Desires, Defences and Power for Life
1 Corinthians 10

We're looking at 1 Corinthians, and at a part of the letter where Paul is writing to certain Christians in Corinth who considered themselves strong in their faith, and knowledgable about spiritual stuff, and he's telling them not to eat in the idol temples, not least because it wounds the consciences of other Christians. That instead of living to please themselves, they should be living for the good of others.

And yet, it's taking him three chapters of this letter to make that argument. Why so much time and ink on this? Well, probably because he knows that what he's saying is going to meet with resistance. The people he's writing to don't want to stop eating in the temples, they don't want to stop meeting their colleagues or clients over dinner there, even though they can see it hurts others in the church with weaker consciences.

Now why do people do that? Why do people persist in a behaviour even though they know it causes pain to others? Because it's not just them is it? Think of the pain caused to the family and friends of an addict, or - maybe a bit closer to home - a workaholic. Or why can someone find themselves unwilling, maybe even unable to stop doing something, or even just speaking in certain ways, even though they can see the wreckage it causes? Why not just stop?

Misdirected Desires
In a city like Corinth, the pagan temples weren't just places of worship, they were places for networking. And you'd meet colleagues, and potential clients there. And over a dinner of the meat sacrificed to the gods of trade, or harvest, or fertility, or success, you might meet people who could promote your career, help you up the greasy pole, or send trade your way, or you might be able to help their careers along and gain status as you did.

So the temples weren't just serve a religious function, but a social one. This was where you got seen, where you could work your network.

So if you wanted to advance socially, it's obvious why you might not want to stop going just because it hurt others. 'It would hurt me. I'd lose out - financially and socially. I'd lose my place in the circle.' So, these Christians may not have been worshipping the idols in the temple, but they were still using them for the social advantages they brought.

And really it's the same for anyone who doesn't want to give something up, even when we know it's hurting others: it's that there's something we want more, something we desire more than the good of the other - and we think this other thing - going to the temple, career success, alcohol, porn, a romantic relationship - will give it to us.

Look at v6, 'Now these things [the history of Israel in the wilderness that Paul's just recounted] took place as examples for us, *that we might not desire evil as they did*.'

You see, sin is not just that we *do* wrong things, things that offend God and hurt others and ourselves. It's that we *want* to do them. It's about *desire.* And for these guys going to the pagan temples, what they desired - on the surface - was social advancement and social acceptance. It was the desire to be known, to be welcomed, to belong, to be *in*, with all the social and financial capital

that came with that. And so at the deeper level what they were desiring was security and status, the flourishing that comes with knowing that you matter.

Augustine wrote that at root sin is all about two desires - the desire to love and to be loved. But it's not that those desires are wrong - God has made you to love and be loved. It's that we misdirect those desires - we look to the wrong things to fulfil them. We love, we cherish, we supremely value, and we look for love from things that can never ultimately satisfy our desires, from things other than God. And for these guys it was the social approval, the career progress, the being-well-thought-of by society that came with going to the temple.

And here's where it gets serious for us. You see, the problem is that if you love, and look for love in the wrong places, it will have serious knock on effects. And in v7-10 Paul spells those out by looking back to Israel. Verse 7, 'Do not be idolaters as some of them were.'

You see, if you love the wrong thing, this thing you most want, the applause of the crowd, or a great family, or a reputation in your field, or if you look for love in the wrong places, it inevitably leads to idolatry, because you're going to seek inner satisfaction in this created thing, rather than in the Creator. And you'll idolise this thing, you'll make costly sacrifices for it and trust it, because you think it'll give you what you want - love, identity, security, belonging. And you'll use it and try and control it to give those things to you, until it starts to control you. And Paul says to these Corinthians Christians, v14, 'Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.' Because they may not have been directly worshipping the idols in the temples they were going to, but the reason they were going was still idolatry, because they were still making something other than God the object of their desires, of what they most wanted, of what they worshipped.

But he goes on, v8, 'We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did.' And in Israel's history, sexual sin and idolatry were nearly always tied together. But things don't change do they? You see, sexual immorality doesn't just come out of the blue. Someone doesn't sleep with their girlfriend or boyfriend, or commit adultery, out of nowhere. It comes from wanting to love and be loved, but looking for it in wrong places, in thinking sex with this other person will give me what I want.

