

First Corinthians

April 27, 2025
Chapter 10

The Matters of Jewish Idolatry

“Paul’s Jewish Ancestors”
Chapter 10:16 - 33

(1) Look at the LORD’s Supper (10:16-17)

Paul asks,

¹⁶ Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

Before discussing verse 16, I want to highlight an interesting detail: this is the only instance in which the cup is mentioned before the bread. Some people try to link this to heathen feasts, where the drink is served before the food in pagan rituals. However, Paul is clearly addressing the LORD’s Supper and not these pagan practices. When we reach Chapter 11, which continues this context, Paul will reverse the order as it appears elsewhere in Scripture.

Regarding the passage at hand, why does Paul ask these two questions about the cup and the bread? We must remember Jesus’ words at the first LORD’s Supper in the upper room. He said, “*This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me*” (Luke 22:19). Paul will repeat this in 11:24-25 of this letter. Therefore, the purpose of the LORD’s Supper is to direct the hearts, minds, and eyes of all participants toward Jesus.

Notice that Paul uses the word “*we*.” He includes the saints in Corinth who are participating in the LORD’s Supper. His point is to show that whether the LORD’s Supper is taken in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, or anywhere else on any given day, all focus on Jesus in unity. Because the bread and the cup represent the body of Jesus and no one else, all churches are united in the one body of Jesus. To support this point, Paul says, “*Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.*” By this, Paul means that all saints of the Church are part of the one body of Christ. Here is where we can confidently state that all churches and individual churches are simultaneously *part of the Body of Christ*.

Paul now urges the saints in Corinth to observe the idolaters.

(2) Look at the Idolaters (10:18-19)

Paul asks,

¹⁸ Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? ¹⁹ What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?

When Paul says, “*Look at the nation of Israel*,” he refers to the Old Testament sacrificial system established by the LORD. However, this statement also clarifies to whom Paul is directing this conversation: the Jewish saints, not the Gentile saints. With each line of information in this letter, it becomes increasingly clear that the Jewish saints in Corinth were the primary instigators of the divisive issues in the Church that Chloe raised with Paul. While Gentiles may have been aware of the sacrificial laws in the Jewish system, all Jews knew them by heart, as they were ingrained in them from childhood.

To clarify for those who have never studied the Levitical sacrificial laws, here is a brief summary to guide you. There were morning and evening [afternoon] offerings every day at the Tabernacle or Temple. [The Hebrew “evening” begins as the sun begins to set after high noon. We call it “afternoon” in the West.] The priests made these offerings as instructed by the LORD, ensuring a continual aroma of praise rose from the altar to the LORD. In addition to the morning and evening offerings, there was the special Sabbath offering along with a few other unique offerings. The ordinary Jew did not participate in the offerings, except in one way: the priests selected the animal for the offering from the stock that had come into the Tabernacle or Temple through tithes and offerings. Then, there were the offerings of the people. This is when they brought a sin offering, a guilt offering, or a thanks offering to the LORD. With these three types of offerings, each regular person bringing an offering participated in the sacrifice and the preparation of the meal, whether by roasting on the altar or boiling the meat in a pot. Once the meat was ready, the priests, their families, and the ordinary person presenting the animal for sacrifice, along with their family, could eat the meat. (See Leviticus Chapters 1-7) Therefore, they were able to partake in the consumption of the sacrifice. This provides the background for Paul’s statement, “*Are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?*”

Now, when Paul continues to say, “*What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?*” in his two questions, he actually contrasts the difference between the LORD’s Supper and heathen sacrifices. The LORD’s Supper symbolizes the unity of the saints in the LORD, whereas the sacrifices of the heathens do not represent anyone’s unity with anything else. However, Paul will next instruct us to consider the demons, as idol worship sacrifices are made to demons.

(3) Look at the Demons (10:20-21)

Paul answered his questions when he said,

²⁰ *No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.* ²¹ *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.*

When Paul speaks of Gentile sacrifices, he is not referring to the Gentile saints in the Church; he is speaking about the lost Gentiles who live without the LORD in their lives.

When Paul uses the word “*demons*,” he refers to evil (angel) spirits. In Ephesians 2:2 and 6:12, letters Paul will write in the future after this one, he states that the evil forces of this world control it, describing “*the prince of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience*” (Ephesians 2:2). “*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6:12).

