

## In Whom Shall We Participate?

1 Corinthians 10:17-22

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We often face a difficult question in life: with whom shall we associate? There is a lot of sloppy thinking on this question. Some people think that even talking with a drug addict or a prostitute would be sinful in and of itself. Other people think that we need to make child molesters our closest friends, even if we have small children of our own. Surely both positions are wrong, are they not? When it comes to people, the Bible has a balanced perspective. Our closest friends should be those people who will help us most in our progress in holiness and godliness. On the other hand, we cannot cut ourselves off from the world, such that we never have any interaction at all with unbelievers. It is wise for us to know whether we are in a situation where we might very well fall back into the patterns of sin that we were supposed to leave behind, or whether we have a genuine witnessing opportunity. These are not always easy questions to answer. We have to take into account our own sins and weaknesses, so that we will share the gospel, but avoid temptation.

When it comes to spiritual beings, the situation is much clearer and sharper. We are not to have any fellowship with demons whatsoever. Angels will minister to us, and we are to have the closest fellowship possible with our Triune God. The reason why the situation with spiritual beings is so much clearer in regard to fellowship is that we cannot evangelize demons, nor can we help angels in their godliness. Their identity and destiny is much clearer to us than that of flesh and blood people.

The question of idolatry is the main point of the text in front of us, and what that means for our fellowship. With whom shall we participate or have fellowship? In order to understand what Paul is getting at, we have to go back a little in the letter to chapter 8:4-6:

Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

Idols do not actually exist. When ancient Canaanites worshiped Baal, that Baal did not actually exist. There is no being who exists who is called "Baal." That is what Paul is getting at here in chapter 8. All the idols that ancient people worshiped never did exist. In this way our idols of today are different, in that they do actually exist, but are not God. Money, power, pleasure, and self do actually exist, but should not be made into objects of worship.

So what is actually happening when people worship idols? How can we worship something that does not exist? To answer that question, we must go back to chapter 10 and look carefully at what Paul is saying. Paul's argument hinges on the distinction he makes between idols and demons. Idols like Baal, or like the ancient Greek "gods,"

are not real beings. Demons, however, are very, very real. Paul is telling us that when people worship false gods, they are in reality offering worship *to demons*. There is a spiritual reality behind the worship of idols. That spiritual reality is the world of demons. When we worship the idols that our heart manufactures for ourselves, we are actually worshipping demons!

How could we become connected to that world of demons? Paul tells us in verse 18 about an analogy that was true of Israel whenever they offered sacrifices to God. Anyone who eats of the sacrifice is a partaker of the altar. Or, to put it in other words, you become connected to the God to whom you sacrifice, and you become connected by the very means of the sacrifice. So if an ancient Israelite sacrificed one of the meal offerings to God, and ate of that offering, he became connected with God, because of his faith in God to whom he was sacrificing. We must never forget here the all-important element of faith in establishing this connection between us and God. For us, it is Jesus who was offered up in sacrifice, and we eat of that sacrifice (which is no longer a sacrifice, since Christ offered it up once for all), and thus we are connected with our God when we exercise faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The connection between us and God is established by sacrifice. This is true if we are connected by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is also true that a very different relationship results if we are connected by a very twisted kind of faith to the idols of our hearts. What do we sacrifice in order to be connected to our idols? We sacrifice everything good! If we worship the idol of money, then we will sacrifice relationships, including our families, for the benefit of this all-consuming idol. If we worship pleasure, then we will sacrifice the proper forms of pleasure in order to indulge in the improper forms of pleasure. If we worship power, then we will sacrifice anyone who gets in our way of obtaining that power. With all forms of worship there is a sacrifice, and there is a connection established to demons through that sacrifice, Paul is saying.

