

The Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

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When Aliza asked me one day last week, "How do you feel?" I said, "I feel fine, except I have a really stiff neck and I have no idea why it seized up on me. There has to be an explanation." She smiled compassionately and simply said, "Babe, you're getting older. And when you get older, things change." Of course, I vehemently denied it.

But let's be honest. Things do change as we get older. One of them is my experience at family meals. When I was growing up, my parents often hosted large holiday dinners for our extended family. We would squeeze three generations around the dining room table and eat an enormous quantity of food. Because dinner was buffet style, you could eat a lot of what tasted really good and avoid the stuff you didn't like. And you could eat two or three different desserts without getting in trouble! At least, that's what I remember as a young boy. Family meals were all about the food.

Twenty years later, we still have family meals, but what they represent and what I look forward to experiencing has completely changed. The food is still good, but it's the relationships I treasure. It's the time to hear how my brother and his wife are navigating the challenge of parenting. It's the time to listen as my oldest son learns how to participate in adult conversation. It's the time to watch my mom tirelessly move between the kitchen and the dining room and quietly marvel at her gift of hospitality. It's the time to hear my dad quietly lead us in a sincere prayer of thanksgiving or tell another hilarious story about his lack of technical savvy.

Same occasion. Same table. Completely different experience. Family meals were fun as a kid, but they're increasingly priceless as I get older. I wonder, Christian, if that's how you would describe your experience of our family meal as a church – the Lord's Supper? The longer you've followed Jesus, has it become more delightful or more rote? More significant or more unthinking? Chew the bread, swallow the juice, and on to the next thing (my family meal experience as a child)? Or spiritually feeding upon Christ and him crucified, nourishing your joy in him and deepening our relational unity as his body (more like my family meal experience today)?

This is the second to last sermon in our Sunday Matters series where we're examining what God tells us to do when we gather for worship as a church. Our focus this morning is the Lord's Supper, one of the two sacraments or means of

grace the Lord has given us as his people. Throughout church history, the Supper has been among the most celebrated and debated elements of Christian worship. Even when it was a source of strong disagreement, everyone agreed it was of tremendous importance.

Such is not the case today, at least in many Protestant circles. Our working assumption is that if it's controversial it must not be essential. It's a personal relationship with Jesus that counts, right? Everything else is peripheral. That sort of attitude is more American than biblical. There is a certain irony in the popularity of prayers for unity in the church even as we minimize and take for granted the family meal Jesus himself hosts to confirm and strengthen our fellowship in him. Brothers and sisters, it should not be. The Lord's Supper is a precious gift of grace for his people – both corporately and individually.

It's impossible for me to cover all the Bible teaches us about the Lord's Supper in a single sermon, let alone engage with the various perspectives held by faithful Christians past and present. I'll content myself with providing a simple definition and explaining a few of the key elements from Paul's written exchange with the church in Corinth.

First, the definition: **The Lord's Supper is a family meal by which we remember the price Jesus paid to make us one, affirming and receiving anew all the privileges of covenant relationship with God and one another.**

Now how is that definition supported by 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and the surrounding context of Scripture? I'll try to expound this text under three headings: (1) The Problem: How should we not celebrate the Lord's Supper? (verses 17-22) (2) The Truth: What does Jesus teach us about the Lord's Supper? (verses 23-26) (3) The Practice: How should we celebrate the Lord's Supper? (verses 27-34)

1) THE CORINTHIAN PROBLEM: HOW SHOULD WE NOT CELEBRATE THE SUPPER?

Suffice it to say, when it comes to their practice of the Lord's Supper, the Corinthians were in a heap of trouble. Verse 17, "But in the following instructions I do not commend you." Why not? They were eating and drinking the elements of the Lord's Supper, bread and wine, but they weren't actually celebrating the Supper because their attitudes and actions toward one another denied the very thing the Lord's Supper is all about.

Verse 21, "For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk." When the church gathered in Corinth, they apparently shared the Lord's Supper as part of a communal meal. The problem, it seems, was that rich members of the church were bringing piles of food and wine and having a grand old time in front of poor church members who had next to nothing.

The net result? They were creating division in the church, which makes Paul nearly apoplectic. Verse 22, "What! Do you not have houses 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 commend you in this? No, I will not." Stern stuff and rightly so. Why? Because their practice of the Supper was undoing the very spiritual reality the meal was designed to reflect and strengthen, namely, their unity in Christ as fellow members of his body.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17, "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."

The way we share the Lord's Supper matters big time because the elements of the meal, the bread and wine, represent something of profound significance – the body and blood of Christ. When we drink the cup, we are "participating" in the blood of Christ. When we eat the bread, we are "participating" in the body of Christ. The word we translate as "participation" in both places is the same word we translate elsewhere in Corinthians and in Acts 2 as "fellowship." It describes a close association, union, or intimate relationship between two parties.

Think about it: When you become a Christian, when you turn from sin to trust and obey Jesus, what happens? The Spirit of God unites you to the Son of God so that you are now "in Christ." The spiritual privileges and blessings he won through his sacrificial life and death become your spiritual privileges and blessings. His standing before the Father becomes your standing before the Father. His victory over sin becomes your victory over sin. Our faith-union with Jesus is so close, so real, that we become, in a spiritual sense, part of his body, along with every other believer.

1 Corinthians 12:13, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free." That spiritual body, to which every believer is joined by the Spirit, is what the Bible calls the church. Ephesians 5:23, "Christ is the head of the body, his church, and is himself its Savior." As a congregation, we are, first and



foremost, a local expression of the body of Christ. That's our identity. Christ is our head and we're his body.

