

The Lord's Supper III

1 Corinthians 11:27-34

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If you are a guest at Bethel Church today, our weekly worship practice is to preach messages from the Bible. Typically we are teaching through books of the Bible. This allows us to speak on all the subjects the Bible speaks on, which is a huge spectrum of subjects. You are visiting on week three of a series of teaching on the Lord's Supper from 1 Corinthians. The Lord's Supper was commanded by Jesus and this series is helping us to understand what it's about, how to participate in it, and why it's so important.

There is an insert in today's bulletin that addresses some common questions about the Lord's Supper I won't get to including how often we should take it and what about children participating. Check it out...after the service.

Let's remember what we've seen so far. The Corinthian practice was common to the early church, that of hosting a meal; a kind of potluck during which The Lord's Supper was celebrated. Great! Here's the problem. The wealthier folks were eating and gorging before everyone else arrived, leaving some hungry and neglected and others fat and drunk. The Apostle Paul takes them to task and says essentially they are NOT having the Lord's Supper. That bears our consideration. You can take the elements of the Lord's Supper without actually taking the Lord's Supper. For it to be the Lord's Supper, the Lord has to be there. He is spiritually with us through the truth symbolized by the bread and cup. But when the attitudes of the people toward one another are the opposite of what Christ's sacrifice on the Cross means, Jesus doesn't show up and it's NOT the Lord's Supper.

How should we take it? We learned two heart characteristics: we must be *thankful* and we must *remember*. We'll cover three more today: *proclamation, anticipation, examination*.

We begin with 11:26, *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*. This little verse holds two important purposes for the Lord's Supper: proclamation and anticipation.

How to Eat the Lord's Supper (Continued)

Proclamation – The Lord's Death

You proclaim the Lord's death. Central to the Lord's Supper is the Lord's death. His death is what we are to remember. He doesn't establish a remembrance ordinance to any of His miracles, His temptation, His transfiguration or even the horrific details of His betrayal and flogging. It is His death on the cross where He represented us, atoned for our sin, paid the moral and spiritual ransom price required, and personally experienced a human death. This is the center of the Christian faith. This is the core. This is the foundation. The Lord's Supper centers Christian worship on the redemptive event. It tethers us to it. This is what keeps the church from becoming a social center or a club or a political action group or whatever. The Lord's Supper helps us keep the main thing the main thing. This is one of our core values at Bethel Church. The Supper reminds us *who we are* (sinners), and *who Christ is* (Son of God, Savior of the world), and *what He did* (He died for our sins).

It also reminds us *why we are here*. We proclaim His death to the world. We are called to be gospel speakers to the community and culture around us. How are you doing with that? Not like you'd like? Me neither. How do we keep ourselves outwardly focused? The gospel itself does that by breaking our hearts with God's love. That breaking creates compassion and enthusiasm for sharing it with others. The gospel inherently does that, and so does the Supper as it reenacts to us God's love through Christ's work.

It is a little like dining at a new restaurant that you really like. Maybe you've done this. "You've got to go there. The food is wonderful. The service is great. The atmosphere is really nice. We loved it!" Diners share their dining happiness with others. The Lord's Supper is a kind of spiritual dining experience. The more we appreciate it, the more we want to share it with others. That's *Proclamation*.

Anticipation – The Lord's Return

You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (Verse 26)

This is how the Lord's Supper is different from President's Day or Martin Luther King Day. All the memorials to great people who have died look back. None of them look forward. There's nothing to look forward to! The person is dead.

The Lord's Supper looks back to the cross but also looks forward to His return; forward with anticipation to the one we remember and worship. Looking forward was so much a part of the early church's celebration that they would conclude the Lord's Supper by corporately saying *Maranatha*. It means *O Lord, come!* Let's do that sometime in future. Let's practice. And the church said, *Maranatha! O Lord, come!*

In this way, the Lord's Supper celebrates what we celebrate next weekend: He's alive. It's not a funeral. It's not a graveside service; for the simple reason that funerals are for dead people! Not only is He NOT dead, He's coming back. Then we will feast at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb with Him. No more symbols. No need. He will be physically there. Then we will feast with Him bodily present.

