

## **Flee from Idolatry**

**Jeff Plemons**

**I Corinthians 10:1-14 "Moreover, brethren, I would not that you should be ignorant...."**

**Look at verse number seven and notice the warning that is found there. Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul warns God's people not to be idolaters. He refers to an Old Testament account of God's people committing idolatry. The nature of that idolatry is given in Exodus 32. In verse fourteen we see that Paul loved these people in Corinth. He loved them dearly. However, he was concerned about some of them. Some were caught up in idolatry or were on the verge of being caught up in idolatry. God's people are not to be idolaters. Paul says to these that he loved, "My dearly beloved, flee from idolatry."**

## **WHAT IS IDOLATRY?**

**D.L. Moody said that an idol is anything that means more to a person than God. Whatever becomes the focus of one's attention or becomes more important than God or becomes bigger in life than God, His work, or His kingdom is an idol. Idols are things that people put before God. Idolatry, then, is not seeking God and His kingdom first. Idolatry is living for other things. If we have time, we will take care of God and His work.**

**The Bible says in Exodus 20:2, "I am the Lord thy God...." Since He is the Lord God, He has the right to tell any of us what we need to be doing with our lives. Exodus 20:1-2, "And God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The Bible tells us that God is the Lord, and it tells us what the Lord had done for His people. He brought them out of the land of Egypt, and He delivered them out of the house of bondage. Based on the fact that He is the Lord and that He has done these wonderful, marvelous things on behalf of His people, God has the right to tell us what to do. We ought to be willing to obey Him, follow Him, and serve Him.**

## **GOD DEMANDS FIRST PLACE**

**In Exodus 20:3 God commands, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." This is the first of the Ten Commandments. Why do you think God had to say this? Obviously, He said this because a lot of people have other gods that they put before the Lord. If idolatry was not a problem, God would not have had to give this commandment. The one true God says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." There are many gods in this world, and many people put them before the true God. Here we recognize the sense of D.L. Moody's definition when he said that an idol is anything that a person puts before God. Idols are things that people put before the true and living God.**

**Most people do not have a problem with God. They have a problem with putting God first. This is a religious nation. Most people speak of God. They say they love God. Yet, they want to put things before Him. They do not mind the kind of god that allows them to put anything and everything before him. This is the kind of god they want. People have problems with the God of the Bible. He says, "I am the Lord thy God," and demands first place. God wants to come first—before family, before friends, before pleasures, before everything.**

**People will come to church until they have to choose between God and something else. God says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." If you ask someone who did not go to church why he did not go, the answer may be that he decided to go somewhere else or do something else. That is putting gods before the Lord. That is exactly what God said He did not want us to do. A lot of people will be in church unless a favorite team is playing a ball game or their favorite driver is in a race or a social gathering is planned. These people serve God only when He does not interfere. When God interferes with something they would rather be doing, they ignore God and put in His place whatever they would rather be doing. People who go to a family reunion rather than to God's house on Sunday are putting that reunion before the Lord. People who stay home and sleep rather than go to God's house are putting sleep before the Lord. Spending time with family is right, but people who take their families to a lake or to the woods or somewhere else instead of going to church are putting those families before the Lord. In my family it is understood that Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and revival night we go to church. If family unexpectedly drops in for a visit and doesn't want to go to church with us, they may wait at the house until we get back. We go to church. If our children want to be involved in a sports activity that conflicts with church attendance, they have to play at another time. We go to church. What we put first in our lives is god in our lives. If God is really our God, He will have first place.**

**Before I was saved, I was like any other sinner. A lot of things were more important to me than God. All of us, before we were saved, loved pleasure more than God. We enjoyed going to the lake and skiing or doing other things on Sunday more than going to the house of God. These things meant more to us than God. When we were saved, we turned from our idols to serve the living and true God. One of the ways that we can tell that a person really is saved is that God becomes first in his life.**

**Exodus 20:4 says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." We are not to worship God through the use of images in the "...likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth...." We do not need these images to make God real to us. The Holy Spirit makes Him real to us. We do not need these man-made images that carry the likeness of things in this earth because nothing on this earth is like our God. He is above all that is in this earth. We do not come to know God by looking at an image. We come to know God through the new birth, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible.**