Then, Paul makes a strong statement: “*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.*” Let’s ask a question. Is Paul saying it’s impossible to participate in the Lord’s Supper and the worship service of heathens? No, it’s not impossible. People do it metaphorically all the time in daily life. Think about Sundays. They attend worship in holiness, then they watch an “R” rated movie in the afternoon. One is godly; the other is godless. One is the table of God; the other is the table of demons. One is decent; the other is demonic. In Paul’s day, the saints could participate in the Lord’s Supper at church in the morning, and in the evening, they could go to the local market to purchase meat from the heathen temples. Therefore, a saint could participate in both. Rather, the question Paul is presenting is, “*Is it morally right to knowingly participate in both?*” The answer is no.

Paul then directs the Corinth saints to look at the LORD.

(4) Look at the LORD (10:22)

Paul asks,

"22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?"

Why would participating in the Lord's Supper at church and eating supper offered in idol sacrifices "provoke the Lord to jealousy?" It's simple. It's found in the Lord's first commandment in Exodus 20:3: "You shall have no other gods before Me." The Lord added the following commentary to that.

"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God." (Exodus 20:5)

Then, in a surprising comment, we have the commands in Exodus 34:11, "Be sure to observe what I am commanding you this day." Following that, the LORD reveals His name in Exodus 34:14, "for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God...."

Amazing!

The LORD tells us His name is 'Jealous.' Furthermore, since His name is "Jealous," He is a "jealous God." Why is His name 'Jealous,' and why is He a "jealous God"? He is 'Jealous' because He will not permit anyone or anything to be a god above Him. As *Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers* states,

...but jealous of His own honour, one who will not see "His glory given to another" (Isaiah 42:8; Isaiah 48:11), or allow rivals to dispute His sole and absolute sovereignty (Comp. Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 4:24; Deuteronomy 5:9; Deuteronomy 6:15; Joshua 24:19.)

How do saints provoke the LORD to jealousy? They do so by engaging in anything associated with man-made idols, which are nonexistent and a fabrication of man's imagination. By participating in the LORD's Supper, a saint expresses faith in the LORD. Taking part in a heathen idol feast is equivalent to confessing faith in that idol. A saint should never do this.

Then Paul asks, "We are not stronger than He, are we?" What is Paul saying here? He conveys that we cannot fight against God and win. No one can triumph over God. Therefore, worshiping at the foot of an idol during an idol feast provokes God's discontent. Why? Simply because it places the idol on equal footing with God by splitting one's fellowship between God and an idol. For this reason, God will exhibit His jealous wrath for breaking His commandment.

We have already introduced the law into this conversation; now, Paul does the same. He instructs the saints in Corinth to examine the law.

(5) Look at the LAW (10:23)

Regarding eating meat offered to idols, Paul states in verse 23,

"23 All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify."

Before continuing, we must discuss the demographics and economic status of the city of Corinth compared to the Church of Corinth. Due to Paul's letters to Corinth, it is easy to assume that the Church had a major influence in the city; however, this was not the case. The Church was small and insignificant next to the vast city itself. Corinth was a large, powerful Greek city with two thriving ports and was essentially a significant city-state. At its peak, the population reached 90,000. Not only did goods from around the world flow through Corinth's ports, but ships were also lifted out of the water at one port and transported overland by ropes, logs, and manpower to

the other port. All the businesses in Corinth contributed to its wealth; yet, wealth was not the primary concern for most of the Corinthian population – idol worship was.

Corinth was named after *Corinthos*, the son of *Helios*, the sun god. According to legend, the city was founded by *Ephray*, a Greek goddess who governed the world's oceans. Kings ruled the city, the first of whom was *Sisyphus*, a tyrannical leader.

The city played a crucial role in the Trojan War during Agamemnon's reign. He was the brother of Menelaus, the king of Sparta.

The Greek gods were worshipped in Corinth, listed in alphabetical order as follows: Achelous, Aeolus, Aether, Alastor, Apollo, Ares, Aristaeus, Asclepius, Atlas, Attis, Boreas, Caerus, Castor, Cerus, Chaos, Charon, Cronos, Crios, Dinalas, Deimos, Dionysus, Epimetheus, Erubus, Eros, Eurus, Glaucus, Hades, Helios, Hephaestus, Heracles, Hermes, Hesperus, Hymenaios, Hyperion, Hypnos, Iapetus, Kratos, Lelantos, Menoetius, Momus, Morpheus, Moros, Nereus, Notus, Oceanus, Oneiroi, Paean, Pallas, Pan, Perseus, Phosphorus, Plutus, Pollus, Pollux, Pontus, Poseidon, Priapus, Pricus, Prometheus, Primordial, Syceus, Tartarus, Thanatos, Triton, Uranus, Zelus, Zephyrus, and Zeus.

