, flee from idolatry". The worship of idols is so destructive to our spiritual lives and so offensive to God that we must distance ourselves from it as much as possible and as fast as possible.

Before we look at the details of what the apostle says, it might be helpful for us to consider the context for this passage. This passage is very closely linked with what has gone before. In chapter 8 the apostle addressed the issue of meat that had previously been offered to idols. Some believers had an easy conscience about eating such meat, whereas others had a guilty conscience doing so. Paul said that whilst those believers who ate such meat were, strictly speaking, free to do so, out of love they should not eat such meat if it might cause to stumble the person who had a bad conscience about eating such meat.

But whilst the apostle did allow, if it would not lead someone to stumble, the eating of meat that had previously been offered to an idol, the apostle certainly did not intend by this that believers should go to an idol temple and actively engage in the worship of idols. So, in case he was misunderstood on this point, in chapter 10 verses 1 - 13 he very strongly warned the believers about the danger of idolatry. He went back to the history of Israel as they were coming out of Egypt, and drew lessons from what happened to them. They were greatly privileged, as we are, yet they were severely dealt with by God because of their sin, particularly the sin of idolatry. If we do not overcome sin in our lives, then God is liable to deal with us in a similar way. So, the apostle goes on to say now, "flee from idolatry".

As we think about this passage, I want to do so under three headings:

1. What the apostle tells us to do.
2. Why he tells us to do so.
3. How we can do what the apostle says.

## **1. What the apostle tells us to do**

The apostle says that we are to "flee from idolatry."

For us to understand what he means by this, we need to understand what idolatry is. Idolatry is the worship of anything that has been made. Its most obvious form is when a person makes a statue of a man or woman or an animal and prays towards it or lights candles or offers food to it, but idolatry can be much more subtle than that. In Romans 1.23 the apostle Paul says that men "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is for ever praised!" So if you love any created thing with the love that should be directed towards God, you are treating that thing as an idol. So, for example, if you hero worship your favourite football personality, or your movie star or rock star, you are committing idolatry. You can make an idol out of your career ambitions. Your idol might be yourself – your own ego and pride. If you are greedy for things in this world, like comfort, pleasure, cars, computers, mobile phones, clothing, holidays, your home, then this is idolatry. A greedy person is an idolater (Ephesians 5.5).

What is our attitude towards idolatry to be? We are to flee from it. It is so

dangerous, so destructive, so ruinous, that we are to get away from it as fast as possible. Let me illustrate this in the following way. Suppose one night you are asleep in your bed, and you are awoken by a smoke alarm. As you wake up you realise you can smell strong smoke coming from a room downstairs. What do you do? Do you get up slowly and start reading your emails on your computer? No, you make sure all the other people in your household are awake, and then you get out of the house as fast as you can. Or suppose one day you are walking down the street, and you are approached by a menacing looking gang. Do you stop and pass the time of day with them? No. If you have an opportunity to escape, you run, as if your life depended on it. Why? Because you are in danger. Or, take the example of Lot in the Old Testament. He lived in a very wicked town called Sodom. God decided to destroy the town by pouring out burning sulphur on it, but because Lot was a righteous man God sent his angel beforehand to rescue Lot and his family from the city. What did the angel say? "Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere on the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away" (Genesis 19.17). Or, take another example from the Bible, the story of Joseph. He was tempted not so much with the sin of idolatry as the sin of sexual immorality, but the principle holds good. He had been sold into slavery, and had been given a very responsible job in charge of the household of a rich man. His master's wife tried to seduce Joseph, and one day she got hold of him by his robe. Joseph left the robe in her hand and fled out of the house.

In just the same way, you and I are to flee from the sin of idolatry.

## **2. Why we are to flee**

The apostle gives three reasons why we are to flee from idolatry.

### **1) Because if you worship an idol you are worshipping demons**

The apostle says in verse 20 that the "sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, and I do not want you to be participants with demons." He explains how he reaches this conclusion in verses 15 to 19, in which he says that if you involve yourself in a religious ceremony, you participate in the power that lies behind that ceremony.