**In Exodus 20:5 God says, "Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." Whenever a person engages in idolatry or a family puts other things before the Lord, this will bring the judgment of God down upon them. God does not bless the family or individual who puts other things before Him. I try to stress this especially to young couples who are trying to raise their children. It is hard work to train children so as to see them saved and living for God. Sadly, parents may think they can put other things before God. Yet, at the same time, they think that they can turn to God in prayer when they need something in relation to their family. They think He will hear and answer this prayer. These parents do not understand what the Bible says about God and how He feels about people that put other things before Him.**

**In the context of Exodus 20:5, God is talking about idolatry. He says, "...I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." This verse is talking about worshipping idols and putting them before the Lord. Idols may be graven images or images made of stone, wood, gold, or silver; or they may be idols in men's hearts. Colossians 3:5 says that covetousness is idolatry. The Bible talks about those who honor their children first before the Lord. The Bible speaks of many who love pleasure more than they love God. If these have to choose between God and family, money, sports, recreation, and so forth, they choose those things before God. In Exodus 20:5, God is saying that if you put anything before Him, your**

**children are going to suffer. They are going to suffer to the third and fourth generation. These are long-reaching consequences. Whenever people give themselves to idolatry, they condemn their families to suffer in this generation and for generations to come.**

**If we put God first and seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33), we will find mercy with God. God is a merciful God. In Exodus 20:6, God speaks of "...shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." Mercy is what we need when raising our children and helping our families. We need the mercy of God because none of us have been all that we need to be as parents. Every day I see areas where I could do better, and I pray that God will help me. If my only hope for seeing my children turn out right was based on me being a perfect parent, I would be most miserable. I have not been perfect, but I will tell you what I have tried to do through the years. I have tried to put God first. I have tried to teach my children that God comes before everything else. I believe that the Bible teaches that when people put God first, He is going to show mercy to them and to thousands just like them who love Him and keep His commandments. Help your family. Put God first. Help your children. Put God first. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."**

## **WE ARE IN DANGER OF FALLING INTO IDOLATRY**

### **Exodus 32:1-5**

**:1 And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.**

**:2 And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me.**

**:3 And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron.**

**:4 And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.**

**:5 And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.**

**This account (referred to in I Corinthians 10) is the record of God's people in the Old Testament when they committed idolatry. They made a golden calf and worshipped that golden calf as if it were God. The context of this account is that Moses is up on the mountain with God, and he has been there for some time. For all that the people knew, Moses might be dead; he might not ever be coming back. They wanted some gods to go before them. When the people saw that Moses did not come down when they thought he should, "they gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up make us gods, which shall go before us, for as for this Moses...we wot not what is become of him." The amazing thing is that Aaron did not refuse, but went along with their plan. He told them to give him their golden earrings. He took the earrings and melted them in the fire. He poured the molten gold into a mold to make a calf. The Bible says that after making the calf, Aaron took an engraving tool and began to engrave certain markings on the calf. After Aaron had done all that, the people said, "These be thy gods, O Israel...." They began to worship around the golden calf.**

**We can learn some things from this Old Testament account of idolatry. Keep in mind that in I Corinthians God tells us to remember what these people did but not be like them. He uses the people of**

**Israel to warn us not to commit the same sin. God warns us because we are also in danger of falling into idolatry. That is why God tells us to flee idolatry. That is why John said in I John 5:21, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." We must put God, His work, and His kingdom first.**

**In many cases when a person commits idolatry it is not because they did not know better. These people, especially Aaron, did know that worshipping the golden calf was idolatry and condemned by God. Just forty days earlier, God had spoken from Mount Sinai and given them the Ten Commandments. "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." The people knew it was wrong to make the golden calf and worship it. When we look around the church today, we see people putting other things before God. Most of them know better. They cannot plead ignorance. Most of the people that stay out of the house of God, for whatever reason, know that it is wrong. They do it anyway.**