All 69 idol gods had temples in Corinth where they could be worshipped. In each temple, animals were sacrificed daily, and in some cases, this occurred multiple times. What happened to the meat from these sacrifices? The meat was taken to local markets to be sold to the people of Corinth. If you wanted to eat meat in Corinth, you would go to one of the many markets to buy it. The meat available in these markets came from sacrifices at the temples, leading to a surplus of meat dedicated to idols. The sacrifices were given to the temples, and the meat was sold in the marketplace. The marketers kept a portion of the sale price, while the temple also received a share. Since the animals were donated, the sale price was considered profit, which was then divided between the temple and the marketers.

With that said, we have established the context for the issue of saints in the Church consuming meat that has been sacrificed to idols. It was nearly impossible for any saint in the Church to purchase meat that had not been offered to idols.

In Chapter 8:4, Paul said, "... *there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.*" In Chapter 8:7, Paul said, "*However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.*" In Chapter 10:19, Paul said, "*What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?*" These three verses, all from the same letter, make three points. First, there are no gods except for God. Second, some people believe in the existence of gods and have created carved idols of them to be worshipped through sacrifices. Third, the idea that something sacrificed to idols means anything at all is completely unfounded. Together, these points convey that food sacrificed to idols is simply food, nothing more. Being sacrificed to an idol does not affect the meat in any way; it is perfectly fine to eat.

Now, we turn to our verse at hand: "*All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable.*" Here, Paul tells the saints that it is perfectly lawful for them to purchase meat in the marketplace in Corinth and eat it. There is no sin involved. However, considering what Paul has just said about making God jealous by worshipping other gods, they could potentially sin. As long as the saints do not engage in idol worship, there is no sin in eating meat sold in the market that was sacrificed in a temple. But why does Paul say, "but not all things are profitable"? Why does Paul assert that lawful things may not be "profitable"? Paul means that meat is meat and is good to eat, regardless

of its origin. However, in the context of Corinth, where nearly all the meat in the markets comes from pagan temple sacrifices, consuming that meat may not benefit or advance the Gospel. Although he has not explicitly told the saints this, Paul is suggesting that eating meat from the market, knowing it came from temple sacrifices, may indeed hinder the spread of the Gospel. Then, Paul says, “*All things are lawful, but not all things edify.*” All things are lawful is the same as before. However, Paul adds, “*but not all things edify.*” What does *edify* mean? It means to build up. Paul is saying that just because something is lawful, not all lawful things actually enhance and build a cause for good. In this case, Paul is saying the opposite; he is indicating that it might not build up; rather, it might tear down the Church.

How can you determine when it's appropriate to eat lawful meat? Paul suggests observing your neighbor.

(6) Look at Neighbor (10:24-30)

Verse 24,

²⁴ *Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.* ²⁵ *Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake;* ²⁶ *FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS.*

“*Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.*” This statement is one of the most important verses in the letter. Since chapter 8:7 and the following verses, Paul has addressed the difference between mature saints and weaker saints in the LORD regarding meat sold in the marketplace that has been sacrificed to idols. Mature saints possess knowledge to guide them; weaker saints do not, as they have not been taught the knowledge of the LORD through discipleship. This is not new. As mature saints, we often forget that new Christians, including older individuals who convert, may not fully understand the LORD. They need training. We also need training. We may look at a sixty-year-old person who has just accepted the LORD and assume he knows everything about Him, but he does not. Therefore, to ensure that this person appropriately grows in maturity, we must be cautious about what we say, do, and how we act around those weaker saints. “*All things may be lawful*” for the saints, but “*not all things are profitable or edifying*” for them. Paul has established the context to say, “*Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.*” In other words, Christians must consider where immature Christians are in their spiritual journey and avoid actions they might perceive as wrong. This is particularly relevant to meat sacrificed to idols and then sold in the marketplace.

Here, too, all Christians, whether mature or weak, must clearly understand that “*all things*” do not include immorality, adultery, or other such sins. Just because you are a saint does not mean you can break those laws and escape God's judgment. However, regarding food offered to idols, Paul has argued that because idols are not gods, the sacrifices to them are futile and meaningless. Therefore, saints can consume the meat as food.

