

Spiritual Vertigo

1 Corinthians 10:6-12

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A Quick Review of 1 Corinthians

The Apostle Paul is writing to the church he founded in the city of Corinth. In his absence from them, the church was drowning in issues and dysfunctions. Paul is systematically addressing these issues and he began in chapter 8 in a section that goes through chapter 10 dealing with Christian liberty. Christian liberty issues are gray areas that the Bible doesn't clearly spell out as to whether a Christian should or should not participate. Paul's main point is that real Christian liberty is not a bondage that *has to* exercise liberty, but is a freedom to NOT exercise freedom should it be better for gospel ministry or relationships with fellow Christians.

Paul sets before them an example - his own life. He was an Apostle with rights and privileges that go with that office, yet he willingly set them aside in order to reach people with the gospel. He became all things to all men so that by all means he might save some (9:22). He disciplined himself like an athlete who disciplines his body's natural desires in order to win the race and win the prize.

This brings us to chapter 10 where he warned the Corinthians that they were trending toward the same spiritual overconfidence that destroyed Israel. Israel had tremendous spiritual privileges in the Exodus: they walked on dry ground through the Red Sea; they were fed every day with miracle manna and drank miracle water; God personally led them each day with a pillar of fire. You would think these experiences would have translated into total devotion to God.

Did it? Far from it. *Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.* (1 Corinthians 10:6) They fell so quickly and so easily into sin that they remain tragic examples of incredible privilege and incredible failure. Paul continues to draw on the story of Israel to warn the Corinthians to not live their own tragic story.

Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:6-12)

The key verse is verse 12. We know this as the "Therefore" shows it to be Paul's conclusion based on what he has said in verses 1-11. This is his application point. *Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.* "Thinks" that he stands. What does that mean? This is a person who is spiritually disoriented. He thinks that he is standing strong spiritually, and that he is morally upright, but in reality he is about to fall and he doesn't realize it.

As a child I had lots of ear problems. I have had tubes in both ears twice. I spent untold hours at the ear doctor with various problems. And then in my late teens on two separate

occasions I broke both ear drums requiring fairly significant surgery to repair them. I am not an expert on the ear, but my knowledge is probably above average. The ear apparatus does more than help us hear sound; it also gives us our sense of spatial orientation. Are we vertical or horizontal? If this isn't working properly, we lose our sense of balance and feel dizzy. This is known as vertigo.

When someone has vertigo, their inner ear instrument panel isn't working right and they may think they're vertical, but they're horizontal or think they're horizontal, but are really vertical. The sense of balance is a pretty important part of the body, don't you think? If you have spun a child around or played the game where you spin around a bat, what happens when you stop? You are going down. Why? That sense of balance has been lost.

Have you ever been to a wedding when someone in the wedding party passes out? I have performed a few where it happened and it's always a bit shocking because they remain upright for awhile. They have already gone bye-bye but they are still standing and then they begin to sway and then they go down. I did a wedding here once where this happened. I was standing here and a bridesmaid fell from the third step or so all the way to the ground. She hit hard.

Let he who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall. Spiritually speaking, sin and temptation are like spiritual vertigo. They disorient us. We think we're still okay but in reality we are in the process of falling. The Corinthians were in just such a danger. For all their supreme self-regard about their spiritual achievements, their attitudes toward one another and their lack of concern for gospel ministry, their flirting with the idolatry of Corinth revealed weakness, not strength. They were more falling than standing.

We are all susceptible to this same kind of disorientation and if you don't think so, you are in the most precarious position of all. How often have we heard it said on the other side of some devastating sin, and you can finish this, "*I never thought it would...happen to me.*"

This is how temptation fundamentally works, *I'm good. Everything's fine! Somebody like me would never fall. I am too spiritual. Too strong.* The old saying is true, *The bigger they are the harder they fall.* I was reading an "end of the decade" sports article listing the most influential sports stories. It was a long list. Guess what was number 1? **Temptation.** The undisputed force of the decade. It's not even close. Her perfume filled the air. Her stiletto footprints were everywhere. Too many in sports couldn't resist her. How many lives did she professionally and/or personally damage?" (Shaun Powell, http://nbcsports.msnbc.com/id/34471048/ns/sports-decade_in_review/) The article went on to list the famous athletes brought down by temptations to steroids, women, scandal, and all the rest. These examples should tell us something.

That's what Paul is saying here about Israel. These examples should tell us something. The wise will hear it and beware.

Temptation's Dizzying Temptations

What you really want/need is not God - idolatry

Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." (Verse 7)

This is a reference to Israel's idolatry at Mt. Sinai with the golden calf in Exodus 32. Israel had just experienced God's mighty power with the ten plagues and the Red Sea crossing.

They left with all the wealth of Egypt handed to them and are encamped around Mt. Sinai. As I have said, if there ever were a people who should be committed to their God, it was Israel on the other side of the Red Sea. Moses was on the mountain receiving the covenantal stipulations; also known as the Ten Commandments. They ironically begin with commandment number 1, *You shall have no other gods before me*. While God is giving that to Moses on the mountain, Israel is spiritually disoriented in the valley. They demand Aaron make a god for them. They wanted a god they could make, a god they could see, a god they could manipulate and control. Aaron gathers their gold and makes the golden calf god. Guess where they got that idea? The Egyptians worshipped the bull and believed it to be the god of fertility and strength. The very people who enslaved them are who they admire and want to be like. *The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play*. (Verse 7) The word for "play" is a euphemism for sexual play. It was a wild party of food and sexual orgy.

How do God's people go from a Red Sea experience to golden calf idolatry? We look at this and say, "Are you stupid?" No. They were like us. The desire to worship and live for something other than the real God of heaven is so subtle that it disorients our belief system and heart priorities and we can quickly live for something other than God and not realize it. This is more of a problem than we realize. I recently read a great book on this by Tim Keller. Let me share a few of his thoughts with you. First of all, what is an idol?

