

## **THE LORD'S SUPPER**

### **1 Corinthians 11:17–34**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

This passage from Corinthians is very appropriate for today.

“In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not! For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. So then, my brothers, when

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you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions” (1 Corinthians 11:17–34, NIV).

Today’s communion follows a sermon. Communion in the Early Church followed a supper. In verse 20, it is called the “Lord’s Supper,” instituted by the Lord on that Thursday when He broke the Passover bread and took the cup with His disciples. Then, in the first century, communion was associated with a meal. Through years and centuries of practice, now the Lord’s Table has been somehow disassociated from eating it at a dinner. But I would like to say, as kind of an outset to this passage, that I think that one of the things that we can recover from the Early Church, from the letter to the Corinthians, is the practice of taking communion together when a group of us as believers are having dinner together in a home. That part of the dinner could include, at the conclusion, the taking of communion. We are not told in the Corinthian letter that it is necessary to have any ordained minister present. We’re not told of any particular directions we have to follow or that it has to be in a church building. It rather appears that the Corinthian setting was in a home. And in addition to celebrating the communion together in the church setting, which we do once a month, I believe that our own individual relationships and small groups, as we enter into that phase of our church, can be strengthened as we share the Lord’s Table together after a supper.

That’s the way it happened on the road to Emmaus. Jesus took bread, and in the taking of bread and the eating, He was made known to them. The Early Church regularly broke bread together, a reference to the fact that in the Early Church they kept the Lord’s Supper.

The word “supper” itself means the main meal of the day. In the Greek world, a supper was very important. You didn’t eat much for breakfast or for lunch. At breakfast, you might take some

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bread dipped into some wine on the run. For lunch, you would have had your picnic lunch, which had been packed in the morning. You would eat it out in the street or in a marketplace somewhere. Again, on the run. But supper was the one meal of the day where the family came together and where the emphasis was not simply on eating but on fellowship as well.

It is in this context we find, then, that the Corinthians are having communion at the end of their suppers. But their communion is open to criticism.

It is, first of all, open to criticism in verse 17, on the basis of it doing more harm than good. Can you imagine a communion service that does more harm than good? Walking away saying, “The way that was conducted—it simply tore me down rather than building me up.” Or you can imagine it being a regular part of any spiritual experience with the rest of the body of Christ and it producing more destructive influences in your life than building-up influences? Yet this is precisely what is happening at Corinth. The services are chaotic. They cause destruction.

Can you imagine a communion where the divisions and differences are emphasized rather than the unity which pertains to believers? The word for “divisions” is the word “schism.” And the word for “difference” is “heresy.” There are schisms and heresies at Corinth. Not doctrinal heresies, in this context, but the heresy of one social group within the church feeling superior to the other social group and making a distinction according to the size of the paycheck that is being brought home.

At a private dinner party, you can invite anyone you want. But for the Lord’s Table, He has invited the guests. And the Corinthians had forgotten this. They had begun to think that it was their table and they were, therefore, free to give the invitation. But it is the Lord’s Table, and only He can give the invitation. That is one reason why at this church we practice what is called “open communion.” For it is not Newport Mesa Christian Center’s communion or supper. It is

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the Lord's Supper. We haven't given the invitation. The Lord has. And, therefore, whosoever will may come. Whoever has faith in Jesus Christ, whether in this body or out of this body, may take freely because it is the Lord's Supper.

Can you imagine a communion that's marked by extreme manifestations of self-centered behavior? That's the focus of verses 20–22. Here were persons at a potluck dinner. (Someone has said they don't like the term "potluck dinner." There are two reasons why they don't like it. One is the word "luck," which is a concept they did not appreciate, because it didn't seem to be Christian. And the other word, they didn't like is the word "pot." So, therefore, I would propose a substitute term—"multiple choice dinners.") At the Corinthian "multiple choice dinners," some were bringing their steaks and baked potatoes and apple pies à la mode. And getting together in a corner, and having a wonderful time, even getting to the table where all the dishes are spread out and elbowing people aside to get there so they could be first in line. In fact, Phillips translates verse 21 as "Everyone tries to grab his food before someone else." Have you ever seen anyone elbow in line at a church social function? Doesn't that seem out of place? It seems terribly out of place. That's exactly what the Corinthians were doing here. Not only elbowing their way to the front of the line, but the people who had brought the most were taking what they had brought and not sharing it with the poorer people in the congregation, who had their half a baloney sandwich, and were going over to a corner and remaining hungry. This reflected, in their atmosphere, a total indifference to others. Letting some go hungry and others bringing a plentiful supply of wine and taking it and getting drunk in one part of the room. I can't imagine people getting drunk at the Lord's Table. Neither could Paul. By the way, this matter of them getting drunk solves the question as to whether or not Corinthian wine was grape juice or wine.

