



## Free to Serve

1 Corinthians 10:1-22

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September 20, 2009 – Trinity 15

There are lots of things we struggle with in the Christian life, but as I've walked with Jesus myself and as I've talked with fellow brothers and sisters over the years, the thing that keeps cropping up over and over again and that seems to me to be the single greatest struggle is the balance between the extremes of legalism and license. I think it's fair to say we've all strayed off the road at times and I also think it's fair to say that at different times we've all fallen into the ditches on both sides of the road. For those of us who identify as "Conservatives" we're probably more likely to be so often thinking of sin and recalling to mind all the Bible's lists of do's and don'ts that we fall into the trap of thinking that we can earn God's favour by "keeping the rules". The biggest danger in that is if we don't manage to get back on the road – if we keep walking in the ditch of legalism – we inevitably become self-righteous as we compare ourselves to others and to our own lists. The cross falls out of our vision and the witness and ministry of the Church withers and dies. But we can run off the other side of the road too. Like the Corinthians we can remember that because Christ died for us, we are free from the condemnation of the Law and in that knowledge we can start asserting our rights and our freedoms to the point that we forget what it means to walk in love and to live as new creations. Instead we simply insist on asserting our freedom and we end up just like the world around us – and again destroy our witness and ministry. But whichever ditch we might fall into, the reason is that we've lost sight of the cross. When we start trying to earn God's favour it's because we've lost sight of the fact that Jesus, on the cross, has already earned God's favour for us. And when we fall into license because we know we don't have to earn it, we're forgetting the high cost of our freedom – we're forgetting that to pay the penalty for our sins, God himself had to come to earth and die in our place. When we fall into license we forget the price God paid for

our freedom, when in fact, that high price should motivate us to serve him, to do what we know to be pleasing to him – ultimately to be supremely loyal to our redeemer – all out of gratitude. Legalism and license – they're both the result of losing sight of the cross.

At the end of Chapter 9, Paul gave the familiar illustration of the runner and the boxer and how if they don't commit themselves to training and if they don't keep the prize in view, they'll end up disqualified. It's an illustration of the Christian life. We need to walk with the cross in view. If we do that, we'll stay on the road and out of the ditch. The Corinthians were in the ditch of license. They were asserting their freedoms, but in doing that they were failing to be new creations. They were failing to live in love and the other fruit of the Spirit and most importantly they were being disloyal to their Redeemer – being spiritual ingrates – and Paul warns them that if they keep walking in the ditch and don't get back on the road they're going to be disqualified.

In Chapter 10 Paul gets back to the problem of the Corinthians taking part in festivals at the pagan temples. They need to be pulled out of the ditch of license. They need to get their focus back on the cross. So here Paul takes them back to the Old Testament and draws some parallels from the Israelites when God had rescued them from Egypt and was caring for them in the wilderness and leading them to the Promised Land. Look at verses 1 to 5:

**For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.** (1 Corinthians 10:1-5)

Lest we think that we can never miss out on the prize, Paul reminds us of the Israelites and shows us how what God did for them prefigured what he's done for us. They were slaves to the Egyptians, but through the shedding of blood he rescued them from bondage. He led them through the water of the Red Sea unharmed – he "baptised" them and led them into a new life. He met them in the wilderness and

sustained them with manna and with water from the rock and he was present with them day and night in the cloud and the pillar of fire. Now consider what he's done for us. Each of us was in slavery to sin. Through the shed blood of his Son, he has rescued us and purchased our freedom. He has led us into new life in the Spirit through the water of Baptism, and as he leads us through this wilderness, he indwells us by his Spirit. He offers us bread and wine at his Table as outward signs and seals of the sustenance he gives us as his Spirit grafts us into Jesus Christ and gives us new life. He graciously provided for the Israelites and he graciously provides for us. He loves his people.