And then, v9, 'We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did.' And given the context Paul's addressing in Corinth, it's interesting that the way the people of Israel tested God in the wilderness was by doubting his power and goodness in this area of food and eating and drinking and would he give them what they needed. But think about it: seek your security, your sense of well-being in life, in things other than God, and you're bound to end up testing him. Because this other thing, by its very nature, will be insecure, so you'll always be slightly on edge, there will always be this doubt in your mind as to God's goodness and power. And if this other thing fails you, because you've put a weight on it that it can't bear, you'll seriously start to question: if God was really there, and if he really loved me, why isn't he giving me this thing I want? Because we've substituted this thing for God.

But the final outworking of wrong desire is in v10: 'We must not… grumble, as some of them did.' And the Israelites grumbled over their food, over their leaders, over their hardships, and over God's promise to give them the Promised Land. Grumbling's the sin of ingratitude isn't it? Desire the wrong thing, look to something other than God to ultimately satisfy you, and you'll never be thankful for all the other ways God is at work in your life, unless and until you get what you most

want. And even if you do get it, over time it will inevitably disappoint, and you'll feel short changed. And how will you respond? By grumbling. And grumbling just has this strange contagious power to spread discontent to others.

So Paul's message to these Christians is - aim your desires in the wrong places - look for love and fulfilment and worth and security in the wrong places and you're going to make idols out of created things, you're going to give yourselves to others in wrong ways, you're going to test God and it will eat away at your inner peace and you'll become a serial complainer.

So, how are you supposed to avoid that path?

Defensive Strategies
Now, when you're out skiing and there's a muddy hole in the piste, what do they do? They fence it off. They put up those black and yellow poles to warn you away and make sure you don't fall in. And Paul does the same here. Because firstly he says, ***know your history.*** Learn from examples.

[Now can anyone tell me who this is? General Henri Guisan] Now when people stick up a statue to some great historical figure they do it to honour them, and to inspire others, like us, to acts of courage and greatness, like them.

But remembering history is also about learning from negative examples, isn't it. Holocaust Memorial Day doesn't just exist to remind us of those murdered, it's to educate today about the ongoing reality and evil of antisemitism. As Winston Churchill wrote, "Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

And in v1-5 Paul recounts Israel's history in the wilderness, and all the blessings all the people enjoyed. Verse 1, they were 'all under the cloud' - they all experienced the protection and guidance of God's presence. Verse 1 again, they 'all passed through the sea' - they all experienced God's deliverance from slavery. Verse 2, 'all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea' - they were all made part of God's people, his redemptive community, led by Moses. And v3-4, 'all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink' - they all experienced the miracles of God's provision - miracles that ultimately came from Christ, the rock, Paul tells them.

And yet, despite all of them experiencing all of this, v5, 'Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.' So even though they'd all had the same spiritual experiences, some of them, many of them, most of them, fell into the sin of wrong desires and idolatry and immorality and testing God and grumbling, and never made it to the Promised Land.

And twice Paul says, v6 and 11, 'These things took place as examples for us… these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction.'

In other words, learn from their negative example, Paul is saying. Take note how others have seen God move powerfully, and experienced his protection and provision, and yet looked to wrong things, to substitute gods, to satisfy their desires and it's led to their destruction.

But secondly, ***Don't be complacent***. Verse 12, 'Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.' Now, imagine a sports coach whose team has just lost, despite being ahead at half-

time, and he's in the post match press conference, and the journalist asks him, what happened? What's he going to say? He could blame the ref. He could compliment the opposition. But he might also admit, 'We got complacent. We should never have lost. We just took our eye off the ball.'

And Paul's saying, don't do that. Don't make the potentially fatal mistake of thinking, this couldn't happen to you. Don't be casual. Don't be over-confident. Don't trust yourself. You'll only stand if you realise you too could fall, that you too are vulnerable to looking to the wrong places for what you most want.

But, you also don't need to despair! Because thirdly, ***Remember God's Faithfulness,*** Paul says. Verse 13, 'No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. *God is faithful*.' You may be vulnerable, you may wobble, but God never is and he never does. So put your trust in him, and not in yourself, Paul is saying. See yourself as vulnerable and him as faithful: faithful to give you what you're really looking for; faithful to satisfy your desires in ways that idols of money and sex and power and status never can. And as you do, far from becoming more insecure in your own vulnerability, your confidence will grow.

So, fourthly, ***Remember God's Power and Provision.*** Verse 13, '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.' When the air hostess makes the safety announcement on the plane, they make a pointing of pointing out the lighting on the floor that'll direct you to the exits if the cabin fills with smoke. Well, when temptation comes sometimes it can feel like your thinking gets filled with smoke, can't it. And you begin to think that maybe it would be more satisfying if you gave in. And Paul is saying, don't. In that moment, trust God. There will be a way out. Look for it, pray for it and you'll find it.

