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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS

#30

SURVIVING THE SUPPER?

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

[PART 3]

INTRODUCTION

Earlier in First Corinthians Paul exhorted the Corinthians to grow up into a more mature faith. His appeal centered on their moving from *men of flesh* to *spiritual men* (1 Corinthians 3:1). No doubt that we often feel like the Corinthians; we have been converted but so much of our old life remains that we can easily call ourselves *men of flesh*. Nevertheless, we desire to be what God calls us to be. We desire *to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ* (Ephesians 4:15). The question then becomes, how do we grow up into what God calls us to be?

As we study the Scriptures, I think we will come to the conclusion that God provides an orderly process [Dallas Willard's term] for our sanctification. Willard writes, *Spiritual formation in Christ is an orderly process. Although God can triumph in disorder, that is not his choice. And instead of focusing upon what God can do, we must humble ourselves to accept the ways he has chosen to work with us. These are clearly laid out in the Bible, and especially in the words and person of Jesus.* If Willard is correct, and I think he is, we must take seriously these words: *26While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 27And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; 28for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. 29" But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:26-29).* Regular participation in the Lord's Supper is a central feature of this orderly process of sanctification. Obviously, whatever is included in this orderly process of sanctification is more than our works because sanctification is ultimately God's gift of grace to us.

Because this process of spiritual maturity is the work of God, we may be tempted to think that it happens magically, but this is not the case at all. To quote Willard once again, *God has provided a methodical path of recovery. Grace does not rule out method....Grace thrives on method and method on grace.* Sanctification requires both method and grace. Regular participation in these ordained means of grace is essential to our sanctification. To better understand how the Lord's Supper effectually brings transforming grace into our lives, I want us to answer three questions.

1. WHAT DOES COMMUNION TEACH US?

When God invites us to His Table, He means to teach us something. This process of teaching is essential to our sanctification because we do not think correctly about God, ourselves or anything else. Romans 1:18-23 says *18For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through*

what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Psalm 10:4 says, The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him; All his thoughts are, "There is no God." It is essential to His orderly process of the increase of spiritual strength and joy that God transforms our minds.

Coming to the Lord's Table again and again is a key ingredient in God's revealed plan for our spiritual growth. This covenant meal introduces new thoughts into our minds, thoughts concerning what God is like and what He desires to do in the world He created. We must come often because some ideas are best learned through repetition. Don't underestimate the power of a single idea to change your life and the entire course of history. Dallas Willard helped me to see this by pointing out that when Satan undertook the purpose of destroying God's creation, he introduced an idea into Eve's mind; specifically, "God cannot be trusted and Eve would do much better acting on her impulses."

That same thought is still lodged in our minds because we have inherited Adam's guilt and thought processes. This Table teaches us that God invites us to come to Him and that we can trust Him. When we hear this invitation, our consciences that have been awakened to sin will object that we cannot come into the presence of such a great King and eat with Him. Martin Luther said it best in the last sentence he wrote prior to his death, *We are beggars: this is true.* But this Supper teaches us that though we were once estranged from God, dead to any spiritual realities and willingly hostile toward Him, we can now come into His presence.

Not only does God teach us that He desires to be with us, but this Table teaches us that our sins must not keep us from coming to the Lord because Jesus eats with sinners. Luke 5:27-33 records just such an event from Jesus' life, *27After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me." 28And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him. 29And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. 30The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" 31And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. 32"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." 33And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink." When Levi [Matthew] wanted to go public with his conversion, he threw a feast for Jesus! When the religious leaders of the day witnessed this they accused Jesus of wrongdoing, but Jesus clarified His mission, *I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.* Jesus then helps them understand why His disciples feasted rather than fasted. *34And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? 35"But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days."* The promised Messiah had come and this was not an occasion for mourning; the only proper behavior was feasting. Jesus did teach that there would come appropriate times for fasting, but not at that particular time. When Jesus invites us to this Meal, it is not for fasting, but for feasting. We are with the Bridegroom. This is a small feast given to teach us about the great feast to come at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. It is unthinkable that we would fast while sitting with our Lord at His Table.*

2. WHAT DOES COMMUNION SHOW US?

Sin has corrupted our minds, so God's orderly process of transforming us must include a renewal of the mind. But ideas are never enough to adequately teach us what we must learn. We must see those ideas come to life in powerful images. Satan knew this well in Eden when he showed Eve the one forbidden tree. That one tree with its gorgeous fruit came to symbolize the subtle idea that Satan had placed in her mind, "God cannot be trusted and Eve would do much better acting on her impulses." Genesis 3:6 confirms the power of images, *When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.* What intensified Satan's deceptive idea was an image that stood before Eve each day, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Images always intensify ideas. In short, Satan destroyed creation by introducing a destructive idea and reinforcing that idea with a graphic image. Images, if graphic enough and if looked at often enough will eventually overwhelm us.

