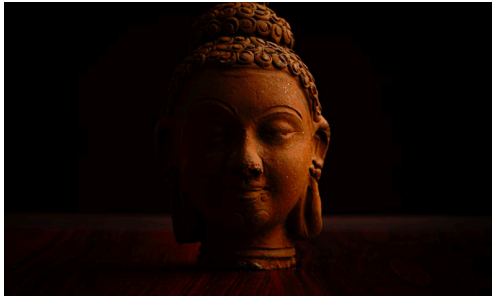


The Demon Behind the Idol

By Daryl Wingerd



The Christians in 1st Century Corinth were in pretty bad shape. In the Bible, Paul’s first letter to them (which was actually the second letter he had written to them) reveals that they were separating into factions, suing each other in public courtrooms, tolerating serious sexual sin, and even

engaging in flagrant idolatry. Idolatry is the worship of false gods, and it is a serious sin. It is something God never tolerates in his people. It was the very first thing he prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3-4), and the Israelites’ violation of this command was the central reason why most of the Exodus generation perished in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:5). God has always demanded exclusive loyalty from those who are his.

In order to understand just how the Corinthians were engaging in idolatry, you need to know a little about their culture. In 1st Century Corinth, idolatry was an ordinary part of most people’s lives. There were many temples dedicated to many idols, each of which represented a different god. People in this pagan culture claimed loyalty to one, or several, or even many of these gods. They believed that honoring these gods through sacrifice would bring good health or favorable weather or economic prosperity.

Honoring these many gods took place in public ceremonies, private homes, and centrally in the temples dedicated to these gods. In these venues an animal would be sacrificed to the god, and the meat would be consumed in a feast shared by all who were present. These gathering places and these sacrificial meals were used for the purpose of business meetings, gatherings of workers from a particular trade, social events like weddings, or even private birthday parties. Idol worship was *everywhere!*

We can better understand the Corinthian dilemma when we understand what was at stake. In Corinth, if you wanted to climb the corporate ladder in your chosen profession, or if you wanted to operate a successful business or trade, you needed to establish and maintain relationships with the important people in your field of work.

To do this you would be expected to attend the kinds of gatherings where there were people to impress, or where there was business to conduct. If you wanted to maintain good relationships with non-Christian family members, you were expected to attend birthday parties, weddings, and other family events. And remember, these events usually centered around a sacrificial meal honoring whatever god (or gods) the family or business or social group chose to honor. Those who failed to participate quickly became outsiders, incurring suspicion and disfavor. Conform, or suffer.

Some of the Corinthian Christians believed they knew how to navigate this difficult situation without offending God *or* the unbelieving Corinthians. They participated in these meals for the sake of maintaining good relationships with unbelievers, while considering participation acceptable on the basis that “an idol has no real existence” and “there is no God but one” (1 Cor. 8:4). After making a lengthy and complex case to the contrary (8:1-10:13), Paul finally lays it on the line in chapter 10, verses 14-22. He explains that as Christians—people who participate in the Lord’s Supper, the sacrificial meal to honor the crucified and risen Christ (10:14-17)—it was completely inappropriate for them to also participate in a cultic meal held in honor of a false god. Though the idols representing these false gods were nothing—just wood, or metal, or stone—each one represented a demon, a real, evil spiritual being behind the idol. By participating in these cultic meals, the Corinthians were not merely *at risk* of falling into idolatry; they were *practicing* it! At the end he sternly warns them, “Shall we provoke the Lord to Jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” (10:19-22). He was reminding them of the Israelites who practiced idolatry and were overthrown in the wilderness by the same God who saved them out of Egypt (cf. 10:1-11).

Suffering for Jesus is never easy, but Paul assures the Corinthians in 10:13-14 that God will reward their faithfulness to him by sustaining them through it. Any persecution they might face for abandoning these idolatrous feasts will not be greater than he will enable them to bear. “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. Therefore, flee from idolatry.”

In what ways in your own life do you feel pressured by society to conform with what you know God hates? What kinds of suffering do you anticipate if you reject this pressure and truly set yourself apart as one who is loyal to Jesus Christ alone? What kinds of compromises are you already allowing in your life to avoid this kind of social disfavor? Remember, God is faithful!