

Prayers

Opening prayer

It is our duty and our delight, Lord Jesus, to worship You throughout our day. As we do this, give us such a deep and abiding sense of Your presence, that we fear no evil and receive the encouragement of Your Holy Spirit, and come to know the full extent of Your caring of love in even the darkest of hours. May we know the joy of victorious living and the freedom of Your peace, through Your name and by Your saving power, Lord Jesus; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Write down a list of the major events that have shaped your life in the past five years, for good or ill. Pray about each one of them, asking that you might gain a godly perspective on all these things.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian youth camps.** Pray for young people who are attending Christian camps, especially those who are do this for the first time. Pray that they will be responsive to the message of Christ's love, and come to faith
- Give thanks to God for your food and drink, and say a special prayer of grace today at the meal table, giving considered thanks to God for His provision, and also calling for God's blessing on the food.
- Pray for the USA and for the success of the efforts made to stabilise the financial base of its economy. Pray that political leaders will be responsive to the real needs of people both in the USA and throughout the world, because of the international importance of the dollar

Meditation

Who will put faith into action without reserve?

Who will work to understand the Word of God?

Who will walk the path of disciplined discipleship?

Who will grasp the Saviour's vision of His Kingdom?

Who will feed whoever is hungry and serve the poor?

Who will worship the Lord at all times, in spirit and truth?

Who will bear witness to the Lord God before all nations?

Who will dare preach a message of faith to a doubting world?

Who will learn lessons from the past and do what is right now?

Who will leave no stone unturned in the quest to do what is right?

Only those who will abandon all things to gain the truth in Christ.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

¹⁴ Consequently, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak to you as sensible people; judge for yourselves what I mean.

¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing of the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf of bread, though many people, we are one body, and so we all take our share of the one loaf of bread.

¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel in a worldly sense; do not those who eat the sacrifices take part in what has been done on the altar? ¹⁹ What therefore do I mean? That food sacrificed to an idol has some meaning, or that an idol means anything?

²⁰ On the contrary, what they sacrifice is offered to demons not to God, and I do not want you to have a share in demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons, and you cannot share the Lord's meal and the meal of demons. ²² Are we trying to make the Lord jealous? Are we more important than He?

Review

This is a powerful and fascinating passage of scripture, which catches our attention dramatically in verses 16 and 17, which appear to describe the 'Lord's Supper'. Paul says much more about this in chapter 11, so why does he mention it here? He begins with a warning against idolatry (10:14), goes on to consider what it means to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols (10:18,19), and comes to an end with a dire warning about sacrifices to demons (10:20-22)! What are we to make of all this?

We must firstly be careful, because this passage is not really about the subject of eating meat offered to idols, which is covered earlier in Paul's letter (chapter 8). When Paul mentions eating meat offered to idols in this passage, he does so as part of a wider discussion; but what indeed is his subject matter here? The answer is found at the beginning, where Paul warns the Corinthians to be *'free from idolatry'* (10:14). Idolatry is the worship of false gods, so it seems that Paul had been told that some of the Corinthians were not only worshipping God within the church fellowship, they were also offering worship to idols.

How was it possible? It is difficult for us to know, but it is possible that some Christians joined in such practices for the sake of maintaining social contacts and status. We can imagine their argument. If 'other gods' did not exist, then surely no harm was done by worshipping them for social reasons? Literature from the first century occasionally suggests that such things did indeed happen. So the Corinthians had succumbed to the old sins of Israel, who in times past worshipped not only the God of their forefathers, but also the Ba'als (as in the days of Elijah - see. 1 Kings 19,20).

All this now makes our passage clearer. To begin with, Paul addresses the problem head-on and challenges the Corinthian Christians to get rid of any idolatry in their midst (10:40). But before saying more about this, he draws their attention to the true worship of God's people, as practiced in the 'Lord's Supper'. To do this, he uses words that remind us of Jesus' own on the night before He died; Jesus said,

'Jesus took a loaf, and after blessing it he broke it and said, "Take, eat, this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it all of you this is my blood of the covenant ..." (Matt 26:26,27)

But in Paul's letter, these words have become something more like a liturgy for use by early Christians in their regular services;

'the cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?' (11:16,17),

Nevertheless, Paul says these words here to remind the Corinthians of the true worship of their God, and the fact that he said this is of great importance to all who have read the letter since. Verses 16 and 17 are a remarkable testimony to the fact that the Lord's Supper has been central to Christian worship from the earliest of days.

Now, in contrast to this true worship, Paul turns to the awful truth about what was happening at Corinth. To begin with, he continues his previous theme of using examples from the stories of Israel. Remember, his aim is to rebuke Christians who were taking part in pagan sacrificial rituals. He makes the point that sacrificial practice required priest and/or worshippers to eat some of the sacrificial food and in this way receive the benefits of the sacrifice. He shudders to think what this means to those who eat meat sacrificed to idols!