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The hungry poor were meeting intoxicated rich at what was supposed to be the Supper of the Lord. But theirs had become not the Lord's Supper but man's supper. Self-centered supper. C. S. Lewis has put it so well when he says, "None are so unholy as those whose hands are cauterized by holy things." To be "cauterized"—to be burned, seared so that one loses sensitivity of touch. Those who are around holy things becoming seared in the commonality of those holy things, so that they come to have a conscience which is not fresh and open to the Lord. The lack of sensitivity.

This was Corinth. It's sometimes us. It's sometimes other people. Some of you have had the privilege of going to the Holy Land. One of the things I relate C. S. Lewis' statement with is coming into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Within it there's a room which supposedly is the room where the tomb was contained which Jesus came forth from. Many of us evangelical Protestants do not like that particular site. We prefer the garden tomb, because it doesn't have all the trappings. But archeological research would seem to support, not the Garden tomb, but the other place.

What sort of turns you off are the dirty robed priests with their beggar-like attitude toward the pilgrims coming in, expecting coins for the people to go in and see the room. It's sort of like they've lost the freshness of what that room stands for, what it represents after being there so long. Whenever that becomes a practice in our life, we begin to have a dead faith, entombing a living Lord. At Corinth, a simple lack of spiritual sensitivity had resulted in a cauterized spirit. If these are some of the practices, which we are called upon to abstain from, what does communion really accomplish? What did the Lord intend for it?

Verses 3–26 tell us that he received word directly from the Lord about communion. This is a tremendously important statement bearing upon Paul's apostleship. It's not something he says

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was handed down to him by the other apostles. But it's something he received directly from the Lord, and we recognize that Paul was not in the room that evening when the first Lord's Supper was celebrated. But in some appearance of the Lord to Paul, in His commissioning Paul to be an apostle, he received him this from the Lord's own lips. He told him what had happened in that room. Basically, we see two purposes that the Lord has for His supper.

#### **I. One is that, in taking the bread and the cup, we might remember Him.**

Twice Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24–25). "When you take the bread, it's in remembrance of me." "When you take the cup which represents my blood, it is in remembrance of me"

Jesus had nothing physical to leave His disciples when He died. He didn't have any money in the bank account. He had no stock certificates. He had no checking account. He had no title deed on a house. He hadn't written a book—He couldn't leave the copyright of the book to His disciples. And He didn't even have a tape ministry. He couldn't even leave that. His own clothes were taken from Him and divided among the soldiers who gambled at His feet when He was crucified. He literally had nothing to give to His disciples. So He gave them, instead, a sign and symbol, an emblem, a visual picture by which, whenever doing it, they were to recapture Him, to remember Him, to put Him fresh in their mind.

To me, it's somewhat like the picture that is on my desk of my mom. The last picture that we have of her. When I look at it, it brings to my mind, not only when that picture was taken, but the totality of my mother. It allows my mind, in a few seconds of time, to sweep through the years of association and to cherish the memory together. I know I'm able to do this without the picture, but the picture somehow helps me to focus. And to remember.

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Jesus says, “When you take this bread and this cup, I want you to take this as a picture of Me, to let it bring within you that surge of emotion, that welling up within you that a picture does.” It is to be personal. It is to be deeply felt. It’s not this bread and the cup, it’s not simply remembering the cross. Jesus says, “It’s remembering Me.” When we take this, we not only remember that Christ died for us, but we remember all there is of Christ, so that, as I share communion, and as you do many times, the Spirit will quicken to my remembrance some aspect or phase of the ministry of Jesus, which at that moment is appropriate to my need and my heart. It is remembering Him.