In a way our redemption could be told in the story of three suppers. The Last Supper. The Lord's Supper. And the Lamb's Supper. The first establishes the covenant. The next remembers the covenant. The final consummates it. The Lord's Supper anticipates His coming. Kind of like appetizers get the juices flowing for the real food to come. The Lord's Supper gets the spiritual juices flowing. It anticipates by proclaiming to us His death until He comes. *Maranatha*. Proclamation. Anticipation.

Examination – Spiritual Self-evaluation

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (Verses 27-30)

This is a difficult passage of Scripture. I remember the first time I became aware of it as a boy. A twenty-something son of a family in the church I grew up in died in an accident. He was far away from God and his death was so strange that people speculated that God judged him. I remember the fear I felt as a boy, *Would God do that?* Is that was this means? On the other side of the spectrum are people who find judgment talk amusing. God

is love after all and we are free. God doesn't take these things that seriously and neither should we. Both are wrong and I hope our little exposition will show why.

Context is SO important. What is the problem that Paul is addressing? A distortion of the whole point of the Lord's Supper by some of the wealthy who created division in the church by ignoring the needs of the less well-to-do by eating the Agape meal and taking the Lord's Supper on their own. This displayed an entitlement mentality. We are up here and everyone else is down there. Verses 27 and following are Paul's prescription for keeping that attitude out of the church and away from the Lord's Supper.

What does "in an unworthy manner" mean?

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. (Verse 27)

Most of us, myself included, have read this to refer to my worthiness or moral suitability to take the Lord's Supper. Notice that it doesn't say "whoever is unworthy to eat this bread." It is not the person who is unworthy, it is the manner of taking it that is unworthy of the gospel. J.C. Ryle said, "A sense of our own unworthiness is the best worthiness that we can bring to the Lord's Table." If we come to the table with any thought that the moral rightness of our lives allows us to partake, we are missing the point of the Lord's Supper. It is not a statement of our worthiness; it is a reminder of our unworthiness. We don't deserve anything the gospel gives. We receive it by His grace.

The story is told of an old minister, who saw an old woman hesitating before receiving the cup. He offered it to her and said, *Take it woman; it's for sinners; it's for you.* That is not to deny the need to confess sin to God, or to take an inventory of our spiritual lives. These are things we should do regularly anyway.

To take the Lord's Supper unworthily is to do what the Corinthians were doing. They were being selfish. They were disregarding the needs of others in the church. They were satisfying their own cravings, and there was no sense of community or mutual fellowship in them. Their selfishness was dividing the church and making a mockery of Christ by the manner in which they took the Lord's Supper.

"Unworthy manner" is not unbelief or a lack of moral purity; it is the absence of Christian love or spirit of service toward one another.

It is unworthy because by their attitudes they are not on the side of Christ but on the side of His enemies. His enemies physically broke His body and these Corinthian Christians were spiritually breaking His body. That's why they are guilty of profaning the body and blood of Jesus. One commentator says a literal translation is, *They become guilty of murdering Jesus.* That sounds harsh, but it tells you how serious God is about Christian love and unity, especially at the Lord's Supper which celebrates the terrible price Jesus paid to make us one.

I have missed this my entire tenure at Bethel. As you know we almost always say, "This is for Christians and if you are not a Christian, please don't partake." That is still true. The Lord's Supper is for Christians, but that's not what this is talking about. The warning isn't for non-Christians, the warning is for Christians whose attitudes and actions are divisive, lack love, and fail to allow the weightiness of even the Lord's Supper to shape their attitude. They mock the spiritual unity of the church which Jesus died to create and therefore are as liable as those who murdered Jesus in the first place.

How about that warning before partaking? "If by your attitudes or actions you are creating disunity in the congregation, especially if you have a holier-than-thou attitude, do NOT participate." If you do, God will view you like Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, Judas, and the Jews who cried out "Crucify Him!" Needless to say, you don't want to be in any group with Judas.

That ought to get our attention, right? Might that not compel some hardened relationships in the church to soften and reconcile? Might that not fuel a servant mentality in the church (note the next chapter)? Might that not help us keep the main thing the main thing? Why? I don't want to be guilty of profaning the body and blood of Christ. No way.