It is anything that is more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career or making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving "face" and social standing... An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure." There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship. (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. xvii-iii)

We have to realize that idolatry is not the golden calf itself; it is the desire within to live for something other than the true God. It's not the calf itself. It is the desires and priorities of the heart and who or what is ultimate. That is why the first commandment is, *You shall have no other gods before me*. Here's more from Keller:

- *If you want to know what or who your God is, who or what do you enjoy imagining? The Bible uses three metaphors to describe how people relate to idols: they love idols, trust idols, obey idols.* (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. xxi)
- *The most painful times in our lives are times in which our Isaacs, our idols, are being threatened or removed.* (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 19)

Much more could be said here. Idols are evidence of spiritual vertigo. We are confused; disoriented; in a very dangerous place. We think we stand but idols trip us up and take us down to our own spiritual destruction. As I have talked about this, are you identifying any counterfeit gods in your way of thinking or way of living?

Sexual fulfillment is ultimate - immorality

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. (Verse 8)

This story is recorded in Numbers 25. Here's what happened. The Israelites encamped near the Moabites. The Moabites worshipped pagan gods of fertility and sexuality. The Moabites invited the Israelites to their parties and worship services. These were filled with illicit sexual activity. The Israelites came and the text says they "*began to whore with the daughters of Moab.*" (Numbers 25:1). This is not hard to figure out and I hope I don't have to color this in. They called themselves the people of God but they wanted sexual fulfillment more than God's favor. They wanted sex more than God.

There is so much to say on this point. Sexual desire is so deceptive. It is a drug and it disorients our value system and it plays with our hearts so easily. A well intended Christian man can be walking down the street and in a moment see an advertisement or an attractive woman and be seized by something very powerful and very disorienting. I know because I have tried to be that good Christian man. Lust is instant vertigo. When lust has the opportunity to express itself, now it seems overwhelming. Vertigo. *I love God, but she is so beautiful, so desirable, so much better than not having her or having someone else.* How quickly we can forget a Savior who loved us and died to set us free from sin. How quickly we forget about the damage and intrinsic punishment sex outside of marriage brings.

We are living in a modern day Moab and the Moabites invite us to their value set every day. If you think you could never do that, lust after that, become obsessed with online pornography, forget your marital vows, rationalize anything, blindly lose everything for a sexual encounter, you have not only forgotten what happened to Israel but are blind to how many fall to this all around us. If you party with the Moabites, you'll likely sleep with the Moabites.

Sexual desire itself is good. God made it and designed marriage for its fulfillment. Lust magnifies the value of the momentary thrill and minimizes the consequences spiritually so that in that moment it seems perfectly reasonable to lust, flirt, and ultimately, sleep with someone. This is spiritual vertigo. If King David would have thought rationally for a moment about all that a sexual encounter with Bathsheba would cost him, he would have never given her a second glance.

I received a note from someone who told me that he was obsessing about a woman not his wife. What should he do? This is what I wrote to him: *I share your deep concern for this fantasy that you are in. As you must realize, this is NOT God's will. It is a lie that is promising to offer you something that fidelity to your wife and God will not provide. You need to take this thought captive and kill it by slaying it with what you know to be true. Sexual sin outside of marriage is a powerful lie. You promised your wife you would love her only. The world and your family is watching to see if there is any truth to your profession of Christ. Every adulterer is judged by God, the consequences of doing what you are fantasizing about would be devastating and regretful for a lifetime. A few honest moments of reflection like this would/must surely show this other woman and the thoughts you have toward her to be completely foolish. If you intentionally spend time thinking and praying through these things and still cannot see this woman through the lens of truth, let me know.*

Israel is an example. Thankfully it is also an example of God's grace. Sexual sin is damaging but it is also forgivable by God and others. God will restore the repentant sinner. I'd also add, we are all in this struggle together and none of us should cast too many stones or we will find ourselves the one who thinks he stands yet falls.

Grumble against God's goodness - blasphemy

We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. (Verses 9-10)

I am going to take these two together as they are similar stories. Israel complained against God in Numbers 21:5. They tested His patience and God sent serpents into the camp. In Numbers 14:2 they grumbled against Moses and God saying, *Would that we had died in the land of Egypt!* The one tested God, the other questioned His goodness. Both brought severe judgment.

The seeds of those sins lie in our hearts. How quickly we complain against God about some circumstance in our life that we don't like, think should be different, would change if we were God. We give vent to those in the form of grumbling and murmuring. We get negative about God and the church and the Moses in our lives. The Israelites did this constantly! There is always a temptation to grumble because nothing and nobody in this world is perfect! We can always find something wrong with anything. Some people are professionals at it. I have had the opinion after getting to know some folks that they are going to get to heaven, look around, and say, *It's just not what I expected.* God must be in heaven thinking, what does it take to make these people happy?

The flesh feeds on the negative, mulls it over, savors the bitterness, whispers complaints. Behind all of it is a heart thinking it should be God, and if it was, things would be better. This is how temptation gets to us. Idolatry. Immorality. Grumbling. Why are these here? Verse 11: *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.* These were normal people like you and me. We need to look and learn from their spiritual failure. It happened to them; it could happen to any one of us. *Let anyone who thinks that he stands (like the Israelites did) take heed lest he fall (like the Israelites did).*

Who among us in 2010 will ignore this, and will fall? Can we look at these examples and see how NOT to do it? What should we do? Take heed. This means "beware." Look out! It is in the imperative. *Look out! Watch out!* Beyond "taking heed," what we should do is actually next week's message, one of the most famous and helpful verses in the Bible: *No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. 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. (1 Corinthians 10:13)*

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