#### **II. The Lord says also that this communion is meant not only to remember Him, but it is meant that we might preach Him.**

Verse 26 says, “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you preach [or proclaim] the Lord’s death till he comes.” Most of you have never preached a sermon. But whenever you take the bread and the cup, you are preaching. You are declaring something. And here is what you’re declaring. You’re declaring Christ. The Corinthian believers’ communion did not preach Jesus, for their practice was devoid of obedience to the cross and obedience to the message of reconciliation. Here, when we take communion and we preach Christ, we are saying, in taking the bread and the cup, “Here Jesus pardons.” “Here Jesus died in my place.” “Here Jesus bore my sins.” “Here His new creation begins within me.” “Here is the blood of His covenant.” At that moment, I am preaching, by declaring to the Lord that I am His, declaring to myself that I am His, declaring to the believers that are about me that I participate in the death of Christ and I am one of His and, therefore, belonging also to them. I declare, in Paul’s theology within Corinthians, before principalities and powers, before the forces of evil, I declare that I am one of

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God's children through Jesus Christ, even before watching angels, I declare am of Christ's. I proclaim His death until He comes. I'm preaching when I take it. It is an acted-out sermon.

Paul leaves this particular segment of thought to say that we have before us a choice, whether to have the man-centered kind of communion at Corinth or the Christ-centered communion, which He has ordained. He tells us that, at communion, we must bring our observance into examination, lest we be brought into judgment and condemnation. That's the focus of verses 27–34.

When I get up in the morning, I need a mirror to look into to get myself aligned with what I'm supposed to look like. Isn't it amazing that I don't look like what I'm supposed to look like unless I use a mirror? It's not much help, but it is some. The communion is a mirror by which I not only examine my relationship with the Lord, but with others. If we're mistreating other believers, as was occurring at Corinth, Paul says we're sinning against the body and blood of Christ. Sinning against His body and blood means sinning against Him personally as well as sinning against His body here on earth—His people.

At the first Lord's Supper, Jesus began by correcting relationships at the table, through taking a towel and washing their feet. Because they were all wrought-up with who's the greatest—man entered worship. That problem, which the Lord had corrected in the first Lord's Supper, is being corrected again by Paul at Corinth and must be corrected again wherever it occurs. So we are called upon to examine ourselves lest we fall into judgment, Paul says that this is why many in the Corinthian church “have fallen sick and some have even died prematurely” (1 Corinthians 11:30)—failure to examine oneself.

What does it mean “to examine yourself”? Does it mean to have a morbid self-introspection, which, out of fear of not having examined yourself sufficiently, refrains from taking the bread

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and cup as it's passed, "lest we drink unto ourselves," as Paul says, "judgment and condemnation" (1 Corinthians 11:31). Is it that kind of examination?

If that's the kind of examination Paul is calling for here, all of us are disqualified, on ground one, from ever taking communion, for we have all fallen short of the glory of God and all are unworthy, as we have been at the foot of the cross.

The lack of examination at Corinth was this maltreatment of other believers. It was somehow thought consistent to take the Lord's Supper at the conclusion of the time when you have grossly maltreated other believers. Such cannot be in the body of Christ. To "examine oneself" means of course, as always, to handle sin in your life honestly, to not try to cover it over, to not try to persuade yourself it doesn't exist, but to admit it. Call it what God calls it, repent of it, and lay it aside.

Some people falsely assume that at communion they will escape judgment if they pass by the communion. "Something's wrong in my life, therefore, since I don't want judgment, I'll pass the communion by." But it's really a catch-22 situation. Because, if you drink with an unexamined life, Paul's saying that you drink to your condemnation. But if you pass with an unexamined life, if you pass the elements by because you won't examine your life, that is also suggesting condemnation is in your life. And judgment is there, which needs to be laid aside.

The way to deal with it is, as the communion is being distributed to you, examine your life. If there is disobedience in your life, which you are aware of, bring it to the Lord. Deal with it then and there. It doesn't take months or weeks or hours of penance to deal with it. Deal with it now. That's what Paul is saying. Let this be a picture to you of Jesus. Examine your life and your love. Having examined your life and having laid aside or recognized that within you which may not be

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appropriate before the Lord, lay it aside. Bring it to Him. Lay it aside and then take the communion.