Martin Luther knew the power of images from his earliest years. While preparing for a career in law, Luther was deeply troubled by his own sinfulness and that idea was driven into his mind by an image. Stephen Nichols writes, *On his daily walk, he encountered a sculpture that often captured his thoughts. The image depicts Christ as judge with a sword clenched between his teeth and a piercing stare. This image...haunted Luther for years as he contemplated his guilt before God.*

Images are powerful and Christianity is not simply a religion of vague ideas and concepts. God knows the frailty of our minds. He knows that we have difficulty grasping ideas, therefore, He teaches us through images as well. The cross stands as one of the best known and most powerful images in the world today and that is not by accident, it is by God's design.

To reconcile creation to Himself, God put forward a new idea and a new image. The idea that Jesus reconciles us to God is clearly revealed through the imagery given at the Last Supper. *26While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 27And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; 28for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:26-28).* The idea that we are made right with God through Jesus is driven home through the graphic imagery of His broken body and shed blood. That is why the cross has become the single most powerful image of Christianity.

Knowing that images transcend and drive home ideas, we must meditate on the wisdom of Jesus' command to His Church that we celebrate communion often. Contemplate the images before us today as we sit at the Lord's Table. There is broken bread signifying Jesus' broken body and there is poured wine signifying shed blood. There is the image of the bride of Christ, sinners, eating and drinking as a sign one must receive Christ because *12But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).* And the one loaf reminds us that because of Jesus' broken body, we have been reconciled to one another; we are now one body under one Head.

I cannot help but notice the irony of Satan's destructive idea and imagery: "Eve, you cannot trust God; just look at the tree and you will see what I mean." God's idea and imagery: "You can trust me; just look at the tree—the cross where Jesus died."

So let me ask you, do you see what God is doing here at this Table? Do you grasp the idea and perceive the images? Jesus invited sinners to come and eat as we discern Him to be our Head and the others here to be our brothers and sisters. This *discerning the body* leads to worthy participation and great blessing.

3. HOW DOES GOD CHANGE US THROUGH OUR PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNION?

The end result of all of this is not learning ideas and perceiving images. The goal of this orderly process is deep and lasting conformity to Christ. Our lives are being reshaped as we eat and drink in faith. When we come here and worship in faith, God's grace assists us in ways beyond our understanding. The ideas we learn here gradually reshape our minds so that we can discern the work of God's Spirit and love the truth of His word. The images we behold here gradually seize us so that God uses them to make us new people, His people.

But what should the effects be of regular and faithful participation in The Supper? First of all, regular and faithful participation in the Supper will make us a grateful people. The unbelieving world is characterized by ingratitude [Romans 1:21]. This must not be true of us as well. The Lord's Supper is often correctly called the Eucharist. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek verb *eucharisteo* which means "to give thanks". Our Lord Jesus used this very word when He instituted the Lord's Supper and Paul reminds us of this in 1 Corinthians 11:24; *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."*

Secondly, regular and faithful participation in the Lord's Supper will transform us into hospitable people. Hospitality is characterized by a life of openness; we are not closed off from others. Instead, we are being transformed into a generous and welcoming congregation. Those whom God accepts, we accept. Perhaps it was the idea of hospitality that led the early Church to combine the Lord's Supper with their agape feasts. It is certainly our desire to be hospitable that causes us to have a weekly fellowship meal as a regular part of our Lord's Day gathering.

Thirdly, regular and faithful participation in the Lord's Supper will convince us of the preeminence of the Lord's Day. The Lord's Day is the day we rest from our normal labor as we gather to celebrate the work Jesus has completed, the work of redemption. Our celebration calls for feasting and not fasting. This weekly celebration should include spiritual feasting on the body and blood of Jesus and physical feasting on the food which is produced by the fruits of our own labor. Our understanding of the Lord's Day is that it is not to be spent in isolation, but it is a communal commemoration of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Therefore, the Lord's Day must be characterized by mutual sharing, giving and receiving and joyful participation. Coming to the Lord's Table images all of these ideas.

Fourthly, regular and faithful participation in the Lord's Supper will train us to view created things properly. God created all things *to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude (1 Timothy 4:3-4)*. It is unbelievers who *advocate abstaining from foods which God has created (1 Timothy 4:3)*. Therefore, bread and wine used in communion should not cause an uproar in any church [See also, Colossians 2:20-23]. God created all things for His glory and they should be gratefully received and celebrated.

COMMUNION

At the heart of all of this is the gospel; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God, in the place of sinners. Sinners who turn from trusting in themselves or some other god for salvation and turn to Jesus in repentance and faith are gladly welcomed to His Table. Here, we meet with our Lord, receiving ever increasing strength and joy. Here we call upon the Father to remember the sacrifice of His Son on our behalf. The Father remembers the sacrifice of His Son and treats us accordingly. Here the Spirit lifts and delivers us into the presence of Jesus to feed upon His body and blood.