

Eat and Drink in a Worthy Manner: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34
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This is our last week in a short sermon series on the ordinances. I preached two sermons on baptism and this morning will be the second sermon on the Lord's Supper. I want to acknowledge that this short series is certainly not exhaustive, and I apologize if I haven't covered the specific questions that are on your mind. I'd be glad to talk to you further if you have any lingering questions. My desire has been to help us see how baptism and the Lord's Supper portray the truth of the Gospel. I want us to cherish these ordinances which Christ has given to us. When a person is baptized and when we share in the Lord's Supper I want us to see the vivid imagery of Christ's death, and also His resurrection.

Last week we looked at the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, beginning with the Old Testament Passover and then Jesus' words in Luke 22, and finally the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19. This week we're going to study 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and try to understand better how to eat and drink of this meal in a worthy manner. Verse 27 warns against eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. So I want us to ask this morning, how are we to partake of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner. And I want each of us to ask ourselves, Am I observing the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner or an unworthy manner?

There are two important pieces to this text which I want to focus on today that will help each of us answer the question, Am I eating and drinking of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner. And the two pieces are related. The first has to do with church unity at the Lord's Supper, and second is self-examination at the Lord's Supper.

Church Unity at the Lord's Supper

It's important to notice in this passage that Paul is severely rebuking the church at Corinth. There were some major problems in that fellowship, and some of those problems were especially apparent when they came together for a meal. Paul begins by saying, I do not commend you. When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. In other words, you have messed this up so badly that it would be better for you not to come together at all. In verse 18 he identifies the problem. There are divisions among you. And in verse 21 he describes the nature of the divisions. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. The divisions he has in mind here, at least one of the divisions, is between the rich and the poor. The church would come together for a meal—they

were calling it the Lord's Supper, but Paul tells them in verse 20 that, in fact, it's not the Lord's Supper that you eat because of these sinful divisions—and when they came together the rich would have their nice meal prepared with plenty of food and plenty of wine. And those who were poor in the congregation hardly had anything, maybe nothing at all.

And so we see this horrible situation in which brothers and sisters in Christ are coming together, but they are not acting like brothers and sisters in Christ. They're acting just like the world. They're taking the same class distinctions that are made in the world, and bringing them into the church fellowship and even to the holy ordinance of the Lord's Supper.

Not long ago we were in James 2, where we read, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" A similar thing was happening in the church at Corinth. The poor were over here with little or nothing to eat, while the rich were feasting and even getting drunk. What a disgrace!

And we have to ask ourselves, is this happening in our church in any way? Maybe it's not as blatant as what was going on in Corinth. But are there any subtle distinctions between groups of people based on financial status or color of skin or education? Are we being partial in any way? As the body of Christ we need to consciously fight against the prejudiced tendencies which are part of our sinful nature. We need to consciously determine to view all of our brothers and sisters in Christ as equals, as fellow believers, fellow heirs of the kingdom. And what a beautiful thing this is when people from various backgrounds, various ethnicities, various life situations can be unified around the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

In Paul's reprimand in 1 Corinthians 11 we see that church unity is a significant facet of the Lord's Supper. The Corinthian church thought they were celebrating the Lord's Supper, but they were deceiving themselves. The divisions among them fundamentally contradicted this important element of the meal—church unity.

Don't miss what Paul writes in verses 18-19. After mentioning the divisions he says, "And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized." This is a striking comment in the

midst of a rebuke. Paul is not condoning the factions in any way, but he does point to God's providential plan in all things and the good that will come from this sad situation. In the midst of these factions there were also the faithful—the ones who were tested and approved. And in the midst of the petty divisions, those of genuine and mature faith would stand out.

I think this can be an encouragement to us in that we should always be striving for unity around the truth and around holy living (orthodoxy and orthopraxy). But even in those areas where there are divisions, God has a purpose. He will use those divisions to refine His church. The division may be of a theological nature, or it could be a serious moral issue like the partiality we see in this passage. Whatever the division may be, we can thank God for His sovereignty and His goodness, that He has a good purpose in every trial, even including divisions within the church.

The divisions in the Corinthian church which Paul describes were based on the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Verse 21, “One goes hungry, another gets drunk.” They weren't having a pot-luck. They weren't sharing. The rich brought with them a large meal with plenty of wine to drink, and the poor came in and stood by with a hungry stomach. Then the next verse tells them what to do, in the form of a rhetorical question: “What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?” As he does in more detail at the end of the passage, he's instructing them to eat their main meal at home and then to come together for their celebration of the Lord's Supper. The next statement shows how serious their sin was. “Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” They didn't know it, but their behavior constituted a despising of God's church. This shows us the seriousness of partiality within the body, and it also shows us the weightiness of this ordinance. It is not to be taken lightly. To eat and drink in an unworthy manner, harboring sinful divisiveness in your heart, is to despise the church of God. Let that sink in.

