

Sermon 36: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34: Properly Observing the Lord's Supper

OUTLINE

Criticized for sinful observance
Reminded of proper observance
Warned against unworthy observance

INTRODUCTION

The Lord's Supper is something that is central to practicing our Christian faith. It is one of two ordinances that Christ gave to His church and commanded them to do, to make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Trinity; and to remember His death for us until He comes again by observing the Lord's Supper. It was a key aspect of what the early church did when it came into existence in Acts 2:42, 'And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' The Lord's Supper was celebrated with a meal which came to be known as a love feast (Jude 12). It was called a love feast because of the love that the Christian church had towards one another. Paul had taught the Corinthian church about Communion 11:23, but the purity of its practice was being compromised by their lovelessness and divisions. We come to one of the key NT passages that teach us about the Lord's Supper. Sadly, Paul is having to do some rebuking and instruction because the Corinthians were failing to observe it in the proper fashion. We will see from 11:17-34 that the issue with the Corinthians was not so much one of theology and doctrine, but of improper practice. True, the Corinthians were ignorant of the spiritual aspects of Communion which Paul has already spoken about and illuminated them on, 10:16-22. But we see from the passage before us that there was also the major problem of observing it in a loveless and divided way. Paul is dealing with the question of, how does one properly observe the Lord's Supper? How do we properly observe the Lord's Supper? How do we eat in a worthy manner? These are matters of deep concern to each and every believer.

Our portion falls into three parts, v17-22 where Paul criticizes them for their sinful observance; this is followed up by v23-26 where Paul reminds them of the proper observance; and then finally Paul warns them of the consequences of an unworthy observance in v27-34.

Criticized for sinful observance

V17, 'But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.' Paul had begun this section in 11:2 commending the Corinthians for remembering and maintaining the various traditions he had handed on to them. Paul makes very clear here that this does not include the way that they have kept the Lord's Supper.

V18-19, 'For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.' Paul zeroes in on one of the key problems, they are divided. Today if you speak about divisions over the Lord's Supper you would probably be describing theological differences between Roman Catholics who believe in transubstantiation and who view the Mass as a bloodless sacrifice; and the

Lutherans who believe in Consubstantiation and who view the literal body and blood of Jesus as present though not the bread and wine; and the Reformed view which believes that Christ is spiritually present to nourish through the Spirit by faith; and the memorial view which rejects any notion of presence and blessing in the supper seeing it as a bare memorial. These are not the divisions that Paul is talking about. Rather Paul is talking about the sociological divisions that prevail in Roman society being propagated in the church. Instead of the gospel defining the unity of God's people, the prevailing beliefs and practices of Roman culture regarding the 'haves' and the 'have nots' were being imported into the church and impacted how the Lord's Supper was being observed. Paul recognizes that there is a place for legitimate differentiation where those who are true and excel are distinguished from those who are not, separating the true from the false. But Paul is stating that there are illegitimate divisions in Corinth.

V20-21, 'When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.' Paul's disgust at the abuse is apparent in v20 where he denies that they are even celebrating the Lord's Supper. The divisions are so against the spirit of what the table is all about that even if they call it celebrating the Lord's Supper, it is a farce and denial of it. Paul, like the OT prophets of old is denouncing the religiosity of the Corinthians because they are hypocritically going through the ritual of the Lord's Supper but are treading upon the needy and poor in their Church. V21 is the tip of an iceberg that points to the typical practices related to feasts in the ancient Roman world. Instead of the unity of the body of Christ being recognized by the way they eat the meal we see details of a fractured practice. In ancient Rome meals were a place where you broadcast your status and your place, where through where someone sat, what they ate, who ate first, and who ate their fill all communicated and reinforced your place in society. The 'haves' and the 'have nots' were treated very differently. You must remember that the early church would meet in people's homes, most likely the homes of a rich person which had the space for large groups. And it seems that the typical practices of Roman society were being perpetuated in the church. Pliny the Younger gives an account of what would often occur at a meal in a rich person's home: 'It would be a long story, and of no importance, were I to recount too particularly by what accident I (who am not at all fond of society) supped lately with a person, who in his own opinion lives in splendor combined with economy; but according to mine, in a sordid but expensive manner. Some very elegant dishes were served up to himself and a few more of the company; while those which were placed before the rest were cheap and paltry. He had apportioned in small flagons three different sorts of wine; but you are not to suppose it was that the guests might take their choice: on the contrary, that they might not choose at all. One was for himself and me; the next for his friends of a lower order (for, you must know, he measures out his friendship according to the degrees of quality); and the third for his own freedmen and mine.'¹ We have to fill in the blanks and can't give a full accounting of the detail, but it is clear from the details that Paul provides that there were those who had much and ate it all themselves, who did not share with those who came later and with less; that there were those who were so overindulgent that they were even drunk at the meal attending the Supper.