He argues this first of all from the Lord's supper. In verse 16 he says, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of

Christ?" When we drink the cup during the Lord's supper, we share spiritually in the blood of Christ. It is not as though the wine actually becomes the Lord's blood. We know this because when the Lord instituted the Lord's supper he said to his disciples as he gave them the cup, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26.28). When he gave them the cup, his literal blood was still pumping through his arteries and veins. What he meant was that the cup *symbolised* his blood. So as we drink the cup, we do not drink the literal blood of Jesus, but, if we drink with faith, we share in the spiritual blessings flowing from the forgiveness he bought us.

Then the apostle goes on to say, "And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" Again, we are not sharing in Jesus' literal body, because that body died on the cross and then was raised from the dead and is now raised to heaven, and will come again at the end of the world. But, spiritually, as we eat we share in what the death of Jesus' body accomplished for us. And not only do we have fellowship with Christ, we also have fellowship with each other. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, because we all share in the one loaf."

The apostle then speaks about the sacrifices in Old Testament times. "Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?" Some of the sacrifices that were offered in the temple in the Old Testament times were eaten by those who offered them. These were called "fellowship offerings" and they were looking forward to the fellowship that we have with God through Jesus Christ.

And so, by the same token, the apostle argues, sacrifices that are offered to idols lead the worshipper to have "fellowship" with demons. It is not, as he says in verse 19, that "a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything." An idol is just an inanimate lump of wood or stone that has no power of its own. But behind that idol there is an evil spirit.

What are demons? They are evil spirits, fallen angels, who are full of hatred towards God and man. What they want is to completely ruin people's lives. They will seek to do all they can to stop you from believing Christ for salvation, and if you are already a believer, they will do all they can to ruin your Christian life.

So think about it: if you hero-worship a football personality, or if you fill your heart with desires for things in this world, you are worshipping demons. Are you

a Christian? If so, do you really want to worship demons?

## **2) Idolatry and worship of God cannot co-exist in the same person**

The apostle says in verse 21 "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons." The same person cannot worship idols and worship the true God. The love for the one will drive out love for the other.

This is what Jesus taught. It is recorded in Matthew 6.24 that he said "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." James also says something similar: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4.4). John also writes "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2.15). So we see the consistent testimony of Scripture is that the love of God and the love for the things of this world cannot co-exist in the same person. If we allow love for things in this world to get the upper hand in our hearts, then the love of God will be driven from us.

## **3) Idolatry arouses God's jealous anger**

Paul says in verse 22, "Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" As believers we are the bride of Christ. He is our husband. He expects from us one hundred percent devotion. If we do not do so we are committing a spiritual form of adultery. And just as a husband rightly has a sense of jealous anger if his wife commits adultery, so God rightly has jealous anger towards his people if we commit spiritual adultery. If God is aroused against you, who will win? Can you take on God and come out OK?

## **3. How we are to flee from idolatry**

I want now for us to consider together how we can flee from idolatry. For most of us living in the West in the twenty-first century, the big temptation will be to make an idol out of money, and the things that money can buy. How are we to run from this form of idolatry? Here are some suggestions of things we can do to help us overcome this temptation.

## **1) Guard your exposure to things which will feed desire**

First of all, we need to guard our exposure to those media which promote greed. If you spend hours and hours pouring over catalogues, or reading glossy magazines, or scouring certain web-sites, your desires for things in this world are likely to grow and grow until they are running out of control. If you watch television, be on guard for certain "soap" programmes which are presented against a backdrop of affluent American or Australian households, and can give your life is not really worth living if your house is not virtually a palace.

## **2) Remember that this world is passing away**

The Bible constantly reminds us that this world is passing away.

You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning – though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered....The length of our days is seventy years-- or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. (Psalm 90.5 – 10)

Yet we are so foolish. We keep on conning ourselves into thinking that we are here for ever, and that the things in this world that we set our hearts on will be here for ever. If someone you know dies, go to his funeral. There is nothing like a funeral to remind you of the brevity of your own life. Visit the sick and the terminally ill in hospital. Seeing someone lying in a bed who has been paralysed by a stroke will help to cure you of your love for things in this world. Visit scrap yards and municipal dumps. See end of the cars, computers and furniture that people love so much.