But Paul is not going to be drawn into saying that pagan sacrifices have any real meaning (10:19). Rather, he suddenly launches a new accusation, saying that those who treat pagan sacrifice casually should beware. Playing about with pagan sacrifice is equivalent to worshipping demons! It is a stunning suggestion, and Paul's final logic is straightforward enough. The Christian cannot pretend to worship both God and idol; the two are incompatible, it is the temptation of demons opposed to God. Paul's final comment in verse 22 castigates those who might think they draw out the grace of God by making Him jealous through their sin. How dare God's people seek to manipulate His awesome power (10:22)!

All in all, therefore, this reading is a call to all Christians to turn away from idolatry and offer exclusive and pure worship to God. It contains a strong hint that the primary way to do this is to celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the meal we call the 'Lord's Supper'.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Consequently, my dear friends ... (10:14,15)
- Worship and communion (10:16,17)
- Eating, sharing, and idols (10:18,19)
- Sharing God and demons? (10:20-22)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V14 'My dear friends'

Here, Paul departs from his usual manner of greeting, which is 'fellow believers' (Greek, 'adelphos'). He uses the Greek word 'agapetos' meaning 'those who are loved'. Old English versions use the word 'beloved' here, but the usual term for endearment here is probably 'dear friends'.

V16 'the cup of blessing that we bless'

The word 'blessing' is important. It comes from the Greek 'eulogia', which means 'blessing, 'praise', 'participation', or 'consecration'. Undoubtedly, Paul is speaking about the sharing of the cup of wine at communion, but the range of meaning of the word adds greatly to our understanding of 'blessing'.

V16 'is it not a sharing of the blood of Christ'

The word 'sharing' comes from the Greek 'koinonia', which is traditionally translated 'sharing', and this is indeed the best translation. However, it also means, 'fellowship', 'participation', or 'contribution'; everything that makes for 'togetherness' in Christ. Secondly, you may be familiar with classic church liturgies that speak of 'sharing in the blood ...', but I have translated 'sharing of the blood...'. I can assure you that 'of' is the correct translation here.

V17 'Because there is one loaf of bread ...'

I use the phrase 'loaf of bread' to translate the Greek word 'artos' meaning 'bread' in the same sense we use the word today, meaning anything from food in general, to a loaf or a piece of bread. Although some may feel it interrupts the flow to say so, Paul clearly means a 'loaf of bread' here, and it is worth saying so to prevent people thinking that this important Scripture says anything else.

V18 'Consider the worldly people of Israel.'

If you compare this with many other translations, you will find that many say '*consider the people of Israel*'. Now, the Greek means literally, '*consider Israel according to the flesh*'. Paul asks us to reflect on Israel as the worldly people of God, meaning the Jewish people, and not the spiritual people of God, who are the Church. I have added 'worldly' to make this clear.

V18 'take part in what has been done on the altar'.

A strict translation would give '*take part in the altar*', or '*share in the altar*'. I have added the words '*what has been done*' to help sentence make sense. We need to know that when people said '*take part in the altar*' in Paul's day, they meant being included in the benefits of the sacrifice, and this translation helps us understand this.

V21 'you cannot share the Lord's meal'

In this phrase, the Greek word 'trapedsa' is used. This means, 'table' but in the sense of a table spread out and prepared for a meal. It would be used to describe a banquet spread, for example. In our context, it is best to call it a 'meal'.

V22 'Are we more important than He?'

The Greek negative used here implies a negative answer to the question. You will find that many Bible versions have 'are we stronger than He?' This translation is close to the text, but it does not help us understand what Paul meant here. The Greek word 'ischuroteroi' is used frequently in the Bible to speak of God's authority and holiness, so I feel that it best to translate 'are we more important than He?' which gets closer to the heart of what Paul meant. He was challenging the Corinthian's sense of personal status and importance.

Consequently, my dear friends ... (10:14,15)

Paul is very concerned about the lifestyle of the Corinthians, and following his warnings in the early part of the chapter, his first appeal to them in order to get right with God is to 'flee from idolatry' (10:14). Paul upholds absolutely that there is only one God, but the evidence is that what people put in place of God are dangerous, and they should be avoided. A famous passage of Deuteronomy is this, and it lies behind much of what is said in this passage:

¹⁵ Jacob ate his fill; Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked. You grew fat, bloated, and gorged! He abandoned God who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. ¹⁶ They made him jealous with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him. ¹⁷ They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared. ¹⁸ You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. (Deuteronomy 32:15-18)

This text was Moses' warning to God's people about the dangers of 'growing fat' with what they had been given by God, meaning that they had become self content with the benefits of God's grace, and their relationship with Almighty God was impaired. Even as we read this, the connections with our passage jump out at us, and Paul clearly had it in mind. Indeed, it is reckoned that it was a well known passage in the days of the early church.

