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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS

#29

SURVIVING THE SUPPER?

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

[PART 2]

INTRODUCTION

Last week, we began to listen in as Paul corrected the Corinthians regarding their attitude and behavior at the Lord's Supper. Their agape meals [love feasts] had devolved into something that did not even reflect the Lord's intention in establishing the Supper (v20). The sins of division and selfishness clearly manifested themselves at the Lord's Table (vv17-22). It was such sins that brought stern rebuke from the Apostle as he attempted to bring the Corinthians to repentance. Paul's words here have often been misapplied in the life of the Church and this becomes most evident when many Christians often abstain from the Table for fear of eating *in an worthy manner* and thus becoming *guilty of the body and blood of the Lord* (v27). We find this behavior in various periods of Church history. Walter Marshall in his work The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification wrote, *Many account it the safest way wholly to abstain from such a dangerous ordinance, or at least, that one a year is enough to sun so great a hazard...Instead of striving to receive Christ and His salvation therein, they account themselves to have succeeded well if they come off without the sentence of damnation.* To summarize such an understanding of the Lord's Supper; many Christians could not properly celebrate the Supper because they were simply trying to survive the Supper! Even in light of these warnings, we must remember that Paul says *Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16).* This Supper is given to bless us with the grace of God. We come to this Table with the expectation of blessing, not the fear of a curse.

There are two temptations that we face when we come to this Table: first, there is the temptation to make this Supper about us and our righteousness. This often leads to neglecting Jesus' clear command to *do this in remembrance of Me* (vv24-25). Do not forget, we are commanded to eat the Lord's Supper. We are free to abstain. When we see sin in our lives, we must leave off the sin and eat the meal. We are not free to leave off the meal and keep the sin. Secondly, there is the temptation to neglect proper self-examination (v28) and refusing to judge the body rightly (v29) which means we come to eat with dirty hands. When we come to this Table thoughtlessly, we come in an unworthy manner.

CORRECTING THE ABUSE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (11:23-34)

Paul begins correcting the Corinthians by returning to the fundamental commands [eat bread and drink wine] and principle [in remembrance of Me] which our Lord gave to His Church.

A CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF REMEMBRANCE (11:23-26)

Essentially, this covenant meal consists of gratefully eating bread and drinking wine as we call upon the Father to remember His Son's sacrifice of body and blood on our behalf. Truly this meal is a memorial to the Lord Jesus. The very elements used in worship should help us understand

some of the effects of regularly coming to this Table. The bread communicates strength and the wine symbolizes the joy of the Holy Spirit. Just as bread has the capacity to give strength to the body and just as wine has the capacity to *make man's heart glad* (Psalm 104:15), so the Holy Spirit uses this meal to increase our spiritual strength and joy when we eat and drink in faith. Calling upon the Father to remember His Son's death is a clear proclamation of the Gospel and we are commanded to proclaim the Gospel through this meal *until He comes* (v26).

A CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF SELF-EXAMINATION (11:27-28)

Fundamentally, this meal is not about you, it is about Jesus. But you must eat and drink in faith which means self-examination must precede this Supper. The goal of such examination is to eat and drink in a worthy manner. Charles Hodge writes, *The way in which the Corinthians ate unworthily was, that they treated the Lord's Table as though it were their own; making no distinction between the Lord's Supper and an ordinary meal; coming together to satisfy their hunger, and not to feed on the body and blood of Christ; and refusing to commune with their poorer brethren...[Paul's] warning is directly against the careless and profane, and not against the timid and the doubting.* The sinful, weak and doubting are invited to this meal, but they must come recognizing its significance and desiring its benefits: holy strength and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Let me quote Hodge one more time concerning self-examination: *Let him ascertain whether he has correct views of the nature and design of the ordinance, and whether he has the proper state of mind. That is, whether he desires thankfully to commemorate the Lord's death, renewedly to partake of the benefits of that death and sacrifice for his sins, publicly to accept the covenant of grace with all its promises and obligations, and to signify his fellowship with his brethren as joint members with himself of the body of Christ.*

Certainly we come to this table having already confessed our sins, but eating in an unworthy manner is not centered on our struggle with individual sins, but rather *not judg[ing] the body rightly* (v29).

Just an aside on confessing sin: confession of sin should take place on a regular basis. In fact, the sooner we confess a given sin, the better. Communion is a time to draw close to Jesus in faith and to be fed in such a way that strength and joy increase. It is not a time to become fixated on our sin. Therefore, we must keep short accounts with God and others. To wait until communion to confess sin is foolish. Nevertheless, obvious sins that have not been thoroughly dealt with should be handled here before eating and drinking.

A CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF JUDGING THE BODY RIGHTLY (11:29-34)

What does it mean for one to judge the body rightly? Simply put, it means that we are to recognize who comprises the body of Christ and treat them accordingly. This is precisely what the Corinthians were not doing at their love feasts (vv18-22). The rich neglected the poor; they treated them with contempt, as if they were not a part of Christ's body, the Church. They were in danger of eating and drinking judgment to themselves (v29) because they were treating their brothers and sisters in Christ as if they were not brothers and sisters at all. Many had done this so often that they became *weak and sick, and a number sleep* (v30).

Paul points out a great truth in verse 31, *But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged.* Calvin writes, *God does not all of a sudden become enraged against us, so as to inflict punishment immediately upon our sinning, but that, for the most part, it is owing to our carelessness, that he is in a*

manner constrained to punish us, when he sees that we are in a careless and drowsy state, and are flattering ourselves in our sins. If we would awaken to our sin and repent, the Lord most often withholds judgment. And if we are disciplined, it works for our ultimate salvation and not our destruction (v32).

Paul's concluding comments are straightforward: *when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment (vv33-34).* This is a command to demonstrate hospitality. They are to welcome one another as God welcomes all those who come to Him through Jesus. This is the only way to properly demonstrate the Gospel; welcome those whom God welcomes!

CONCLUSION

Gordon Fee writes, *One wonders whether our making the text deal with self-examination has not served to deflect the greater concern of the text, that we give more attention at the Lord's Supper to our relationships with one another in the body of Christ.* Notice what is required to properly take the Lord's Supper: (1) Gratefully calling on the Father to remember the sacrifice of His Son and treat all participants in communion accordingly, (2) self-examination regarding our love for and commitment to one another. This is why we must pay attention to the details of how we treat one another. How do we treat the poor among us? How do we deal with the hungry? Are we willing to inconvenience ourselves for their sake? We must properly recognize them as members of the body of Christ and treat them in accord with that status.

One additional thought: most Christians I know think that the real "stuff" of Christianity happens in their private devotional lives and the more public aspects of Christianity are secondary. Paul turns that way of thinking on its head in this passage. The real "stuff" of Christianity plays out in our corporate gatherings, even in the most minute details of those gatherings.