

Unit 2: Dealing with Problems in the Church (1 and 2 Corinthians)

Lesson 11 | February 9, 2025

Warnings against Idolatry

Study Text

Exodus 17:1–7; 32:4–6; Numbers 25:1–4; 1 Corinthians 10:1 through 11:1

Central Truth

Christians are called to worship only the one true God.

Key Verse: 1 Corinthians 10:31

Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God (KJV).

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will identify positive examples for living a godly life.
- Students will ask the Holy Spirit to reveal behaviors that can harm their relationship with God.
- Students will evaluate if there is anything in their lives that would rouse the Lord's jealousy.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul drew on the Corinthians' familiarity with the Isthmian Games (similar to the Olympics) to remind them of their goal: Run the race of the Christian faith to win. In chapter 10, he used the example of Israel's idolatry to warn them about things that might keep them from finishing the race.

Discussion Starter—Good and Bad Examples

Ask students to identify good and bad examples that have influenced their relationships. Maybe their parent or grandparent influenced how they relate to their spouse or children. Maybe a boss influenced how they relate to coworkers. Maybe a pastor or teacher influenced how they have matured in their relationship with God. (Remind students that this is not a time to air specific grievances. To jumpstart the activity, come up with one good and one bad example of your own.)

Say: At times, Christianity can devolve into a to-do list that gives a false sense of security to someone who has checked all the boxes. But being a Christian means having an ongoing, growing relationship with Jesus. If we lose this focus, we can slip into a form of idolatry and the sinful lifestyle that follows.

The principle behind the practice of idolatry is putting anything or anyone ahead of God in one's affections, attention, and actions. Christians are not immune to this sin. It's even possible to do this by prioritizing our service to the Lord above the Lord himself. Thank God that He provides us with His Word and His Spirit to help us along our

journey of faith. Today, we'll look at one biblical example that can guide us as we strive to focus our worship on God alone.

Part 1—Ancient Israel's Sinful Example

God's Blessings Experienced

1 Corinthians 10:1–4

Say: Christians must guard against putting anything or anyone ahead of God in their affections, attention, and actions. It takes discipline to stay on the right course and finish the race. Paul used examples from Israel's history to drive home this point for the believers in Corinth.

First Corinthians 10 is part of a larger section that began in chapter 8 with Paul's instructions about eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. He argued that food is simply food and doesn't really affect believers spiritually (though believers should be considerate toward fellow believers whose weaker consciences tell them otherwise). However, participating in celebrations related to idolatry was a danger to believers' spiritual well-being. Although idols are made of natural materials like wood and stone, there are very real demonic forces involved in idol worship. Christians should not be ignorant of this spiritual reality. We must commit ourselves to worshipping God alone.

To strengthen his warning against idolatry, Paul began chapter 10 with a refresher course on Israel's history. The incidents he described in verses 1–4 mostly relate to their exodus from Egypt and wandering in the wilderness. He emphasized the word *all*, repeating it five times:

1. “**All** of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them” (verse 1). This pillar led the Israelites by day and provided light at night (Exodus 13:21–22).
2. “**All** of them walked through the sea on dry ground” (1 Corinthians 10:1). When the Egyptians pursued the Israelites, God parted the Red Sea for His people to escape (Exodus 14).
3. “In the cloud and in the sea, **all** of them were baptized as followers of Moses” (1 Corinthians 10:2). Passing through the sea symbolized a new beginning for the Israelites under Moses' leadership. In this sense, they were “baptized unto Moses” (KJV), like believers are baptized into Christ when they put their faith in Him.
4. “**All** of them ate the same spiritual food” (verse 3). The Israelites lived on the manna and quail God provided (Exodus 16).
5. “**All** of them drank the same spiritual water” (1 Corinthians 10:4). God provided water from a rock (Exodus 17:1–7). Paul's explanation that the rock was Christ pointed to the water's divine source.

Paul was drawing parallels between the Corinthian believers' experiences and those of the Israelites so that he could make a strong point about what happened next. After enjoying God's blessings and experiencing His deliverance and provision, how could they desire anything more?

Discuss

- ? How often do you reflect on all the ways God has blessed you?
- ? What recent blessings can you thank God for?

The Israelites' Discontent

1 Corinthians 10:5–6

Say: The Israelites experienced amazing blessings from God. You would think their gratitude would lead them to love God more and follow Him faithfully. Instead, they complained and disobeyed. As a result, most of them failed to reach the Promised Land, dying in the wilderness instead.

Is it possible there was a touch of sadness and sarcasm in the apostle Paul's tone as he wrote, "But with many of them God was not well pleased" (1 Corinthians 10:5, KJV)? "All" experienced His blessings but "many" (all but two of that generation) died in the wilderness. Paul's point was that the Israelites set an example that believers in Christ should be careful to avoid. We must not allow ourselves to become discontented with God's blessings. If we begin seeking something different than what God has given us, we can find ourselves engaged in idolatry before we even realize it.