Now consider how many of them he led out of Egypt: six-hundred thousand men. If you add women and children, you've got more than two million people. God took all of those people out of bondage and provided for them in the wilderness, always leading the way before them. And yet how many of those 600,000 men actually entered into the Promised Land? Two. Joshua and Caleb. They were the only ones. The rest died in the wilderness – even Moses and Aaron. They were all, to use Paul's word from 9:27, "disqualified". They lost out on the prize. Why? Paul goes on in verses 6-13:

**Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.**

When God tells us he's giving us an example so that we don't have to learn the hard way, we need to sit up and listen. Paul gives four examples here:

**Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play."**

Paul quotes directly from Exodus 32:6 – from the account of the gold calf. Remember that while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the people were afraid. Moses was gone for so long up in the thunder and lightning on the mountain they thought he was dead, so they got Aaron to collect all their gold, melt it down, and make a gold calf for them to worship. Paul could have quoted something about the calf or about how they sacrificed offerings to it. The Exodus passage specifically mentions those things, but instead Paul specifically

quotes how Exodus tell us they sat down to feast around the idol they had made and he reminds us that that's a prime example of idolatry. He's specific in how he brings it up because he's taking us back to the problem in Corinth. The people want to go to feasts in the pagan temples. They claim that it's not idolatry and so Paul takes them back to our own spiritual ancestors who did just this – who took part in a great pagan feast – and were condemned – were disqualified – because it was idolatry. Then the second example:

**We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.**

Now he uses an example from Numbers 25. Sexual immorality is bad enough, but in this case he's tying it to idolatry and pagan worship. Most of the time those feasts in the temples weren't restricted to eating. Lots of those pagan gods, like Aphrodite, were fertility gods. We've talked before about how sex and prostitution were major parts of her worship. That stuff was going on too and we know from Paul's warnings earlier in the book that the Corinthians were involved in all of this. It wasn't *just* eating in the temples. And so Paul reminds them just how much God detests idolatrous sexual immorality by reminding them how the Israelites took up with the Moabites and started worshipping Baal and engaging in the Canaanite fertility rites. God took it seriously enough that he sent a plague on his people and that plague didn't end until the ring-leaders in this idolatry were hanged and until Phineas, Aaron's grandson, caught one of the men having sex with one of the Moabite priestesses, took a spear, and ran them through.

We might think that's brutal and bloody, but it's God's reminder to us of just how serious idolatry is. Now example three:

**We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents...**

Remember how the Israelites grumbled against God and against Moses because they were sick of eating manna – they were ungrateful for the miraculous sustenance God offered them. Again, God sent a plague – this time poisonous snakes. Paul compares what the Corinthians are

doing with the Israelites' testing God in the wilderness – to their arousing the Lord to jealousy. The Corinthians are doing just that when they try to eat at *both* the Table of Jesus Christ and at the Table of a false pagan god. Finally:

**...nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.**

Paul really drives it home here. He's referring back to the revolt of the people against Moses in Numbers 14. When they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land, spies were sent to scope out the lay of the land. When the people heard the report about how powerful the Canaanites were, they threw a fit because they were sure the Canaanites would kill them. They said they'd wished they'd stayed in Egypt and they denounced Moses, God's chosen leader and spokesman. And the result of their lack of faith and their grumbling against God was God's announcement that they were going to spend forty years wandering in the wilderness until everyone had died except for Joshua and Caleb and the children. If the over a million people, Joshua and Caleb were the only ones who hadn't lost faith and who hadn't turned traitor on God, and so they were the only one who would enter the Promised Land – who would receive the prize. Paul compares the Israelites' grumbling to the Corinthians' rejection of his own apostolic authority when he tried to tell them not to involve themselves in these idolatrous activities. He goes on:

**Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.**

The Corinthians *knew* they were free in Christ. They were standing tall in that freedom, and yet Paul says, "Don't deceive yourselves. Your sin and especially your idolatry show that you're standing on the wrong thing. Your forgetting just how much it cost God to purchase your freedom and by your idolatry you're showing a lack of gratitude – and look where a lack of gratitude got the Israelites: a forty-year-long trail of dead bodies through the wilderness right up to the doorstep of the promised land.

Why? Because they were unfaithful and because they fell into idolatry."

The Corinthians were putting themselves in danger of the same punishment – of being disqualified from the prize. And yet Paul exhorts them in verse 13 with those words that are familiar to us:

**No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.**

When we face temptation, Paul says, there are three things to remember. First, there's nothing any one of us experiences that all the rest of us don't. This is one reason why God calls us to come together and to exhort each other. When temptation hits us, we're so often prone to thinking that it's somehow "just me". And then we tend to hide it from everybody else with the end result that each of us thinks that what we're facing is unique to us and we think we're going it alone. We need to share in each other's trials and tribulations. Second, when temptation comes we need to remember that it's controlled. God is faithful and he won't allow any of us to be tested beyond what we can handle. The problem is that we often try to face those temptations on our own strength. That's when we fail. Remember that he's filled you with his Spirit and that it's as we each learn to rely on the Spirit's power and not our own that we have the strength to overcome. When God turns up the pressure, it's because he wants us to learn to lean all the harder on him. And third, he never leaves us without an escape. That goes without saying when you consider that he's already empowered us with his Spirit. If we face temptations with the flesh we can often feel like we're boxed into a room with no way out, and yet if we live in the Spirit those walls fall away. And so for just that reason he says to the Corinthians in verse 14:

**Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.**

You have no reason to fall into sin. Don't tempt God. Don't give him reason to be jealous of you, his beloved for whom he gave his own Son to die. None of us has

any reason to flirt with idolatry. Why court temptation? Why tempt yourself to fall into that which will disqualify you? But there's even more to it than that. He goes on in verse 15:

**I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.**

Paul reminds us of what it means when we come to the feast that Jesus offers us at his Table. Paul uses the "body" metaphor. Jesus is the head and as we find new life in him the Spirit grafts us into his body. As Paul will say in Chapter 12, some of us are feet and hands, some are eyes and ears – we're all different parts – but at the same time we are all one in him. Just like a donor organ is grafted into a physical body, Jesus takes us, a bunch of hands and feet and eyes and ears and makes us part of himself. His blood flows into us and gives us life. Our connectedness with his flesh gives us new functionality. What he invites us to at his Table is no mere meal; it's the outward sign and seal of our very life in him. And Paul reminds us: it's always been that way with God's people.

**Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?**

God invited them just like he invites us and through our participation we are united with him. Now consider what that means for the Corinthians eating at pagan altars. Paul says in verses 19-22:

**What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.**

To eat in the pagan temples was to accept an invitation from a pagan god. It's not that different from God's invitation to us to eat at his Table. Again, Paul draws on the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 32 Moses describes the false gods with whom Israel fraternised as demonic powers. So while that pagan god might not be real, the

power behind it and the power it exerts on the people there is demonic. So Paul says:

**I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?**

There's the bottom line: when you consider what God has done for us, what business do you have courting with demons? While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us! While we were the enemies of our Creator, he continued to love us even though the only way for him to overcome the heinousness of our sins against him was to send his only Son to die and to suffer the penalty we deserve. How can we hear and understand the significance of the Gospel message and then say, as the Corinthians did, "Through Christ I'm *free* to go back to the gods and demons I used to worship – to sit and share a meal with their idols and their priests and followers...and maybe even indulge in a little sexual partying afterward."

Here in Canada, I doubt that any of us are tempted to take part in feasts to pagan gods, and yet idolatry is more than just the worship of another god. Idolatry is what happens whenever we compromise our loyalty to the God who purchased our redemption with his own Son. We no longer stand condemned by the Law, but that Law still shows us what it is that's pleasing to God and what it means to be loyal to him. And how can we ever consider the costliness of our rescue from the bondage of sin and death and fail to be loyal to God?

We can never earn our salvation or earn God's favour, and yet our love for him and our knowledge of how merciful and gracious he has been to us ought to motivate us to a *radical obedience* – not because it'll get us brownie points, but because we seek to be loyal and because we're grateful for what God has done. We come each week and are reminded here at the Table that we are members of the Body of Christ. How then can we leave this place and go back to a life where we make everything else a priority before God? It might not be making a sacrifice before a false god, but it's still idolatry.

Sin, no matter what the specific form, is always at heart a rejection of God's plan for us and a substituting of our own – treason against our Creation and Redeemer. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: you can't serve God *and* mammon – or for that matter demons, whatever form they might take in our modern world. Knowing the grace and mercy and love of God, how can we be anything but totally loyal to him? And yet we still sometimes fall into treason against our Lord. His invitation to us to come and partake of his Table and to partake of the benefits of grace and freedom never give us license for religious and moral licentiousness. No, instead, what it really does is bind us together – all of us – in a common fellowship in, with, through, and around Jesus Christ and his new covenant in such a way that our behaviour – what we do and how we live – is radicalised toward what in the last chapter Paul called "the law of Christ" – toward a radical obedience driven by a profound love for God – a love that itself is rooted in gratitude for just how much he has done for us.

Please pray with me: Father, we ask your forgiveness for the many times that we've taken our eyes off the cross and have forgotten the price you paid for our redemption. Keep our eyes on the cross, we pray, that we might always remember what you have done for us and be motivated in all things to exercise our freedom in order to show our love for you and our gratitude for your grace and mercy and that we would hold the cross of Christ above all other things. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.