But if these guys are to turn away from idol temples, they're going to need a higher motive to live for than social advancement, aren't they? And they're going to need a power to help them do it.

Power for Life and Motives for Living

And having told them in v14 to 'flee from idolatry' in v16-21 Paul tells them that they basically face a choice - a choice they can't fudge. And it's a choice of which sphere, which domain, to be a part of. You can either draw on all the blessing and power for life that flows from Christ's death, or if you continue looking to idols to give you what you desire, you're inevitably going to come under the controlling power of spiritually dark forces.

Verse 16, 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?' So these guys literally have a choice as to which table they're going to sit at, don't they? And as you come to the Lord's table, and take communion, you're sharing, you're participating in all that Jesus did and does for you by his death and resurrection. The cross that tells you you're so vulnerable to temptation, and so broken by the sin that comes with giving into it, that the Son of God had to die for you. But you are so loved that he didn't just have to do it, he desired to do it, he willingly did it. Because his desire is for you.

And knowing that becomes a source of power in your life. It tells you, you don't need to go to the idol temple in 1st Century Corinth, or overwork or sleep with your boyfriend or girlfriend in 21st century Lausanne, to win the approval of others. You've already got Christ's approval. It tells you you don't need money or position or career success to feel ok about yourself, because you know

that though you could never earn enough or be successful enough to deserve it, you are loved by One infinitely greater.

But the other power is very different, Paul says. Whereas Jesus' death and resurrection releases a power in your life that sets you free, look to god substitutes to meet your deepest desires and you'll be increasingly ensnared by them.

Verse 19-20: 'What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.' In other words, these idols are nothing, but it's the controlling powers behind them that matter. And come into their sphere of influence and you'll find yourself increasingly influenced by them. Make the approval of others your god, and you'll be increasingly controlled by what others think of you. Make a romantic relationship your god and you'll be empty if you don't have one and devastated if you lose one. Make career your god and you'll sacrifice family and friends for it - you'll feel great about yourself all the time you're going up, but when you stall, you'll discover just how much, too much, it meant to you.

But Paul doesn't just point us to the liberating power of the cross. He gives us a motive for choosing right. Verse 24, 'Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour.' So instead of just living for yourself and meeting your desires without caring how it affects others, live with care for them.

And he gives two very practical examples. Verse 25, 'Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.' Now, some years back we were invited to dinner at a friend's house, and they served the most amazing piece of beef we have ever tasted. And we sat there and asked, 'where did you get this?' And of course, it was a hand-fed Swiss cow from the local farmer that you'd have to mortgage your house to buy.

Well, apparently, in Corinth, all the best meat in the market would have come from the temples where it would first have been offered in sacrifice to an idol. But Paul is saying, don't let that bother you. Why not? Because Christ is your God and you're participating in the power of his cross, and because, v26, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.' And the same is true, Paul says in v27, if a non-Christian invites you to dinner. You don't need to ask awkward questions about where the steak came from. Be a blessing to them, not a righteous pain in the neck. You can eat with thanksgiving. Because if, as the saying goes, all truth is God's truth, well, all steak is God's steak. So you don't need to go looking for the 'idol free meat' label.

But, v28, 'if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it.' Because for whatever reason, this is clearly bothering them. Now, if life was just about you, you could go ahead and eat, but it's not. It's about living life and making choices that do good, not harm, to others.

But, finally, life isn't just about living for the good of others, it's also about the glory of God. Verse 31, 'So whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.'

Now what does that look like? Well, it means examine your motives. Why are you doing what you're doing? Why are you still going to eat at the idol temple? Or why are you putting everything into your career? Or why do you want to buy or wear that piece of clothing? It means to trust and

obey what God says in his word about this situation you find yourself in, or to humbly accept what he sends your way. It means you don't avoid something just because you feel totally inadequate for it, but neither do you blunder right in because you think you're totally adequate for it, but rather you ask him for his power to equip you for whatever he calls you to. And it means that when you get praised for a job well done, you know where the praise really belongs. And if things don't go well, and instead of praise criticism comes your way, you don't crumble, because you know you are dearly loved by your Father and not because of your success or reputation.

So in any and every situation, think, what most brings glory and honour to God here? And then enjoy him in that situation. That's what Jesus did. And it's why Paul says in 11:1, 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.'

So, Christ has died and risen for you. And as a Christian, you get to share in the power of that death and resurrection. Live a life empowered by that good news. Find your desire to love and be loved ultimately satisfied in him. And then go out into the world to live for the glory of God and the good of others.