For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (Verse 29)

We don't have much time for an interpretation issue but there is one with "the body" in this verse. Is it shorthand for The Lord's Supper (i.e. the blood and the body) OR does it refer to the body of Christ (i.e. the local congregation)? It's not a slam dunk but I think it is the body of Christ. It fits the context beautifully. Anyone who takes the Lord's Supper without regard to their fellow brothers and sisters in the church eats and drinks judgment on themselves. Now another tough verse:

That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (Verse 30)

This is really strong. Paul says, *Your spiritual weakness is the cause of some of your physical weakness and even the death of some.* Do we know any details about these? Nothing. But with apostolic authority, Paul draws a line from their divisive attitudes to spiritual weakness and physical weakness and even death. This isn't the only place that God has physically judged spiritual sin. There are many examples in the Old Testament from the leprosy of Elijah's servant to the death of the Uzzah who touched the ark. The best example is Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 where they fell dead for lying about the extent of their donation to the church. The God-is-love-and-doesn't-do-this-kind-of-thing crowd has a hard time with this. But that is what it says.

Be careful though. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is authorized to connect the dots. None of us are in a position to do that. Illness doesn't necessarily mean sin. That's the error of the disciples when they asked Jesus if the blind man had sinned or his parents. We need to let God do the judging. This is a warning though that God can and sometimes does discipline us physically to produce spiritual repentance and spiritual fruit.

But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (Verses 31-32)

God's discipline is always for our good (Hebrews 12:7ff.). There's nothing like a little illness or pain or a scary diagnosis to put things in their right perspective. God does this so we may not be condemned (Verse 32) along with the rest of the world. It is part of His preserving commitment to our perseverance. He keeps us from hard hearts that turn away from Him permanently. He began the work in us and He will carry it to completion (Philippians 1:6).

Paul concludes with a practical exhortation: *So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come. (Verses 33-34)*

And that concludes the clearest teaching on the Lord's Supper in the Bible. How are we going to approach the Lord's Supper as a church? What role is it going to play? This is not something that is determined by pastors and leaders of the church. This whole chapter shows that it is individual Christians' personal belief and practice and the corporate ethos of love that determines to what degree we experience the blessing God intended for the Supper. It is not how well it is prepared or presented. The determining factor is the heart and our relationships, and whether we are showing relationally what the Supper says spiritually. It is a regular call to Christian love, forgiveness, humility, and mutual service BECAUSE we are Christ followers. Not to become or earn it but to show it. *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* (John 13:35)

The Effects of the Lord's Supper

I want to conclude with the effects the Lord's Supper should have on us. One of my favorite dead pastor/authors is J.C. Ryle. He identified four "effects" the Lord's Supper has on the soul when it is received and celebrated as it ought to be:

The Lord's Supper has a humbling effect

To consider the body and blood of Jesus reminds us of the sinfulness of our sin and the immense price that God paid to save us. *To take the Lord's Supper*, as Chrysostom said, *is to bear in mind the greatness of the things set before us.* It humbles us and we see ourselves for who we are before God.

The Lord's Supper has a sanctifying effect

As we think of what Jesus did, it calls us to a greater commitment and a greater holiness of life. To die to self. To take the Calvary road. It ought to stir greater love for our Savior and a greater desire to please Him with our lives.

The Lord's Supper has a restraining effect

Who can properly take the Lord's Supper and not think it's a big deal to be a Christian? It causes us to think with gospel clarity about our responsibilities to Christ and to others, to our families and our church. To see our entire lives in the God story of the Last Supper, the Lord's Supper, and the coming Lamb's supper. I need to be serious about this because God clearly is. Are we? Taking it properly keeps us from triteness and a kind of lite and superficial Christianity. The Supper deepens and enriches our faith and centers it on the foundation of Christ.

The Lords' Supper has a cheering effect

The Lord's Supper reminds us that our salvation is complete in Christ. *If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8:31-32) It ought to make us glad and happy in our Savior.

This Friday night, we will partake in the Lord's Supper as a part of our Good Friday services. Come ready for the service and the Supper to feed us truth and prepare us for Easter joy. It'll be Friday, but remember, *Sunday's coming.*

Benediction

May the Lord of His Supper be Lord of our Lives. May we inwardly weep that our invitation to dine with Him is red with His blood. As we sit at His table, may we hear Christ's assurance that our place at the Table is truly ours by virtue of His New Covenant. May this cause us to look around the table at our brothers and sisters with tears of mutual joy and gladness that sinners like us are seated at such a wonderful banquet as this. May Bethel Church always eat the Lord's Supper with reverence, joy, wonder and worship as we remember our Lord's death until He comes.

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