¹ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 556.

The Lord's Supper was intended to be a meal that speaks of our union in Christ, where the most distinguishing thing about us is not our race or sex or class but that we are all children of God. Paul has already hinted at this unity in 10:17, 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.' This notion of being united as one body is going to be more fully explored in chapters 12-14. But here we see that Paul is incensed because the common way in which those who are not Christians would arrange themselves and eat has not been transformed by the gospel and practices at the Supper. This is a meal not worthy of the label 'love feast.' V22, 'What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.'

The Lord's Supper would have been a countercultural and subversive meal because master and slave, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile would all sit down at one meal. Here is a meal where we put on display that those things that divide the world and not as important and the things that unite us in Christ. That the gospel is more powerful than the things that divide us; that God is making a people for Himself; a people that belong to the New Creation. Christ intended by this love that we have for one another that we demonstrate the poverty of the world, the inability of the world to unite, the irrational divisions the world has, and to show a better way found only in Christ to be the humanity we all long for. Imagine the rich not sharing with the poor; overindulging while others go hungry; who get drunk while others have nothing; imagine the divisions of table seatings, differences in quality of food upheld, where some are fed and others not. Paul is disgusted with this transporting of worldly ways into a feast that should have renovated these practices.

The application is obvious, we cannot perpetuate the way the world divides in the church. Class pride; national pride; racial pride; sexism; ageism; political animosity; or any form of bigotry must die. But more than that the loveless indifference which enables such bigotry to survive must die too. A genuine concern for our brethren is part of what proves we are born again, 1 John 3:16-18, 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.' We have care and concern not only for the poor, but for the lonely, the unemployed, the hurting, the sick, the isolated, the outcast.

Reminded of proper observance

Now we come to the familiar words of institution that we hear every week. Paul now introduces the proper way of observing the Lord's Supper rehearsing the central elements of the Supper to underline the central truth of Christ's giving Himself up in death for us as a rebuke to such selfish and shameless feasting. It is clear from verses 17-22, and v33-34 that Paul has their loveless divisions in his sight. The purpose of including this part here is not to unlock some formerly unknown theological truth, but rather to contrast the selfish way they observe the feast with the selfless giving of Christ at the feast of the Passover and that we remember every time we observe the Lord's Supper.

V23, 'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread.' Paul underlines the divine

origins of the Lord's Supper reminding us that this is a meal we observe by divine appointment, it is not a human idea, and therefore it is something we obey. Paul transport us back into the upper room, to the night that Judas betrayed Christ to the religious leaders, where Christ instituted the Lord's Supper while celebrating the Passover with His disciples.

V24, 'and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." First a few words about how the Lord's Supper relates to the Lord's Supper, here is how one commentator summarizes the events of the Passover, 'The Passover meal began with the host's pronouncing a blessing over the first cup of red wine and passing it to the others present. Four cups of wine were passed around during the meal. After the first cup was drunk bitter herbs dipped in a fruit sauce were eaten and a message was given on the meaning of Passover. Then the first part of a hymn, the Hallel (which means "praise" and is related to hallelujah, "praise ye the Lord"), was sung. The Hallel is comprised of Psalms 113-118, and the first part sung was usually 113 or 113 and 114. After the second cup was passed, the host would break and pass around the unleavened bread. Then the meal proper, which consisted of the roasted sacrificial lamb, was eaten. The third cup, after prayer, was then passed and the rest of the Hallel was sung. The fourth cup, which celebrated the coming kingdom, was drunk immediately before leaving.' The Lord took the meal after the second cup, and the third cup as the point at which he introduced the Lord's Supper. He renovated a meal that spoke of God's deliverance from Egypt and pointed to the great and final deliverance that He would provide for His people by His death. As Christians we do not celebrate the Passover, that is a shadow and type, we remember the One who fulfilled those things by dying on the cross for our sins.