Losing one's salvation rarely happens instantly (Hebrews 10:26–29; James 5:19–20). It is a process. Believers can begin to lose focus on living to please God and crave things that appeal to their natural desires. Over time, their ears become deaf to the Holy Spirit's voice, their consciences become seared, and their hearts become hardened.

We should learn from the Israelites' example. There is terrible danger in becoming discontent with God's blessings or taking them for granted. To avoid slipping into idolatry, we must develop the practice of giving thanks to God and continually growing closer to Him. It is also important to join regularly with other believers who will lovingly challenge us to follow the Lord.

Resource Packet Item 1: Faithful to the End

As we follow Jesus, we need the guidance and conviction of the Holy Spirit. We also need encouragement and accountability from fellow believers. Students will reflect on Hebrews 3:12–19 and assess their faithfulness and commitment to God. This handout would work best as a take-home page for personal devotions.

Discuss

- ? What are some positive examples that have helped you grow as a Christian?
- ? How can believers help one another avoid idolatry?

Part 2—Reject Sinful Practices

Rejecting God Leads to Sinfulness

1 Corinthians 10:7–10

Say: The Israelites' dissatisfaction led them into idolatry, which led to other sins. They engaged in sexual immorality, griped about the lack of food and water in the wilderness, and even questioned God's goodness, wondering if they hadn't been better off as slaves in Egypt. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul was making the point that idolatry always leads to other sin. It was true for Israel. It was true for the Corinthians. And it is true for us. As the Israelites learned firsthand, sin leads to death (Romans 3:23).

Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 10:7–10 how one sin can lead to others. The sin of idolatry led to the Israelites' indulgence, sexual immorality, and lack of faith (evidenced by their complaining and grumbling against God). Each step in their sinful descent represented a rejection of God. Paul wanted the believers in Corinth to learn from the Israelites' mistakes and reject these sinful behaviors. He illustrated his point by specifically referring to four Old Testament incidents where the Israelites' idolatry led to other kinds of sin:

1. *Worshipping a golden calf* (Exodus 32). Moses had been on Mount Sinai for forty days, receiving the terms of God's covenant. During this time, the people gave up on Moses' return and insisted that Aaron "make us some gods who can lead us" (verse 1). They then worshipped the idol, and Aaron said, "These are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (verse 4). The people also "rose up to play" (1 Corinthians 10:7, KJV), which refers to sexual revelry. About three thousand died that day as God's judgment was meted out (Exodus 32:28).
2. *Worshipping Moabite gods* (Numbers 25). The second incident Paul cited was when some of the Israelite men began having sexual relations with Moabite women and then joined them in worshipping Baal and other Moabite gods. Again, God's judgment led to thousands of Israelites dying in one day.
3. *Grumbling against God and Moses* (Numbers 21). The third incident Paul cited occurred when the Israelites questioned God's leading and provision, growing impatient with a detour around Edom. To them, everything seemed bad—the direction they were headed, the food they were eating, and the supposed lack of water. Because of their unbelief, God sent venomous snakes among them and many of the people died.
4. *Believing the faithless spies* (Numbers 14). The fourth incident Paul was likely referring to took place when the Israelites believed the ten spies' bad report about the Promised Land. They claimed God had brought them out of Egypt only to lead them into defeat and death. God's judgment for their lack of faith was that their generation would die in the wilderness (verse 23). The ten spies died of a plague (Numbers 14:36–37), which Paul described as the "destroyer" (1 Corinthians 10:10, KJV; "angel of death," NLT).

Obviously, Paul did not list every time the Israelites lost faith in God. But his examples illustrate the importance of consistently following the Lord. If the Christians in Corinth went down the path of idol worship, sexual immorality, doubt, and complaining like the Israelites had, they would also reap destruction (Galatians 6:7–8).

Discuss

? How might Christians today become involved in idol worship?

? Is God justified when He judges people for worshipping idols? Explain.

Heed the Warnings

1 Corinthians 10:11

Say: Many more incidents related to the Exodus and wilderness wanderings could have been recorded. But God led the author to include specific accounts as examples for His people. The principles to be learned from these stories apply to all generations.

It is wise to learn from the examples of others—whether positive or negative. We have been set free from sin so we can make good choices that glorify God. But we still have free will. By studying the Scriptures, we can see what happens when people choose God’s way and what happens when people reject God’s way. The same choice presented to the Israelites is now before us (Deuteronomy 11:26–28).

Emphasizing his point, Paul said these examples were “written down to warn us who live at the end of the age” (1 Corinthians 10:11). These are the last days. Anticipation of Jesus’ return should be a constant motivation for godly living (2 Peter 3:11–14). With the Holy Spirit working in our lives and fellow believers encouraging us to good works and reminding us of Jesus’ soon return (Hebrews 10:23–25), we can keep our eyes focused on the one true God who alone is worthy of our worship.

