

PREFACE

Let me prepare us for this study by setting up a hypothetical situation. Linda and I are working on our fiftieth year of marriage. Let us assume that for the last forty-nine years I have loved her, been attentive to her needs, behaved toward her in a gracious, respectful manner—I have been, by any definition, a good husband to her.

During this fiftieth year, however, she learns that I have doing much the same with another woman for the last ten years. Though not legally married, I have loved this other woman, been attentive to her needs, behaved toward her in a gracious, respectful manner and, in a practical yet unofficial capacity, have been a good “husband” to her.

Shocked and saddened by this news, Linda confronts me with the evidence, demanding an answer. My response? “Haven’t I always been everything you could expect from a husband? Have you lacked in anything? What does it matter if I do the same for another woman, if I meet all my obligations to you?”

Would any wife, any woman in my hearing be satisfied with that response and that situation? I think not. Some in the Corinthian church, however, were doing this with their devotion to Christ. They were saying—if not in words, their actions—that so long as they gave due diligence to Christ by attending church and partaking of the Lord’s table, what did it matter if they also attended a pagan temple and partook of that idol’s table? In our text today Paul gives them a direct, unequivocal answer.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.**v20**

Before we leave v20, we need to get down into the weeds a little bit. We have run into similar anomalies in other passages, other studies, and we need to point it out again here.

In v20 Paul is clearly drawing from Deuteronomy 32:17, which we read near the end of our previous study. Look at v20 as I read 32:17 and you will immediately see the connection:

They sacrificed to demons who were not God,
To gods whom they have not known,
New gods who came lately,
Whom your fathers did not dread.

You will note that in both v20 and Deuteronomy 32:17 the word “God” (Greek: *theos*, Hebrew: *eloh*) is capitalized. In either language the word can refer to *the* Deity (“God”) or *a* deity (“god”). The oddity which we have run into before is that almost without exception all the commentators remark, as Gordon Fee puts it,

[Paul] does not intend to say that “the pagans are not sacrificing to God,” meaning the God whom we Christians know and worship. That would be irrelevant at best. Paul means either “not to a god,” or “to demons, even to one who is no-god.”

Yet—and this is what leaves us lowly amateurs scratching our heads—every one of our common translations renders this “God,” capital G, even though the word in the Greek allows the lowercase g.

v21

What we now have before us, in v21, is what I believe to be one of the most powerful, most important verses in God’s word. I consider it of utmost importance because of its obvious application and relevance to the believer’s ongoing sanctification. It has deep, foundational ramifications far beyond just the immediate context of Chapter Ten—i.e., the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

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.

Even before he opened his present topic in Chapter Eight, Paul was saying much the same thing he says here, in Chapter Six, on the topic of visiting temple prostitutes.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:15-20.

And he will continue in his second (extant) letter to the church, this time on associating with unbelievers.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

This tells us that the topic was important to the apostle—and that he considered it of vital importance to the spiritual health and sanctification of the church. [But let’s get back to our text.](#) In Chapter Ten the setting is not visiting temple prostitutes but Communion—the “table of the Lord.” As he has since the beginning of this chapter, Paul is contrasting the Lord’s table, in which the believer identifies with Christ Jesus, with the idol’s table, in which the diners—even if they do not realize it—identify with demons.

Notice first the verb: “cannot”; not “I wish you wouldn’t” or “you shouldn’t” or “you’d be better off not to.” No, it is *impossible* to “drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons”; it is *impossible* to “partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.” One cannot split one’s devotion; one cannot subdivide the soul.

Back in the very early eighties, after a period in the wilderness, in practical terms ignoring the God of my youth, the Spirit pulled me back into the fold. After a while, I found myself parting company with some friends and colleagues I had had during those wilderness years—not purposefully, not under any command to do so; those friendships just faded away, as we now had little in common. I was now spending more time with those in the body of Christ, and those earlier relationships just didn’t *feel* right. We were now out of sync with each other. I was on one path; they were on another.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons;

There is a lot going on at the Communion table; it would make for a useful and edifying study on its own. But let’s focus on just two aspects to what we call Communion—the two aspects Paul brings out in this paragraph.