Jesus gives thanks for the bread, from which we get our word Eucharist, from the Greek word for thanksgiving. He then tore the bread in order to distribute it. As He handed it out He indicated that the bread represented His body, which He was giving out, for them. The earliest Greek manuscripts don't have the words, 'broken for you,' and rightly so as Christ's body was torn though not broken, not one of His bones was broken. Here the symbolism collides in layers. A body given in sacrifice as the bread is given in payment for sin; but there was also the bread in the wilderness which sustained the Israelites in the wilderness. So does the bread representing the body speak of Him as a sacrifice for sin; or sustaining His people in the wilderness, and the answer is yes. Christ fulfills all the types of these images. By eating we remember His body that secures our payment for sin and His ongoing sustaining of us by His Spirit even now. Remember we are one body with Christ by the Spirit and sustained by that union. In fact His body resurrected will secure our final resurrection from the dead. Applying this to the problem at hand, we must note the sacrificial generosity as Christ holds back nothing in order to meet our desperate need. What a contrast to think of Christ feeding us with His body, and the Corinthians not sharing their food with each other. On that, the mystical body of Christ is the church, and we are one represented by our sharing in the same loaf, what a contradiction then to not allow some to eat!

We are commanded to do this as a remembrance of Christ and His work for us, taking occasion by the bread to think of His body and all it means for us.

V25, 'In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." The bread speaks of Christ in His saving work for us, and carries with it

implications for our generosity and inclusion of our brethren in Christ, likewise does the cup. Incidentally there was not a common cup but each guest had their own cup. The cup that Christ drank represents the cup of God's wrath that He drank on our behalf. Because of His being cut off and taking the penalty of our sins, we drink of the cup that speaks of His blood shed in payment for our sins, blood that redeems us and sets us apart as the covenant people of God. Just as God consecrated a people by the sprinkling of blood in Ex. 24 so God consecrates a new people of all who believe in Jesus by the blood that He has shed for us. We are not Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, but the single people of God. Imagine gulping down all the wine at the Lord's Supper so that you get drunk, and the wine which speaks of the blood that makes us a single people is totally consumed that other believers have nothing to partake of, shameful. In our drinking we should not be thinking of how we can satisfy our own needs, but in remembrance of Him, how He selflessly satisfied others needs, and we should seek to imitate this selfless love towards others.

V26, 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' Paul drives home the central point of the Lord's Supper, every time we celebrate it, we are proclaiming, shouting aloud about His death. And this until He comes again. It is for this reason that we call the Supper a visible word, it is a proclamation. A central aspect of our remembrance should be around His death for us. As long as we observe this command, and we must until He returns, we regularly proclaim this central aspect of His work for us, this is the purpose of the supper. In relation to the problem in Corinth, how can you sit down at a meal that proclaims His selfless death and selfishly exclude and indulge to another's loss?

