

The Lord's Supper

By Brad Allison on 4/24/2005

Scripture Reference *1 Corinthians 11:17-34*

We're in a series on the topic of worship, and such a topic would be incomplete without a discussion of the Lord's Supper. Throughout the history of the church, there has been almost universal agreement that observing this sacrament ought to be included as a regular part of the church's worship. It is on a very short list of worship practices of the church which are practiced by all denominations throughout all the centuries of the church. The same could not be said of such basics as congregational singing and even the preaching of the Word, since there have been times when even these things were not always present in the worship of the church.

But once we move beyond the actual presence of communion in worship, the unity disappears. As a matter of fact, the words of Jesus, "This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me" are some of the most controversial words in the history of the world. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches believe that the bread of communion actually changes into the literal body of Jesus, a view known as transubstantiation. The result of this view is that every service of communion is a fresh sacrifice for sins. That's why Roman Catholic churches have an altar up front, while churches in the Protestant traditions do not. An altar is a place of sacrifice, and we don't believe that any sacrifice takes place in communion. On the other end of the spectrum, some Protestants believe that communion is nothing more than an aid that helps us think about Jesus' death. As Presbyterians, our position is somewhere between those two. We believe that Jesus is really present in the bread and the wine, but it is a spiritual presence rather than a physical presence.

The words before us today are the earliest written words on the topic of communion. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians before any of the other gospel accounts of the Lord's Supper. As we look at this passage, I would like for us to notice the three commands that dominate the passage. Each has a different orientation, beginning with a command oriented to God that tells us to remember him in the Lord's Supper. Then there is a command oriented around others, to discern the body. Finally, there is a command oriented around oneself, the command to examine oneself.

I. A God-Oriented Command - Remember

To remember Jesus and his death during the Lord's Supper means to remember him in our minds and in our hearts. First and most obviously, it means simply that we are to remember in our minds something we tend to forget that Jesus thinks is very important. It's like a mother telling her six-year old, "Remember to look both ways for cars before crossing the street" simply because six-year olds are prone to forget to do so. We are prone to forget that the forgiveness and love of the Father has been earned for us through Jesus' death. We need constant reminders of this because our instincts are always wrong. After messing up in some area of our lives, we instinctively think that the solution is to make amends or try harder. Jesus says, "Remember, you are forgiven and you are perfectly loved because of something objective that has happened: I have died for you in order to secure this love and forgiveness, and it is therefore secure."

It is vital that we remember something of the objective nature of our forgiveness. What I mean by that is that God doesn't arbitrarily ask himself, "Is today going to be a day for wrath and punishment, or for mercy and grace?" Nor does he say, "Well, if you grovel before me enough and do enough good things, then I will forgive you, maybe." God's forgiveness is far

more objective than that, and the objectivity of it can be seen in an ambiguity of this word “remember.” Some have argued that the word has the sense of “memorial”, which is a common Old Testament word for God’s remembering of his covenant. For example, in the Passover, which is the Old Testament basis for the Lord’s Supper, God sees the blood and “remembers” to forgive. So in the Lord’s Supper, we are remembering that God remembers his covenant promises. Jesus said, “This cup is the New Covenant in my blood.” The blood seals the promises of the covenant and guarantees their fulfillment.

Illustration: Steve Brown tells the story of a paper he wrote in seminary for which he should have been given a C, but actually received an A. It was a directed study course for which the only requirement was to write the paper. Steve heard another student say that this professor flunked all of his directed study students who didn’t see him during the semester. Steve hadn’t seen him, so he got worried. So he got a whole stack of books and wrote a very mediocre, but very long paper—80 pages worth. The professor was so busy and so impressed with the 80 pages, that he gave Steve an A without even reading the paper. Here’s how Steve applies the lesson from that. “When he gave me the A, did I go back to him and say, ‘You ought to read that paper. I really wasn’t that good. It was a lot, but it wasn’t good.’ No, I didn’t. I accepted the A. Why? Because the one in authority had given me that A. It’s the same way with Jesus Christ. If I tell you you’re forgiven, you’re forgiven.”

Not only do we remember Jesus’ death in our minds, it is critical that we remember his death in our hearts as well. By this, I mean that we need a regular subjective experience of Christ’s forgiveness as well as knowing it is an objective fact. One of my favorite Old Testament commentators, Derek Kidner, argues that the concept of “remembering” in the Old Testament is not only a mental calling of something to mind, but also a re-experiencing of it as a fresh reality in our lives. For example, for Israel to be called to “remember” God’s deeds in the Exodus is for them to re-experience God’s deliverance of them today. I think that’s something of what is in view here too. In the Lord’s Supper, we are called to re-experience the truth of the gospel as we repent of sin and come to Jesus all over again. That’s why repentance and faith is such an important part of the Lord’s Supper. A Sunday School teacher was summarizing her lesson, and she asked one of her students, “Now, Billy, tell me what we must do before we can expect to be forgiven for our sins.” Without hesitation, Billy replied, “First we gotta sin.” The truth is that we can’t help but sin, but if we are to experience God’s grace, we have to confess that sin honestly and take it to him for forgiveness.

Illustration: A businessman heard about an elderly widow who was unable to pay her rent and was facing eviction. He took pity on her and collected enough money to give her two months’ worth of rent. When he went to her house to deliver the money, she would not answer the door when he knocked, even though he knew she was inside. He left without being able to deliver the money. A couple of days later, he saw this woman on the sidewalk downtown and told her that he had been by her house in order to give her two months’ rent. When she heard that, she gasped and put her hands to her face and said, “I saw you there, but I thought you were the landlord coming to evict me, so I didn’t open the door.” We think that when God comes close, he is coming to punish and judge, but Jesus says to us, “Remember, I came not to condemn the world but to save the world” (John 3:17).