First there is the vertical aspect, embodied in the cup, which represents the blood of Christ. It is not His blood literally, of course, it just represents it. By drinking from the cup the believer—as Paul puts it in v16—*shares* in the blood of Christ. The word is the familiar *koinonia*; the believer solidifies within himself, as well as signifying to those in witness, that he associates himself with the sacrifice of blood Christ made upon the altar of the cross (*for the Christian the table is not the altar; the “altar” is the cross upon which Christ died for his sins*). The drinking of the cup represents the individual’s *fellowship* with Christ’s sacrifice.

you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

Second is the horizontal aspect, embodied in the bread, which represents not just the body of Christ Jesus, but the “body of Christ,” the church. As with the cup, the bread is not literally Christ’s flesh (*against the Catholic belief in the transmutation of the bread and wine, by the priest, into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus*). In v17 Paul writes, “Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.” Here is pictured the fellowship of the church—breaking bread together—around the body and blood of the slain Lamb of God.

Both vertically and horizontally the Lord’s table represents, and is a regular reminder of, the sacrifice Christ Jesus made, out of His love for us, shedding his blood upon the altar of the cross. He commanded us to “do this in remembrance of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25); our participation in the Communion table is our obedience to His command. And it also associates us with Him; one might say, it “brands” us as Christians for all to see.

Beyond this, however, and the reason I believe this verse to be so important, so foundational, is that it speaks to the issue of *lordship*. If we return to the Song of Moses, a little further into it we see the Lord God speaking to this issue.

Read Deuteronomy 32:36-39.

A Lampel paraphrase of vv37-38: *So you find yourself in a spot of trouble and you come crying to Me for help? But you have been making sacrifices to other gods—cry out to them and see if they help you, because you're not getting any from Me. You've made your bed; now lie in it.*

In 1 Kings 18:21,

Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD [Yahweh] is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

And then, of course, Jesus was on the same page.

Read Matthew 6:24.

I cannot love my wife and be wholly devoted to her when I have someone else on the side. It is impossible; something snaps deep in your soul if you try that. Likewise the soul cannot have two Gods and two Lords. You have to choose one—and only one. And this is fundamental to faith, fundamental to our walk with Christ. You can only fellowship with, associate with, be identified with one Lord. To straddle the fence in even a seemingly harmless way is to corrupt both.

v22

Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?

Paul is still referencing the Song of Moses when he poses this rhetorical question, which Fee paraphrases, "Or will you continue eating at both meals, and thus arouse the Lord's jealousy?"

It is true that Paul's focus here, though citing the OT, is not Yahweh but Christ Jesus. It is also true that like first-century Corinth, we are in the church age, the age of grace through the sacrificial blood of Christ. Yet God—who the Son of God is—does not change. He is the same today as He was when He told Moses on Mount Sinai,

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6)

We are not stronger than He, are we?

The meaning of this closing line is not immediately clear, but I think Fee's interpretation is probably correct.

Gordon Fee: Most likely this is the final warning that God's "jealousy" cannot be challenged with impunity. Those who would put God to the test by insisting on their right to what Paul insists is idolatry are in effect taking God on, challenging Him by their actions, daring God to act. Secure in their own foolhardiness, they think of themselves as so "strong" that they can challenge Christ Himself. But their folly, implied in an earlier exhortation (9:25) and given in the preceding warning (10:12), is that they will thereby fail to gain the final eschatological prize.

Here are sobering words from the apostle—words that should convict us to daily examine our actions, our thoughts, our proclivities.

- Are we making room in our life for a competing "lord"?
- Is there anything or anyone in our life vying for the throne upon which there is only One worthy to sit?
- Are we permitting demons to invade where only God should be?