Paul's comment about 'fleeing' from idolatry is more than a suggestion, and it means more than just avoidance. The tense of the verb here indicates that this should be a matter of habit and constant practice. In other words, all Christians should keep the dangers of idolatry constantly in mind and actively seek to get away from it. Paul's next comment, 'I speak to you as sensible people; judge for yourselves what I mean' is surely his appeal to the Corinthians to act on this advice. If they have not realised what he means by idolatry after his warning in 10:1-13, then something was wrong.

Worship and communion (10:16,17)

Dramatically, Paul used words that people of his day understood perfectly. 'The cup of blessing that we bless' was, by itself, not necessarily a Christian comment. It was common in those days for all meals to be eaten in dedication to the god in whom a group of people or a family believed. In the same way that Christians say grace before a meal today, people then would raise a cup at the end of a meal as a form of 'toast' to the relevant god. In Jewish circles, things were different. Meals usually commenced with a dedication to God by the breaking of bread, as Jesus did, not just at the last supper (Mark 14:12f.), but whenever they ate together (see Matt 14:19, 15:36). In addition, at the Jewish Passover meal, cups were raised to celebrate liberation and deliverance, particularly the third cup of what is now regarded as the standard Jewish Passover 'Seder' (that is, the 'form of words'), though this standard was established well after the first century, so we should not stretch this connection too far.

With all this in mind, what was Paul saying in verses 16 and 17? Firstly, by referring to the sharing of the cup, Paul was commenting on the manner in which the Corinthians celebrated what we call 'communion'. This much is obvious to us, but the interesting thing is that Paul mentioned the cup before the sharing of the bread! Note, that when Paul tells the Corinthians how they should celebrate communion in 11:22f., he tells them to break the bread first and share the cup second, and this how we do it today. So Paul was probably saying to the Corinthians 'you have this the wrong way round, and by copying the world's way of offering a cup of blessing first, you have forgotten the heritage of faith.' Now we might think of this is a small point, but for Paul it was not, as we now begin to see.

Paul then added the part we are familiar with as the first act of communion (not the second), which is the 'sharing of the body'; moreover, he emphasised this in verse 17, explaining that the sharing of the bread was a symbol of the unity of all God's people in Christ. The only way to explain verse 17 is to say that it is the most powerful expression of Christian unity possible. The loaf of bread is Christ, and as we all eat the meal together, we express not simply our own personal faith, but our dependence upon the whole loaf; that is, the body which is Christ! In addition, the sharing 'of' the body emphasises that God's people share Christ, they do not contribute 'into' Christ, as might be implied by the oft used expression 'sharing in the body of Christ'. This of course was exactly the problem at Corinth. People thought they brought something to God by bringing themselves and were content at that; they were not at one with each other, and they did not appreciate that they desperately needed the gifts of love, forgiveness and unity within their worship. As we will discover in coming chapters, their communion services were occasions of division, not unity, and for Paul this was a scandal!

For Paul, the words here were very meaningful. 'Blessing' means everything we mean by worship, the Greek word conveying a sense of genuine participation and contact between God and humanity (see notes above). It also conveys a sense of the holiness of God who blesses His people, and the holiness of the people of God whose job is to bless the world. The word for 'sharing' is 'koinonia', a word meaning

fellowship, participation and togetherness that for Paul, expressed everything that a church should be. It was God's gift of togetherness, and it deeply troubled him that this was not found in Corinth where there was much division and strife. In addition, the words 'body' and 'blood' signified the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the one thing that bound all Christians together (we will study them in more depth when we look at 1 Cor 11:22f.)

Eating, sharing, and idols (10:18,19)

Having made various points about worship and the way that it reflected the state of the church at Corinth, Paul continued with an example taken from the Jewish practice of sacrificial worship. It is fascinating that Paul distanced himself personally from sacrificial worship by describing it as something done by the 'worldly people of Israel' (see notes above), and not done by the church; but it served its purpose. The sacrifice Paul described was the 'fellowship offering' (Lev 3f.), and not a 'whole burnt offering' (Lev 1) used only rarely. In the normal 'fellowship offering', the priests who performed the sacrifice had some of the meat, but most of it was given back to those who had brought the animal, so that it could be shared in a meal. In this sense, those who ate the food 'participated' in the sacrifice. His point was that all those who took part in the celebration of the communion and the eating of the bread were connected spiritually to Christ, who died as a sacrifice for their sins. In his illustration, the altar is not the 'table' on which the communion meal was spread out, but the Cross at Calvary!

