



Bible Study

August 10, 2016

I Corinthians 10:12-22

Matthew 16:20-24

I Corinthians 10:12-22 (NKJV) -

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. 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. Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 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. 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?

Matthew 16:20-24 (NKJV) - Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ. From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

Commentary -

In the Roman world into which the Gospel came, the city was a community in a holistic sense. All of the residents of a city were a family (figuratively and over time, through intermarriage, sometimes literally). The city's governors were fathers to the citizens, and there was no concept of separation of religion from politics, and so the god or gods of the city were also seen to be part of the community. These Roman cities then had a strict social structure, with the gods at the top, followed by the rulers, then the wealthy citizens, the poor citizens, and finally the non-citizens at the bottom. While

the non-citizens and the rest of the lower strata had no real legal protections or rights, they were still commonly seen as a part of the city, and it was a mark of honor for the higher classes to act as patrons to them, to provide public spectacles in the form of theater and games, to make sure they had bread to eat, etc. Though the lowest part of the family, they were still family.

This unity of the city found its truest expression in a cycle of public feasts, some celebrated throughout the Roman Empire, some specific to specific cities. At these great feasts, extra sacrifices were offered to the gods to please and appease them, and public feasts were held to which everyone was invited, though, of course, the lower classes ate last. This community, so manifest at the local level, was a basic building block of the unity of the entire Roman Empire, and the cornerstone of its peace and prosperity. It represented the core of the Roman way of life.

As mentioned, however, a central part of these feasts in particular, and of Roman life in general, was sacrifice to the gods. Sacrifice always involved a meal. In Greco-Roman sacrificial rites, there were three separate moments. The first, of course, was the killing of the animal, after a procession, at which point the animal's blood would be drained, and offered to the spirits of the dead, usually a local hero of the past, as they believed that blood granted life and would keep a shade alive in Hades. After this, the slaughtered animal was taken to a place called the prothesis, where it was butchered. The parts which were to be offered to the god or gods were separated out, as well as the portions that would be eaten by the priests, the portions that would be eaten by those offering the sacrifice, and the remainder would be sold in the city's meat markets or given freely at the festivals. Finally, the portions offered to the gods were burned, and the rest was taken to be eaten. Through the sharing of a sacred meal with the gods, pagans believed that they became like them. So one sacrificed to Venus to gain beauty or love, to Jupiter for power, to Pluto for money or to stave off death, and the like. By eating this meal together, the community entered into communion with these spiritual powers.

As St. Paul traveled through the Empire, he proclaimed the victory of Christ over the power of sin and death, and he established Eucharistic communities. Unlike Roman communities and the community around the temple in Judea, these Christian communities offered no animal sacrifices. This is because, as we see in today's reading from St. Matthew, Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for the life of the world and for its salvation. From St. Peter's perspective in this reading, he is concerned that Christ will be the victim of violence. Christ however makes it clear that He enters into His death willingly and knowingly. Thus, He is not a victim, like Abel, whose blood demands vengeance. Rather, He laid His Life down and then took it back up, offering Himself to the Father on our behalf, thereby taking the evil and the hatred directed at Him by the world, meant for evil, and transforming it into blessings and salvation for the whole Creation.

Christ's sacrifice is unique and perfect, and never to be repeated. And so, Christians do not offer bloody sacrifices. Rather, death having been overcome once and for all, only the second two moments of sacrifice remain, and became the basis of the Christian Liturgy, in which the Risen Christ is offered for the people, and the people of God enter into communion with Him by eating the flesh of the sacrifice, and drink the Life of Christ unto Life Eternal. By establishing these Eucharistic communities, St. Paul set up parallel communities in cities around the Mediterranean to the general Roman pagan community. He spends much of his Epistle to the Galatians arguing that these communities must be one, whether composed of Jew or Gentile, and regardless of the social classes involved.

In today's reading from the Apostle's First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul is focusing on something else. Many of the new Gentile members of the Christian community in Corinth, in addition to participating in the Liturgy and being a part of the Christian community, are still attempting to be participants in the life of the larger community of the city. They were essentially treating Christ as another, extra god to add to their list of feasts and celebrations. What St. Paul points out, however, is that their participation in these feasts and in the pagan community is participation in idolatry and therefore the worship of demons. It is seeking to commune with spiritual powers who are opposed to

God. One cannot be in communion with Christ on one hand and with the demons on the other. The two are incompatible. Christians, for St. Paul, must be a separate community, a separate family, God's family, apart from the communities of this world, which are perishing with us. This separation, this difference, is holiness, and it is something that St. Paul seeks to maintain, although in a different way than most of his Judean opponents.

For most of the Judeans, their holiness, their status as separate from the pagan communities of the Roman world, was based on their participation in Torah, and the keeping of its regulations. Holiness, they believed, was the product of external obedience. What St. Paul argues, to the contrary, is that true Holiness comes not through being set apart by different customs or habits, but through the transformation of the human person. For St. Paul, those who follow idols, be they beauty, wealth, power, or whatever else, become like them, deaf, dumb, blind, and ultimately dead. Those however who live in communion with Christ in His Body become like Him, offering themselves as living sacrifices to the God who created them and loved them enough to sacrifice Himself for them. To become holy is to commend one's self, each other, and one's whole life unto Christ, as have all the saints (literally 'holy ones').

The Church, beginning with the churches established by the Apostles, is Holy, and stands apart from this world, its gods, and its way of life. She offers to everyone another Way, and another sort of communion with one another, that crosses all social and cultural barriers, and with God Himself, the Creator of all things. Like Christ, Her Head, the Church, His Body, offers herself as a sacrifice to God in an act of love, seeking nothing for Herself, but receiving everything in return. We have been given the privilege as human persons to sit down at table with one another and with God our Father as a family held together by the Love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let none of us ever forsake this unspeakably beautiful gift in favor of the love of the things of this world which are here today and gone tomorrow, and which are powerless to save.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) St. Paul speaks to us today and tells us that we cannot participate in the fellowship of this world, or chase after the gods it worships, and also partake of Christ. Is there anything else in this world that you're trying to pursue alongside Christ? Though we don't necessarily make statues of them, our culture worships gods of money, of sexuality, of success, of power, of youth, of beauty, and a thousand other false idols. As our Lord said, a man cannot serve two masters.
- 2) How do you look at your Church community? Is the Church community truly your community and your family, or is it a place you attend like a movie theater or a concert? Is the Church your home, and you venture out into the world each day, or is the world your home, and you occasionally visit the Church? Do you embrace all of the members of the community as your family in Christ? Do you 'keep to your own' in terms of family or ethnicity or social status, thereby causing divisions in the community? Only when the community truly is in communion with one another will they also truly be in communion with Christ. If you allow anything to alienate or divide you from even the least member of your Church, you alienate and divide yourself from Christ.
- 3) We as Christians are called to become like Christ in His Love. Christ's Love is, by nature, self-sacrificial. Do you willingly give up the things that you desire in favor of the happiness and well-being of others? When you give, do you 'give until it hurts', meaning that you actually have to give up some of the things you want in order to give, or do you satisfy yourself first, and then give from the leftovers? Do you try to get your own way? How do you react when you don't? Do you worry that if you don't make sure that all of your needs are met yourself that God won't care for you?

Questions or Comments? FrStephen@stgeorgecharleston.org

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