In a moment I'll say more about how to eat and drink in a worthy manner, but we can each ask ourselves, Is there any way that I might be despising the church of God by the way I treat the Lord's Supper? Apparently these folks were oblivious to what they were doing. They might have been so used to how things were done in the world, that they didn't think anything of gorging themselves while the poor folks stood by and watched. They should have realized what they were doing. They should have recognized what a horrible testimony this was and how divisive it was. They were blinded by their sin, and therefore Paul had to deliver this harsh correction.

In verses 23-26 Paul records what Jesus said when He instituted the Lord's Supper. Paul was writing before any of the

four Gospels were written, so this is the first record of these statements that Jesus made on the night He was betrayed. Notice the word “for” at the beginning of verse 23. Paul is citing these words of Jesus as a basis for his rebuke. He cannot commend the Corinthians for their behavior, and this is why—because of what it signifies, because of the weighty truth that it conveys. Jesus said of the bread, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And He said of the cup, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me.”

I’ll just make a brief comment here on the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation. They take the words, “This is my body” in a very literal way and conclude that the bread and cup of the Lord’s Supper actually become the body and blood of Christ. And thus they view each mass as a repetition of Christ’s sacrifice. First of all, it’s wrong to take these words of Jesus in such a literal way. His disciples would have understood very clearly that He was speaking of the bread in a symbolic way, similar to other statements He made: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7), “I am the true vine” (John 15:1). And when Jesus speaks of the cup, it is also clearly symbolic. He is not saying that the cup actually becomes the new covenant. Rather, it symbolizes the new covenant. Secondly, the idea that Christ’s sacrifice is repeated is a blatant denial of what Christ accomplished on the cross. He died once, and His death is sufficient.

So, as we saw last week, the Lord’s Supper is a memorial of Christ’s death for us. It’s not a magical ceremony in which bread and wine are transformed into something else. It’s not a repeated sacrifice of Christ. Rather, it is a vivid and tangible reminder of what Christ has done for us. Just as the Passover lamb was sacrificed in the place of the people, so Jesus Christ, the ultimate Passover Lamb, gave Himself on our behalf. His body was broken for us. His blood was poured out for us and establishes the new covenant.

In verse 26 Paul concludes this paragraph and ties together how Jesus’ words apply to the Corinthians and the issue of church unity. He writes, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” Paul is saying to the Corinthians, Don’t you see what this is about? Don’t you see that the Lord’s Supper is a proclamation of Jesus’ death and an anticipation of His second coming? It’s not about filling your stomach! It’s about what Jesus has done and will do. The Lord’s Supper is such a weighty thing. It is to remind us of the most important realities in the universe. And thus it is an indictment upon any sinful divisions that are present in the church. Jesus died

for the church. He died to save His elect from every people group, from rich and poor, from educated and uneducated. And we are to come together in unity to share in this meal and proclaim His death until He comes.

In the previous chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul refers to the bread and the cup: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together it ought to be a time of profound unity around the Gospel. A unity around the truth that Christ died for us, and He rose from the dead and He is coming again.

Last week I focused on three aspects of the Lord’s Supper that we should be mindful of: it is a memorial of Christ’s death for us, it is a sign of the new covenant, and it is a pointer to our eternal fellowship with the Lamb. Now we add this important aspect of the meal—that it is a display of church unity. There ought not to be petty divisions among us, or partiality of any kind, but as brothers and sisters in Christ we are united in our proclamation of Christ’s death, which we will continue to proclaim until He comes again.

Self-Examination at the Lord’s Supper

The last thing we’ll look at is the role of self-examination as we partake of the Lord’s Supper. In verses 27-32 we read some grave warnings against eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. Verse 27, “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.” In the context of this passage, it seems that Paul still has in mind the divisions between rich and poor and the way that the rich were despising the church of God. I think we can certainly broaden the application of this to any unconfessed sin in our lives—any sin that we’re trying to ignore or justify in our lives, which we need to confess to the Lord. To continue to harbor those sins in our hearts and at the same time approach the table will incur guilt and judgment, because it trivializes Jesus’ sacrifice.

So Paul instructs us in verse 28, “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” Here’s the self-examination that needs to happen in each of our hearts. We need to confess those sins that we’re aware of. We need to pray that God will open our eyes to any sins that we’re not aware of, or we’re too proud to admit. We should tremble at the thought of eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. The severe warnings of judgment in this passage should help us realize what

an awesome thing this is, to participate in a meal that carries such profound significance. This is not something to play around with. We should come to the table with a reverence for the ordinance and what it represents, and we should be careful not to partake if our hearts are hard and we're harboring unconfessed sin in our hearts.

The difficult thing pastorally is that those with hard hearts are the ones most likely to ignore this warning, while those with repentant hearts and sensitive consciences are most likely to hear these warnings and refrain from taking the Lord's Supper. So I want us all to hear this rightly. The issue is not whether there's sin in your heart or not. We are all sinners. The question is whether you are repentant of your sin and clinging to Christ as your only hope of forgiveness.

This is why unbelievers must not eat of the Lord's Supper, because they would necessarily be eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. Those who are not trusting in Christ do not see the beauty of the Gospel and therefore cannot honor God by participating in the Lord's Supper. We invite and encourage unbelievers to be part of our worship services and to be here among us as we celebrate the ordinances. But unbelievers should not partake of this meal. It is for believers only.