**Exodus 32:1 says that when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, they went to Aaron to have him make them a god. The people got impatient. They did not want to wait on Moses, so they got involved in idolatry. Most of the Christian life is waiting on God. A lot of Christians do not like to wait. They get impatient. Did you ever notice how many Bible verses mention waiting on the Lord? Psalm 27:14 says, "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord." Remember that the Bible says in Hebrews 10:36, "For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise." Hebrews 12 pictures the Christian life as a race. How are we to run this race? We are to run it with patience—patience. While some people are waiting on God to help in the church or to answer their prayers or to work in their lives or to produce fruit in their lives, they become impatient. They say, "What's the use? Nothing is ever going to be done." Turning away from God, they get involved in things which they shouldn't. This results in putting such things before God. Instead of becoming impatient, God expects Christians to wait on Him. A Christian will pray about a number of things and wait for the Lord to answer. Be patient and wait until God chooses to work. While waiting, be careful. The devil will argue that praying more or going to church or putting God first is useless. He will argue that God is never going to work, so why do these things? I have been praying and waiting on God in a number of areas for a long time. Until God works, I hope I will continue to wait on Him. He is our only help. I know for certain that if I give up and turn my back on God, there is no hope for help.**

**What about a man like Aaron in Exodus 32:2? This man of God would not stand against the idolatry of these people. Aaron should have stood with God when the people told him to make gods to go**

before them. Aaron should have reminded them that God commands, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" and "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." Aaron should have stood against sin and had no part in idolatry. Instead, he encouraged their sinful idolatry. He made the golden calf, and they worshipped around it.

Notice how Aaron puts a religious slant on idolatry. He said in Exodus 32:5, "Tomorrow is a feast unto the Lord." The people were committing idolatry; but, in their twisted way of thinking, they thought they were honoring and glorifying God. Their idolatry was to the Lord. It is amazing how people try to justify their idolatry by saying that they are honoring God. Years ago, a young man in my church came to me. This young man had not been attending church on Wednesday nights. As I began to talk with him, he said that God had been dealing with him about spending time with his family. He thought taking his children to a ballgame on Wednesday night was a good way to spend time with his family. So, he thought he was honoring God by not attending church on Wednesday night in order to take his children to the ball field. He was committing idolatry; but, in his twisted way of thinking, he thought he was doing it for God. When I was talking with another man about the Lord and coming to church on Sunday, he said that he did not go to church but did worship God. He said that he usually went fishing on Sunday, and that the Lord and he had sweet communion together. "I always talk to the man upstairs when I'm out there in that boat," he declared. That man did not have time to come to the Lord's house because he had to get out to the lake and fish. Fishing meant more to him than God or learning about God. He was putting fishing before the Lord. In his twisted way of thinking, he justified his idolatry by saying he worshipped God when fishing.

Much idolatry is being practiced in churches today and is called glorifying God. If Moses had come down off the mountain earlier, I suspect that the people would not have worshipped the golden calf. I do not think that Moses would have done what Aaron did. Moses would have stood against idolatry. That is why men in the pulpit must be strong. A weak man who will not take a strong stand against idolatry is going to make it easy for individuals and families to get involved. By God's grace, people have stayed out of idolatry for as long as they have because they have been blessed by God to be in a church where they have a strong leader.

Others may put pressure on us to put other things before God. In Exodus 32:21, Moses confronts Aaron, "What did this people unto thee that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them?" Moses was asking Aaron what the people had done to get him to commit this sin. Had they, intimidated him, bribed him, or scared him? How did they influence him? People are going to put pressure on us to live like they do. Most people do not see anything wrong with putting other



things before God. They tell us not to be fanatics or not to be legalists or not to be extremists. If we are not careful, the influence of family, neighbors, friends, or others will wear us down. Most of the parents of children involved in sports do not put God first. Godly parents come under a lot of pressure to put sports before the Lord. Those parents who are idolaters will try to convince godly parents that missing church now and then is not wrong. Idolaters will tell godly parents that missing church to go other places is not wrong. This pressure is a very real thing. It is one thing for Christians to sit in a greenhouse environment where everybody believes the same thing and holds fast to what they believe. We support one another. However, when we get out in the real world, the idolaters coax and compel us to live just as they do and raise our children just as they do. We must stand firm and not fall into idolatry.