Now, if taking part in the sacrifice had such rich meaning for Christians and their worship, what did it say about idols? The Corinthians still wanted an answer to their question about whether food sacrificed to idols had some meaning, or whether it should be ignored. It is possible that Paul felt in danger of being misunderstood here, and his comment in verse 19, 'what therefore do I mean? That food sacrificed to an idol has some meaning?' sounds rather abrupt. What Paul wanted to point out was that whilst there was only one God, idols did have some meaning because they were a real distraction from God.

Sharing God and demons? (10:20-22)

Paul perceived that the Corinthians' worship did not reflect a sacrifice to God, but a sacrifice to other idols of selfishness, greed, and all the other sins that he had identified in the letter, and in verse 20, he described their worship as corrupt, saying, 'what they sacrifice is offered to demons and not to God ...' (10:20)! He was incensed that the Corinthian Christians were coming to church and celebrating the communion by breaking bread and sharing the cup of blessing, but at the same time, they harboured all their sins. He said, in effect, 'you can't do this!' and in a sentence which echoes Jesus teaching about not coming to the altar before one has been reconciled to a brother or sister (Matt 5:23f.), Paul said 'you cannot share the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons' (10:21). This powerful text should never be ignored. The Corinthians had fallen into the trap of compartmentalising their lives, holding on to grievances and anger whilst coming to share in the worship of God, including the Lord's Supper, or the communion. Paul's words suggest that under such circumstances, such demons control people and the church! This point is not to be ignored, and we should consider this carefully.

His last sentence is not easy for us to understand. However, it is like an appeal to the Corinthians to understand what was going on in their midst. Harking back to Moses famous speech in Deuteronomy, he asked, was there indeed such evidence of evil within the church at Corinth, or any sign that what Moses first warned the people of Israel about centuries before now affected the church? We do not pick up this nuance because we are not so familiar with this scripture from Deuteronomy, but in asking the question, he called on the Corinthians to examine themselves. They could not stand above God or outside His authority and strength. Surely they understood this?

Discipleship

Application

There is much more to come, and although this passage only begins to touch the surface of important matters such as the 'cup of blessing' and 'sharing of the body of Christ', what it does say is powerful and significant.

The first major point we can take is that we each have a duty to avoid idolatry. This does not mean having debates about it and trying to find out what idolatry is, it means actively making sure that at every point in our lives, what we do gives honour and glory to Christ alone. I put it this way, because it avoids the complications of trying to decide what a 'god' is. If we focus exclusively on honouring Christ, then all idols will be cast aside. If I allow myself to be drawn into something to the point where I would be embarrassed to talk about Christ or think about Him, or pray, or ask Him what I should be doing; then I am in danger of giving

glory to something other than Him, and guilty of idolatry. For example, I could well idolise myself by trying to please myself, instead of accepting the true peace which comes from doing Christ's will and receiving His reward inwardly. There are many other possible examples, but I leave you to consider them.

The other major point is very similar. None of us can consider allowing our worship to be affected by things that have nothing to do with God. It is hard to speak about this without sounding hard, but we must be clear; all the concerns we have about the structure of our worship, buildings, money, style, music and the rest are secondary to who we are in Christ and our worship of Him. If we think our worship is about these things, then we are lost; and if we fall out about them, all we do is prove that we have departed from the true faith. Even church schemes and programmes can become idolatrous. People are tempted to believe that unless they have followed 'what the pastor has written in his book', or 'what the constitution of the committee says', or some such secondary though possibly important guidance, then they have missed the mark. This is not true; we only miss the mark if we do not honour Christ. Unless Christ is clearly and demonstrably honoured and given the highest priority, then we will make these things into gods, and this is incompatible with faith. I speak strongly about this, but there is no option. Christ is our 'all in all', and everything we do flows from Him.

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage of Scripture teach us about the true worship of God in the life of the church today?
2. What does the 'sharing of the body of Christ' mean to you? What does the Lord's Supper mean to you? Is this the pinnacle of worship for you?
3. What idols are actively drawing people away from worshipping the one true God in our world today? What can be done about this? How can the demons be evicted?

Discipleship challenges

- *Ask yourself one of the questions above in the list of questions for group use. Use it as a starting point for a period of self examination. Please remember that the comments I make in this section are suggestions about how you can take topics from the text and use them to explore your own discipleship. You must use them as the Lord leads you.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to do anything other than get very defensive about how they worship God, and pray that your own church fellowship will receive the gift of tolerance, forgiveness, and understanding.*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, thank You for the privilege of worshipping You. May we never sin by allowing ourselves to become idolatrous, perhaps by giving other things greater importance than we give to You. Rid us of idolatry and chase the demons out of our lives we pray: AMEN