With all that said, Paul stated, “*Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.*” Paul emphasizes considering the maturity of the saints around you before prioritizing your own interests in the matter of meat sacrificed to idols. He does not instruct the mature saints in Corinth to stop eating the meat sold in the marketplace. He says, “*Eat anything that is sold in the meat market....*” It is perfectly acceptable for the saints to eat. It is also completely fine to feed families in the homes of the saints. However, Paul does not stop there. He further adds, “*without asking questions for conscience' sake.*” Is Paul suggesting, “Just don't inquire about where the meat came from so you can have plausible deniability if some weaker saints question you?” Absolutely not! Paul asserts, “You already know that the meat likely originated from sacrifices in the pagan temple. But you also understand that it

is simply good meat you can buy and place on your family's table because being sacrificed to an idol holds no significance. Therefore, purchase the meat in the market and ask no questions." *For the sake of conscience, there's no need to know the meat's origin.* The Greek word for *conscience* is *suneidesis*, which means *to create a persistent notion*. Paul deliberately chose the term *conscience* here. He indicates, "Since you already know the meat is perfectly acceptable to eat, there's no need to ask where it comes from because you do not need to continually question whether it is lawful to consume the meat. The question of lawfully eating the meat has already been resolved. There's no need to revisit it every time you buy meat in the market." To reinforce this point, Paul quotes from Psalm 24 to illustrate that the meat belongs to the LORD in the first place: "*FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS.*" (Psalm 24: 1; 52: 12). All creatures on earth were created by the LORD to be enjoyed by mankind. No idol has any power over anything. Even though the heathens believe their idols have power, they do not.

Paul now says not to ask questions while eating with non-believers.

(a) Ask No Questions (10:27)

Paul says,

²⁷ *If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake.*

Let us make an important point: unbelievers are the saints' mission field. Saints should accept invitations to meals from unbelievers. Regardless of what is served, the saints should partake in it. They should not question where the meat came from for the sake of *their conscience*. Is this provision for the saints' benefit, or is it meant for the unbelieving host? We do not know. Therefore, we contend that it serves both purposes. A saint should not concern themselves with the source of the meat, and the unbeliever should not feel guilty about how they prepared the meal.

But what if someone reveals where the meal originated? Paul advises paying attention to the questioner.

(b) Listen to the Questioner (10:28-30)

Verse 28,

²⁸ *But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake;* ²⁹ *I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?* ³⁰ *If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?*

Paul now pivots to address the mature saints after someone informs him about the source of the meat. As Paul states, "*Do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake.*" Here, Paul is likely referring to an immature, weaker saint who has told a mature saint about where the meat came from. We can gather this point from how Paul has framed the entire discussion as a struggle between a mature saint and a weaker saint. The weaker saint is troubled by the meat's origin, not the mature saint. In this situation, a mature saint should refrain from eating the meat, not because it is unlawful, but because the weaker saint doesn't realize that idol sacrifices hold no significance. However, since the weaker saint is troubled by the meat, he will not eat it in the presence of the weaker saint until that saint has matured. Yes, you have the right to eat the meat, but is it beneficial for a weaker saint who does not yet understand?

We know this because Paul states, "*I mean not your own conscience, but the conscience of another; for why should my freedom be judged by someone else's conscience?*"

Notice the final question: *“If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered for what I give thanks?”* Why should a saint be slandered for lawful things?

Undoubtedly, the mature saint in Corinth understands that any food offered to the LORD with gratitude should be lawful to eat without facing criticism.

Paul provides an answer to that question. He advises the saints to seek to benefit many instead of just themselves.

(7) Profit Many and Not Yourself (10:31-33)

Paul says,

³¹ Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the Church of God; ³³ just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

Eat or don't eat. Drink or don't drink. Either way, *“do all to the glory of God.”* Paul's important statement goes beyond merely eating meat offered to idols; it addresses how a mature believer should live. God's glory is the ultimate goal in everything a believer does. A believer should not offend a lost Jew, a lost Gentile, or another believer in the *“Church of God.”*

Paul concludes with his standard for life and ministry: *“...just as I also please all people in all things, not seeking my own benefit but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.”* While many things are lawful for a saint, saints must always live in a way that the lost will accept the Lord as Savior and that weaker saints may grow in the Lord.

Who can the saints in Corinth look to as an example for guidance in living among the lost and the weak? Paul instructs them to follow him as a model in his apostleship.