Likewise, if you consider yourself to be a believer but you know that you are straying from Christ, your heart has become calloused, maybe you're harboring bitterness in your heart or jealousy or hatred, or entertaining some secret sin which you refuse to turn away from—if this characterizes your heart then you are warned not to partake in such a condition. The warning, though, is not to walk away from the table or from the fellowship. The warning is meant to bring you to repentance. These warnings should startle you and scare you and help you see the seriousness of your sin. If you sense areas of hardness and callousness in your heart, confess those things to the Lord before taking the Lord's Supper.

The other situation is if you are so sensitive to the sin in your life and you feel unworthy of this meal—if that's the case then you should be encouraged that you're exactly where you ought to be. That's the attitude we should all have. John Calvin writes of the worthiness that we should seek: "this is the worthiness—the best and only kind we can bring to God—to offer our vileness and (so to speak) our unworthiness to him so that his mercy may make us worthy of him; to despair in ourselves so that we may be comforted in him; to abase ourselves so that we may be lifted up by him; to accuse ourselves so that we may be justified by him" (*Institutes*, 4.17.42). Don't think of the worthiness that is required in terms of being good enough. None of us are good

enough. The worthiness that is required is understanding our unworthiness. So don't let your brokenness over sin keep you from the table. That's precisely the attitude that's involved in eating and drinking in a worthy manner. Recognize your sinful actions and attitudes. Repent of those sins, turn away from them, and look to Jesus in faith for the forgiveness of those sins. This is how we eat and drink in a worthy manner.

A word of application that I want to include here has to do with children and the Lord's Supper. There are many children who are in our services and watch us celebrate the Lord's Supper each week. And some of these children have professed faith, and they may be asking, When can I eat and drink of the Lord's Supper? I don't know the specific answer to that question for your child, but the one thing I want to point out here is that you should look for a maturity level that is manifest in serious self-examination. The serious nature of the Lord's Supper should give us pause in evaluating whether a young person is ready to participate in it. Our kids are still young, and this is just starting to come onto the radar screen for us, so I can't speak from much experience. But if you're wrestling with this I would encourage you to read an article by David Michael called, "Why Can't I Have a Snack Like Everyone Else?" (find it on the church blog) Whether you follow his particular guidelines or not, I think he provides a lot of wisdom in how to think about this question. And I would exhort you to give this question some serious thought and to include the criterion of self-examination as you consider when it would be appropriate for your child to begin participating in the Lord's Supper.

The warnings continue in verse 29, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." Discerning the body could be referring to discerning the fact that the bread represents Christ's body and understanding the important truth that the meal conveys. Or it might be referring to the body of Christ, meaning the church, in which case this would be referring again to the way that the rich were disregarding the poor. They weren't discerning the various needs among the body. Their so-called celebration of the Lord's Supper was a time of division rather than unity.

On either interpretation of the word "body" in verse 29, there is a lack of discernment, a lack of sensitivity to the gravity of the Lord's Supper. We have to realize that this is a meal that proclaims the Gospel that Jesus died for sinners. And we have to understand that it should be a unifying time, not a time of division. To eat and drink without this discernment is to bring judgment upon yourself.

The next verse tells what that judgment has looked like in the Corinthian church. Verse 30 says, "That is why many of you

are weak and ill, and some have died.” Again, these warnings should take our breath away in terms of how serious the Lord’s Supper is. God revealed to Paul that the sickness and death that had been experienced in the church of Corinth was directly related to their mistreatment of the Lord’s Supper. God was judging them for eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. Then Paul reiterates the need for self-examination. Verse 31, “But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.” We need to examine ourselves as we come to the table. We need to humble ourselves and soften our hearts before the Lord. We need to confess our sins and admit our unworthiness. Because if we don’t examine ourselves—if we don’t judge ourselves—then God will judge us. He will discipline us. He will do something to get our attention. And He may even kill us to prevent us from further abusing the Lord’s Supper.

Verse 32 ends the paragraph on a positive note. Paul mentions the good intention of the Lord’s discipline. “But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined *so that* we may not be condemned along with the world.” In other words, the purpose of the Lord’s discipline is to keep us from going to hell. He preserves us in faith and disciplines us when we are heading off into error.

In the last two verses (33-34) Paul summarizes his instruction to the church. He tells them to wait for one another, in contrast to what verse 21 said was going on, “each one goes ahead with his own meal.” And he tells them if they’re hungry to eat at home, in contrast to the rich bringing a large meal to eat at church while the poor stand by with empty stomachs. The Lord’s Supper isn’t about satisfying your appetite. It’s about proclaiming the Gospel in what the bread and the cup represent. And it is to be done this way “so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.”

Throughout these verses we have seen the seriousness of the Lord’s Supper, and I hope this will be something we take to heart. I hope we will see the profound sense in which the Lord’s Supper unifies us as believers. And I hope we will each make a practice of examining our own hearts as we come to the table, confessing our sin to the Lord, admitting our unworthiness, and celebrating Jesus’ death and resurrection which purchased our salvation.