Notice Exodus 32:6, "And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt-offerings, and brought peace-offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play." God says that eating and drinking and playing are idolatry for some people. Their idol is a good time. Enjoying themselves is more important to them than God, serving God, or coming to God's house to learn about Him. Is it wrong to eat and drink? If we did not eat and drink, we would die. As a matter of fact, I Timothy 6:17 says that God, "...Giveth us richly all things to enjoy." We are to receive with thanksgiving all the food God gives us, and so we know it is not wrong to eat and drink. Is it wrong for children to play? No, it is natural for children to play. If a child does not want to play, something is wrong. I have six children, and all of my children want to play. I want them to play and have a good time. Eating, drinking, and playing have their place. However, when eating and drinking and playing become the focus and become more important than God, they are idols. We have a nation of idolaters who live for nothing else but enjoyment. The only way to get these idolaters to come to church on a regular basis is to turn church into play or into a restaurant. What a lot of churches are doing in their services and calling worship is not worship. People are not coming to church to hear the Word of God, to pray, to worship God, or to fellowship with God's children. They are coming for entertainment, for games, and for food. If they do not get these things, they will not come. If we ask the average child who attends the average church about the average service, he will answer that he eats a snack and plays some games. That is idolatry. Like the people around the golden calf, these people are claiming that they are eating, drinking, and playing to the Lord. This is their worship. However, this is not worship; this is wickedness.

Many people who come to church on Sunday morning are not concerned about God and His Word or becoming more holy and more

like God. They come to church and only think about the service ending so they can hurry home and watch a ball game on television or hurry to their favorite restaurant. What is their focus? Playing and eating mean more to them than what they will hear from the Word of the Lord. Some people will not go to a church that does not dismiss in time for them to get to their favorite restaurant before the crowd comes. If church services extend past noon and make them late to get in line, they will simply not attend. What is their focus? Eating at their favorite restaurant means more to them than God. Matthew 12:34 says, "...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." Many who attend the house of God on Sunday morning talk only about ball games, sports, entertainment, or fun. To many people, these are what life is all about. These are their focus. These are their gods.

Exodus 32:25 states, "...Moses saw that the people were naked (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies)...." The people were engaging in idolatry as they worshipped around the golden calf, and they were naked. As a rule—the rule may have exceptions—I have never seen anybody who is an idolater have modest dress standards. Most people who have no problem putting anything and everything—times at the lake, social events, ball games, children's events--before the Lord do not have modest dress standards. Dressing immodestly does not bother them. Dressing indecently does not bother them. Showing their nakedness does not bother them. Idolatry and immodesty seem to go together. (This statement may seem extreme, but just think about it, and see the connection.) These people were dressed immodestly and indecently as they committed idolatry. In God's eyes, they were doing a shameful thing. The Bible says that their actions were so shameful that even the heathen observing them knew they were shameful. Were these people embarrassed? Did they blush? They should have felt guilty. They should have felt unclean. They did not.

Often when someone commits idolatry, he tries to justify what he is doing. He may say that God has not convicted him of that, and when God does, he will change. The idolaters in Exodus 32 should have felt conviction over what they were doing. They did not. Whether or not a person feels conviction for something does not change what God says. In our nation today, people come to church in their nakedness and immodest dress. Men and especially women are coming to services clothed in less and less. Dresses are low cut in the front. Hems are six to eight inches above the knee. Clothing is skin tight, sensual, immodest, vulgar, and wicked. Men and women say they are worshipping God, but they are not. In true worship of God, people do not expose themselves. In true worship of God, people cover themselves by dressing modestly. People who dress immodestly or indecently are not worshipping the God of the Bible.

**Psalm 29:2 commands, "...Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."**

**In Exodus 32:9, the Lord tells Moses, "I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people...." Stubbornness is the root of idolatry. Most men and women are stubborn about their idols. We can take the Bible and show them that they are putting something before God. We can show them that putting something before God is idolatry. They don't care. They are going to do what they want to do. They are stiff-necked. When preaching about idolatry, I watch some people; and it seems like their necks just stiffen. They refuse to hear. Yet, we must know what the Bible says about idolatry. Ignorance makes it easy to fall into this sin.**

**The Bible calls upon us as God's people to stay away from idolatry, to keep ourselves from idolatry, and to flee from idolatry. Idolatry is a very grievous sin. It provokes God. It brings terrible consequences upon an individual, a family, a church, or a nation. "My dearly beloved, flee from idolatry."**