## **3) Remember the things of this world cannot satisfy**

God said through His prophet Jeremiah "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jeremiah 2.3). This is what we tend to do. We tend to turn away from God, who supplies us with fresh, running spiritual water, which satisfies us, and we make for ourselves idols which unable to satisfy us, and are like broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

We all know about Elvis Presley, and others like him. He had all a man could possibly want. Vast amounts of money, everything that money could buy him,

pretty girls, fame, and yet he died a miserable man. He had access to all that this world could offer, yet he was not satisfied.

What can your idol do for you? Can it save you from your sin? Does it care for you? Does it protect you? Does it give you eternal life? Does it give meaningful purpose to your life? Can it give you peace? Does it hear your prayers and answer them?

#### **4) Develop contentment**

Fourthly, we need to develop contentment in our lives. The apostle says in another part of the Bible "I have learned to be content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4.12). If you have Christ, you have all that you need. If the Lord gives you an abundant provision of things in this life, be thankful to him for his generosity. If you do not have many of the things of this world, still be grateful, for the rich inheritance he has stored up for you in the life to come.

#### **5) Take delight in the Lord**

Above all, we need to find our delight and satisfaction in the Lord. We need to not just kill off idolatry. We need to focus our heart's desires onto God, and fill our minds with how good and wonderful he is. If our hearts positively love God, there will be no space in our hearts for the love of idols.

Think about the greatness of God. Consider that he is the everlasting God, without beginning and without end. He is the Almighty God. Nothing is impossible with him. He is present everywhere, at all time. He knows absolutely everything there is to know about the past, the present and the future, as regards all things and all people everywhere. He is the sovereign God, who is reigning over all events. Even evil events are ultimately under his control, and are worked together by him to accomplish his great and perfect plan. He is the creator of all things. Everything that exists owes its life and existence to him. He is self-sufficient. He does not need anything or anyone because all power and strength resides in him.

Then think about his moral perfection. He is perfectly holy, in other words absolutely separated from all evil and corruption. All his ways are just. He never does anything wrong. He never makes any mistakes. He is also abounding in love

towards all men, and has a special love towards those whom he has called to belong to him. If you are a Christian, think of the amazing love that God has shown you. He sent his one and only son to die in your place upon the Cross. He chose you before the creation of the world. He has predestined you to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. He has washed away your sins. He has set you free from the power of the sin. He has adopted you into his family, and given you millions of brothers and sisters. He has called you to share in his everlasting glory. And why has he done these things? Because you were virtuous, or in any way deserving? No, he has done these things because he chose to show love that you did not deserve.

So we need to fill our minds with thoughts about the greatness and goodness of God. We need to be constantly at meetings of the church, so that we can be reminded of the truth about God, and learn more about him. We need to read our Bibles regularly, and meditate upon what we read, so that it sinks deeply into our minds, and affects our thinking and our feelings. We need to meet together with other believers informally so that we can remind each other of the truth about God and build each other up. We need to sing songs and hymns about God so as to ram home into our minds what a wonderful God he is. And as we fill our minds with thoughts of the greatness of God, idols will lose their attraction to us, and we will find ourselves loving God more and more.

### **Conversion to Christ is essential**

Before I finish I want to say a word to any who might read this sermon who are not as yet Christians. What is the message for you through this passage? The message is quite simple: you must be saved through Jesus Christ. Otherwise you will, in one form or another, be an idolater. All men and women, in their natural state, are idolaters. We all refuse to worship the true God, the God of the Bible, and instead worship man-made gods. And idolaters have no place in the Kingdom of God. Their place, if they do not repent, will be in hell. The apostle said earlier in this letter "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters... will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6.9 – 10).

Are you a Christian? Have your sins been forgiven? Are you born again? If not, I urgently plead with you to repent of your sin and come to Christ for forgiveness. The blood of Christ is able to cleanse you from all your sin, and through the Holy Spirit you can start to live a new life of true worship of the



living God. But you must come to Christ, turn from wrongdoing, and trust him for eternal life.

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