Only the one true sacrifice of Jesus Christ can break our connection to those idols of the heart, and establish a new connection to Jesus Christ by faith alone. We celebrate that connection in the Lord's Supper. One of Paul's most clearly articulated points in this whole section is that we cannot have two competing connections. We cannot have fellowship with both demons and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says it clearly in verse 21: "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." Where does your heart belong? Who or what has mastered your heart? We are not here talking about the remnants of sin that still often plague the true believer. This clarification, though, should not be used in turn to justify our sin and think that we can simply let it go through without any opposition simply because everyone sins, and because even Christians sin. For that would be the counsel of despair. What we are really talking about is this: what has possession of our hearts? There can be only one master of your soul. Here is another way to ask the question: is there anything in this life that you would not be willing to give up for the sake of Jesus Christ, if He asked you? If there is anything in this life that you love, or any person (most especially including

yourself!) that you love more than Jesus, then that person or that thing is your idol. The table of the Lord is not for anyone whose heart has a different master than Jesus. That does not mean that the table is for perfect people who never struggle with sin. No, the table is for sinners. But it is for *saved* sinners. Saved sinners have one master: and that master is Jesus.

We have said in the past, in the sermon on verse 16, that the cup is a communion in the blood of Christ, and that the bread is a communion in the body of Christ. We participate in Christ Jesus in the Lord's Supper, when we receive this by faith. There is a connection between us and Jesus in the Lord's Supper which the Holy Spirit establishes. He brings us up into heaven itself so that we can feed on Christ. That is the proper kind of fellowship and participation. That is the fellowship and participation that is so sweet, and that Paul wants us to have.

Now, the food is not acting in some kind of magical way. Rather, we are talking about the significance of the act of eating. After all, one could eat a steak in two different places and have it mean two very different things, not because the steak was any different, but because the act of eating it meant something different. If you eat your own steak in your own house for supper, that is one thing. If you eat a steak that has been sacrificed to idols, and you are eating it in front of people who know what you are doing, that is something else. If you eat a steak in the presence of a Hindu person who worships cows and thinks that all eating of beef is strictly forbidden, then your action will mean something still different. It's still a steak. But it means something different in those three situations. And that is what Paul is getting at here. Why are you eating the bread and drinking the cup, and what does it mean? It is not because this wine and this bread are inherently different from other bread and wine you might imbibe. Rather, it is the significance of the act as it comes from faith. And it is the grace that God bestows on the person who partakes in faith.

The last verse is a bit of a puzzle. Why does Paul start talking about jealousy and strength? Jealousy is a bit easier to understand. If we are partaking with idols (which are actually demonic in nature), then we are taking fellowship away from God and giving it to demons. This, as the Old Testament would say over and over and over again, is spiritual adultery. God wants us for Himself, and not for anyone else. His jealousy is a very righteous jealousy.

The question about strength is an ironic, almost sarcastic, question. You see, what was happening was that the people who considered themselves "strong" thought to themselves that they could eat the meat sacrificed to idols even when someone told them what its purpose was. They thought that they could engage in the pagan worship practices and emerge with their faith intact. They thought that they could mix Christianity with something else and be just fine. They were so strong in their own minds that they were actually encroaching on God's territory. So Paul asks them, "Do you really think you are stronger than God Himself?" Do not ever forget that you are human, and a sinful human at that, and that God is higher than we are, and is without sin. We are not stronger than God. In fact, all our actual strength comes from Him in the first place.

With regard to application, we can look at the Lord's Supper as a place of connection to our God. God strengthens us by strengthening our connection to Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper. Our faith is strengthened. That is what we need to anticipate in the Lord's Supper. That is what we need to expect. This week, as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper next Sunday, Lord-willing, we can think about having our connection to God strengthened in the Lord's Supper.

By the same token, we should be seeking to tear apart any kind of idolatrous connection that we may have, or are contemplating. Only God must be the master of our soul. We cannot be both Christian and something else. The PCA just passed overwhelmingly a report on the Insider Movement. That movement is basically syncretism. It says you can be both Christian and Muslim at the same time. If there is anything that is clear in the New Testament, it is that you have a completely new identity in Christ Jesus. You are no longer who you were. And, incidentally, what matters is not what other people say you are, but what God says you are. Your identity is in Christ. That is who you are. You are a "connected-to-Christ" person now. With whom shall we we associate? We shall associate with Jesus Christ.