Jesus thought it was of great importance that we remember these basic gospel truths of forgiveness. These words were spoken on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, which means that this was the last thing he said to his disciples before that death. It seems likely both from some of the wording throughout the New Testament as well as some early church history that the early church celebrated Communion weekly. There is no direct command that we do so, but it is important that we remember and personalize Jesus’ death.

II. An Other-Oriented Command – Discern the Body

Paul speaks strongly about the need to discern the body when we take communion. He says, “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (v. 29). His meaning requires that we understand the context. Paul addressed this topic of the Lord’s Supper because of a problem that had arisen in the church in Corinth. Unlike today, they observed the Lord’s Supper in conjunction with the eating of a common meal. It was probably done that way because of the fact that the Jewish Passover was the foundation for the New Testament Communion service, and the Passover was celebrated as a meal. It seems that what they were doing in Corinth was something like church potluck dinners in which people would bring food from home for this meal. But unlike our potluck dinners, instead of putting it all onto one common serving table and sharing it with one another, each family would eat their own food without sharing it with others. So wealthy families would eat and drink to excess, to the point even of getting drunk (v. 21), while poor families would find nothing in the cupboard and show up with empty stomachs to watch the wealthy eat.

Paul calls this a failure of not discerning the body of Christ. They were not discerning the fact that the poor among them who were going hungry were members of Christ’s body, for whom he had died. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are saying that we share equally in Jesus. So to discern the body means to love one another. An early Anabaptist by the name of Balthasar Hubmaier (circa 1480-1528) said the following about the Lord’s Supper: “God requires of us the will, the word, and the works of brotherly love, and he will not let himself be paid off or dismissed with words... Christ does not need our love expressed to him in a mystical way; he bids us love him in our neighbor. Only the one who desires to love Christ in the person of the neighbor is ready to meet him in the Supper.” (*Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, p. 221-22).

This is why one of our practices in coming to the Lord’s Supper is to ask ourselves if there is someone in the church with whom we need to be reconciled. It is a failure to discern the body if we partake of communion while holding a grudge against a brother or sister in Christ.

III. A Self-Oriented Command – Examine Yourself

So we are called to remember, to discern, and last of all to examine ourselves. “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (v. 28). There are many students at this time of year preparing for exams. These exams are for the purpose of revealing the student’s level of comprehension. An exam cannot make something exist; it only reveals what already exists. I realize that many of us still have nightmares in which we find ourselves showing up for a class and discovering that there is an exam that day for which we are unprepared. But I want to point out two ways in which this examination is a good thing. First, it reveals those areas where I need to believe the gospel. If my doctor didn’t know the difference between a spleen and a liver on his exam, I would be thankful to have that revealed before going to him as my doctor. And if I have deceived myself and sin has hardened my heart, I want such a fact to be revealed. The Lord’s Supper is a time for the light of the gospel to shine on our lives, showing us where we need to repent and where we are not loving others as we ought. That is a very good thing. A friend of mine by the name of Tom Nicholas pastors a church in Pennsylvania that God has used to reach a number of people with disabilities. Keith Laudermilch, an adult member of the church with Down Syndrome, is one

such person. The *by Faith* magazine in the narthex describes an incident that happened in this church with Keith.

One evening the Session was meeting in a glassed-in room in our church narthex. Keith saw them through the windows and walked right into the middle of the meeting. Looking each elder in the eye, Keith asked them his favorite question: "Do you love Jesus?" After hearing their replies in the affirmative, Keith reminded them, "Jesus is coming again." Then he left. Reflecting on that event, Tom Nicholas, senior pastor of RPC, remarked, "Now, you can look at that as an interruption or you can look at that as prophecy. God sent him to the elders of our church just to give us a check. He comes in and says the most profound thing that could ever enter into a Session meeting: 'Do you love Jesus' Is He the center of your life? Do you have the hope of His coming again?'" (March/April, 2005, p. 35)

A second way in which this examination is a good thing is that it rescues us from sickness and perhaps even death. Notice Paul's curious words of verse 30. "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." It's because they've not examined themselves, and they've been failing to love in some rather staggering ways that we considered above. This is an act of God's grace in which he keeps us from further destroying ourselves. Have you heard the story of "Wrong Way Riegels"? On New Year's Day, 1929, his UCLA Bruins were playing Georgia Tech in the Rose Bowl. When a Georgia Tech player fumbled the ball, Roy Riegels scooped up the loose ball, lost his sense of direction and began running toward the wrong goal line 65 yards away. One of his teammates, Benny Lom, ran him down and tackled him just before he crossed the wrong goal line. Sometimes we run in the wrong direction and God himself, in an act of mercy, tackles us to prevent us from doing any more harm to ourselves or others. You see, the bread we eat and the juice we drink in communion can bring life to those who are feeding on the Jesus by faith, or sickness or even death to those whose hearts have been hardened. So we are to examine ourselves.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close this sermon with a testimony by one of our church members who has examined himself this past week and wishes to share with us what God has taught him.

The following is from an old liturgy written by John Calvin called The Strassburg Liturgy: "Know, therefore, that this Sacrament is a medicine for the poor sick souls, and that the only worthiness which our Lord requires of us is to know ourselves sufficiently to deplore our sins and to find all our pleasure, joy, and satisfaction in Him alone." I invite you to drink the medicine of the gospel as you look to Jesus in faith.