Warned against unworthy observance

V37, '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.' Paul having rebuked them for their sinful partaking; and having contrasted their selfishness with Christ's selflessness now drives his point home by warning them of the consequences of their selfish observance. Paul here tells us that to eat in an unworthy manner makes one guilty of the body and the blood of Christ. What does he mean by this? There are at least 4 ways in which we can eat in an unworthy fashion. Firstly, we can eat superstitiously. There are those who believe that the Lord's Supper is really a sacrifice that can wash away sin, or think that it has some power to save and not the death of Christ dying on the cross. They superstitiously partake instead of trustingly partaking. The opposite of superstition is trust, we do not put our confidence in this ceremony but in the finished work of Christ on the cross. To treat the Supper as a silver bullet that can bestow salvation is to deny the gospel of Jesus Christ, this is to partake in an unworthy manner. Secondly, we can eat ritualistically. If we come to this appointed feast with cold and callous hearts and partake out of habit and in a heartless way, this is partaking in an unworthy way. We must come to the table as we approach the throne of God in prayer, recognizing the presence of our Savior who has promised to meet with us and minister to us. We must come heartily and willingly with an eager expectation of fellowship with Him. Thirdly, we can partake impenitently. Christ died to save us from sin, repentance is proper part of our response to Christ's work for and in us. To come to the table harbouring sin, not warring against sin, being indifferent to sin, even hiding addictions and being backslidden. This is to partake in an unworthy manner. Fourthly, and the way in which Paul is pointing to is to partake unlovingly. To eat

while being selfish, sinning against the unity that Christ creates in His body the Church; to eat lovelessly, not mindful of the new way we are God's people and must act accordingly welcoming and serving one another. This is partaking in an unworthy way.

To eat in an unworthy way is to sin against the body and the blood of Christ, how? Some has said that just like mistreating the flag of a country does not literally harm the country but is an act against what it represents, in the same way partaking in an unworthy manner is a sin against the sacrifice Christ made. To partake superstitiously is sinning against the body and blood as the only payment for sin that can save; to partake heartlessly is to despise what is dear beyond compare; to partake impenitently is to cherish the sin Christ paid to save us from; and to partake unlovingly is to sin against the service and unity Christ exemplified for us.

V28-32, 'Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.' And so we are called upon to examine ourselves. We must examine our relationship with God and with each other. We must eat mindful of Christ's work for us and eat in a way fitting to His sacrifice. Paul warns that partaking in an unworthy manner will bring about judgement, or rather chastening as it does not result in eternal condemnation and explains to the Corinthians why some of their own number are weak, ill and dead. Sins against the church are no small matter, and to sin against the church and then partake of the table in such a blasé fashion result in God's fatherly discipline.

Some have suggested that this Ananias and Sapphira like judgement is only for the first century and the time of the apostles. I don't think so. We do not have the benefit of having an apostle interpret our providences to us like the Corinthians, we can only take it as a general warning without pretending to full knowledge of who is suffering what for what reason.

We can take the call to examine ourselves and judge ourselves to heart. We can declare war on our sins, put our sins to death, stop harboring our sins and confess them to God. This should not result in us excommunicating ourselves from the table because we feel we may not have repented enough. This is a wrong way to examine yourself. Paul is not suddenly pretending that perfection is required. No, he is addressing the matter of impenitent sin not sin that we hate and are presently warring against. Calvin tells us how we can come in a worthy manner, 'So, the best and only worthiness which we can bring to God, is to offer him our own vileness, and unworthiness, that his mercy may make us worthy:

to despond in ourselves, that we may be consoled in him

to humble ourselves, that we may be elevated by him

to accuse ourselves, that we may be justified by him

We are also to aspire to the unity which he recommends in the Supper; and, as he makes us all one in himself, we are to desire to have all one soul, one heart, one tongue.

If we ponder and meditate on these things, we may be shaken, but will never be overwhelmed by the consideration of this vital question, "How shall we, who are devoid of all good, polluted by sin, and half dead, worthily eat the body of the

Lord?" We shall rather consider that we, who are poor, are coming to a benevolent giver, sick to a physician, sinful to the author of righteousness, in fine, dead to him who gives life.'²

To eat worthily also means to eat in a loving fashion as Paul's concluding remarks indicate, v33-34, 'So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—³⁴ 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.' As we come now to the Lord's Supper, let us take Paul's lesson to heart. This is a meal which speaks of a selfless Savior paying an infinite price to secure sinners as His bride and family. Let us now eat treasuring that sacrifice by cherishing the ones He came to save.

² <https://www.monergism.com/how-can-we-take-lords-supper-worthy-manner>