I've added on here to Paul's passage three things that have been helpful to me in taking communion. I've asked the question, does our observance encompass the three rooms of the Lord's Supper? For me, whenever I take communion, I think of myself as simultaneously being in three rooms.

**A.** One is the room in which the Lord's Supper was inaugurated. I see myself, in my mind's eye, in that room in Jerusalem where there are eleven disciplines reclining in oriental fashion around a Passover meal. I, in that moment, as it were, become present with them, individualizing, feeling myself a part of that original company, feeling that the Passover that I'm taking now is no less significant, because it's twenty centuries down the road. It's rather the re-enactment of that first moment. I find myself there as a believer in Christ, slipping into the room, being with them, as one day you and I shall be. We will be anew in a room with Peter and James and John and Jesus.

I perhaps have gotten this practice from the modern Jewish observance of Passover. The instructions from the Jewish book of tradition notes there are four different characters of children—the wise, the wicked, the simple and the one who has no capacity to inquire—which pertains to worship. In regard to the Passover, of the wicked son, it says, “What says the wicked son, what mean you by this service?” By the word “you” it is clear he does not include himself, and thus has withdrawn himself from the community, and it's therefore proper to return upon him by saying, “This is done because of what the Eternal did for me when I went forth from Egypt.” For “me” and not for “him.” For had he been there, he would not have thought it worth being redeemed. “When I went forth from Egypt”—three thousand four hundred years ago.

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When “I” went forth? Yes. It’s the realization for every Israelite. To be part of that Passover is the theology, the teaching of the Old Testament. We become present in that, even when God led His people out of which we are one. Now we become, through communion, present with Christ in the Upper Room.

**B.** I move beyond that to another room. That’s the present room, the room where we celebrate communion now. I look around and I see people who are known to me very well and people I do not know at all. But it is in this room, at this time in God’s kingdom, that we’ve been called together. We share this moment together. At whatever station of life we are. Recognizing that, as I look over the audience, some people are not here this year at this time who were here last year at this time. The nature of this body changes. It is this moment that is precious. We share it together as a pilgrim company.

**C.** I look beyond this room, though, to another room. We only partake of this until He comes, then we’ll sit down and drink the cup new with Him in the kingdom of God. In the room of the Passover, in the room of my memory, my presence along with the eleven and Jesus, and here with you, I look forward to that room where there is a vast expanse, where no man can number the persons that are there, a palatial banquet, also large, yet no one is lost, no one is some IBM spindle card. We’re all unique individuals. The whole church of Jesus Christ has been assembled from every age, from every nation, from every ethnic group, and they’re all seated with Christ, ready for Him to lift the final cup and take it and consummate this meal.

I believe that this meal is an unfinished meal, and that’s why it’s given as a perpetual observance. In the institution of the Lord’s Supper, there’s the greatest possibility that the Lord followed the Jewish tradition of our day as well as His day. It’s said that, in the course of the Passover meal, there were four cups of wine which were blessed: one at the beginning of the

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meal, the second before the main course, the third after the main course, and the fourth at the very conclusion, following the singing of hymns, which brought the meal to a close. In the Gospels, we read, “Having taken the cup Jesus said, ‘I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom,’ they sung a hymn and went out” (Matthew 26:29–30). They didn’t sing a hymn and then go to the fourth cup. It’s my personal feeling, as well as it is others’ who have studied the Scripture, that Jesus ends the meal at a very dramatic moment, with the third cup, suggesting an incomplete Passover. They sing a hymn and go out. When will the fourth cup be taken, which will end the Passover? I think it will be taken in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when all of us, finally, the church of all generations, has a chance to be there. At a certain moment, together, we will all end the celebration which has marked our redemption, our forgiveness from sin, and all of us will express thanksgiving at one time.

Seeing communion in this sort of devotional way helps us remember the Lord and proclaim His death till He comes.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Lord, in these moments, we come now to Your table, recognizing we have not been invited here by man but we have been invited by You, into Your presence. Lord, for all who come today to share in this bread and cup, whatever their needs, You are their sufficiency and You will supply. May we, in these moments, examine our hearts before You and take it in a manner that is worthy. Not in a way which builds in an inconsistent manner upon our treatment of other people through the week, but in a way which reflects our care for Your body, both You personally and Your people. We ask this, Lord, in Your name. Amen.