Resource Packet Item 2: Positive and Negative Examples

Christians have many positive and negative examples to learn from as we follow Jesus every day. Students will list some of these examples from Scripture and their personal lives and then think about the kind of example they are setting for others. This handout would work best as a starting point for group discussion.

Discuss

? How does the Holy Spirit use the Scriptures to instruct believers?

? Identify one good and one bad example of godly living from the Bible.

Part 3—Idolatry Is Demonic

Believers Are United with Christ

1 Corinthians 10:12–18

Say: The Israelites’ example should cause us to consider how we are following God. Like the children of Israel, we are also susceptible to temptation, even though we’ve

been redeemed and forgiven through faith in Jesus. But we can overcome temptation as we look to God. He “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). With such a gracious and generous God, why would we ever worship anyone or anything else?

If we take to heart the lessons we have learned from the Israelites’ example, we will recognize that humility and reliance on God are necessary to keep from returning to sin. As Paul warns the Corinthians, “If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). The strength to live a godly life comes from our connection with Christ (John 15:5–8) and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16). When temptations come—and they will—we can overcome them by relying on God’s faithfulness to make a way of escape. Often this involves a reminder from the Holy Spirit that what the world offers pales in comparison to what God offers (Romans 8:5–8; James 3:13–18). The way to escape temptation is always there, if we are willing to look for it.

By referring to the Corinthian believers as his “dearly beloved” (1 Corinthians 10:14, KJV; “dear friends,” NLT), Paul revealed his heartfelt care for them. While they might have felt he was chiding them, Paul had their best interest in mind, and he appealed with fatherly concern to their emotions (verse 14) and minds (verse 15).

Why is it so important that we flee from idolatry (verse 14)? Because being Christians means we are united with Christ (verse 16). It is utter foolishness for a Christian to turn to idolatry, prioritizing anything or anyone above God. Why return to the very sins Jesus has delivered us from? Why return to darkness after walking in the light? Why return to slavery after being set free by the truth of the gospel?

Discuss

? Does the context of 1 Corinthians 10:13 (in a passage dealing with idolatry) change your understanding of this familiar verse? Explain.

Don’t Participate in Idolatry

1 Corinthians 10:19–22

Say: While God is gracious, patient, and merciful, He is also passionate about His people’s faithfulness. We are called the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–13), the bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7–8), and members of His family (Ephesians 2:19). We are a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, and God’s very own possession (1 Peter 2:9). Is it any wonder that God would be jealous for our devotion?

Paul brought this section of his letter (chapters 8–10) to a close by addressing the topic of eating food sacrificed to an idol. In 1 Corinthians 10:19, he indicated he was about to give the Corinthians his conclusion on the issue. Is there anything significant or different about food sacrificed to an idol? No. Are idols themselves real? No. However, the demonic forces that inspire idol worship are real. So taking part in meals that are part of idol worship is equivalent to participating in demon worship. Paul finished his

instructions concerning this issue by calling on Christians to use discernment and wisdom in matters of conscience when interacting with others (verses 23–33). The essence of those instructions: Whatever you do, do it to glorify God and to not impede others coming to salvation through faith in Christ.

Exclusivity is part of being in right relationship with God. Christians are declared to be part of the bride of Christ. God’s expectations for that relationship include faithfulness and exclusive devotion to Him. Why would Christians put anything ahead of God in their affections, attention, and actions? Doing so only rouses the Lord’s jealousy and destroys their relationship with Him. May all who follow Jesus find in Him everything they need and desire.

Resource Packet Item 3: Jealous God

Jealousy is normally considered a negative emotion or characteristic, but Scripture repeatedly describes God as jealous. So what exactly does that mean? Students will read passages about God’s jealousy and reflect on their meaning. This handout would work best as a take-home page for personal devotions.

Discuss

- ? What are some modern forms of idolatry we should avoid?
- ? Why is the Lord’s jealousy a positive attribute?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Christians are called to worship only the one true God. Temptation still lures us to put other people and things ahead of God in our affections, attention, and actions. But God always makes a way to escape the devil’s snares. Since we understand demonic forces are trying to steer us away from pure devotion to Jesus, we should focus intentionally on following closely after Him. May we pray with the Psalmist: “Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever” (Psalm 73:25–26).

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Identify one person who can be a positive example for you in living a godly life.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal a behavior or attitude that is harming your relationship with God.
- Pray together as a class that your church would be wholly devoted to Jesus, guarding against any form of idolatry.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Idolatry at Mount Sinai.

Exodus 32:1–6, 21–24, 30–35

Tuesday:

Idolatry at Peor.

Numbers 25:1–5

Wednesday:

Idolatrous Prophets Defeated.

1 Kings 18:30–40

Thursday:

The Idol of Human Tradition.

Matthew 15:1–11

Friday:

The Idol of Wealth.

Matthew 19:16–30

Saturday:

The Cure for Idolatry.

Colossians 3:1–7