Now here's the critical connection verse 16 and verse 17. When we all eat from a common loaf of bread in the Lord's Supper, we are enacting and affirming, in a very physical sense, not only our common, spiritual union with Christ, but also our spiritual union with one another as fellow members of his body. Gordon Fee's perspective is helpful. "[Paul] is not thereby suggesting that they become that body through this meal...Rather, by this meal they affirm what the Spirit has already brought about through the death and resurrection of Christ."

What Paul teaches us in these two verses flies directly in the face of how many Christians today understand the Lord's Supper. It's all about me and Jesus and enjoying a deeply personal spiritual moment. No, it's not. It's about our common union in him and as a result, our union with one another as fellow members of his body. Eating together of one body publicly affirms we are all part of one body. It's about our collective union with Christ, which means the Supper isn't an individual meal. It's a corporate meal. And that's why we celebrate it together.

Three times in the first four verses of our passage (verses 17, 18, and 20), Paul describes the context of the Lord's Supper as "when you come together" or "when you come together as a church." That's not incidental. That's critical. The Lord's Supper isn't a meal for individual Christians, for small groups of Christians, or for the bride and groom to share while everyone else looks on. It's a meal for the gathered assembly of the church. It's a meal Christ has given to his spiritual family to be enjoyed by the whole family because the meal, by its very nature, affirms our unity as a family.

And that is why the Corinthian approach was such a big deal. They were taking a meal designed by God to affirm our unity as a church and using it as an occasion to deepen divisions within the church. They were eating a meal that declares, "We are one," while their actions at the meal declared the exact opposite. Put bluntly, they were lying to God and one another through their practice of the Supper.

Yet God was using even their deceit and divisive practices to accomplish his good purposes. Verse 19, "For there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized." The Lord's Supper, rightly practiced, does throughout the Christian life the same thing baptism does at the beginning of

the Christian life – it recognizes and marks off the church from the world. It's a celebration of our unity and distinct identity as the people of God.

The problem in Corinth was that they were treating the Lord's Supper like a fast food run. It's all about me and Jesus. No, it's not. It's a family meal, affirming our unity as a family, and reserved for those who demonstrate through their love for God's people that they're actually part of the family.

2) THE GOSPEL TRUTH: WHAT DOES JESUS TEACH US ABOUT THE SUPPER?

Look at verse 23. If verses 17-22 remind us the Supper is a family meal, verses 23-26 teach us what the family meal is designed to accomplish. "The Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

Jesus instituted the Supper on what occasion? "The night when he was betrayed." Judas' actions points to a deeper reality. We're all sinners. We all stand guilty before God on account of our disobedience. We need to be forgiven and cleansed from the sin that separates us from God and merits his judgment.

It was also the same night Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. The annual Jewish festival looked back to the night the Lord delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. He "passed over" their firstborn sons in his judgment on their Egyptians slave-masters not because they were more righteous, but because of the blood of a lamb painted above the door of their homes. The lamb died so they wouldn't have to die. Hebrews 9:22, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."

Both the Passover and the Supper Jesus instituted on that night pointed forward to all he would soon accomplish on the cross. For there, my fellow sinner, his body was broken for you. His blood was shed for you. He died so you wouldn't have to die. Jesus was condemned so you could be justified. Jesus was stricken so you could be healed. Jesus was punished so you could receive mercy. In the fullest sense of the word, he was your substitute.

He didn't die against his will. He died because he submitted his will to the Father's. For that reason, he gave thanks – for it had been the Father's plan from the very

beginning of the story. What did Adam and Eve do in the Garden? They took and ate the forbidden fruit, destroying their relationship with God and all who descended from them. So what did Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, do? He took them to take and eat, he took the very act that brought sin into God's perfect world and turned it into a memorial of salvation.

What kind of God does that, friends? A God who delights to take the greatest imaginable evil and use it for the greatest imaginable good. What good was that? What did Jesus' death accomplish? It opened a way for our relationship with God to be restored. It's called the new covenant. Hebrews 10:11-18 explains the contrast to the old way Israel related to God.

"And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,' then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin."

Friends, when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we don't engage in an empty ritual commemorating something really good that happened in the past but is largely irrelevant in the present. We are (verse 26) proclaiming once again – to ourselves, to one another, and to the world – the present sufficiency and abiding power of the God who saves.

The gospel the preaching of the word declares to our ears is the same gospel the Lord's Supper reveals to our eyes. We are confronted once again, in a tangible way we can taste and see, with the exceedingly good news that Jesus has done for us what we are powerless to do for ourselves. He has secured for you, Christian, the forgiveness of all your sins, and in so doing, the present and eternal joy of life with God.

Paul's words in verse 26 guard us from thinking the "remembrance" Jesus speaks of in verses 24-25 is passive – like watching a slideshow of old family pictures. It's not. It's tremendously active. For in our remembrance, we are (1 Corinthians 10:16) "participating," sharing in, and receiving anew the body and blood of Christ given

for us. We don't receive it in a literal sense. Jesus said, "This is my body," but he also said, "I am the door," and, "I am the vine." On the night he uttered those words, his physical body remained in front of them and is now ascended into heaven.

However, when we share the Lord's Supper, Christ is present and we receive him anew in a spiritual sense, feeding by faith, as it were, on his all-satisfying provision and enjoying sweet fellowship with him. It's a communion of reliance. A communion of trust. A renewed intimacy with God renewed born of placing all our hope for the present and future in Jesus power to save as we eat the bread and drink the cup.

As the bread and wine nourish our bodies in a physical sense, our faith is nourished in a spiritual sense. For it is through faith, relying wholeheartedly on him in every area of life, that we heed Jesus' words in John 6:54-56, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."

Speaking to Christians, Bobby Jamieson writes, "Christ is already yours by faith, but when you receive the bread and wine you receive him all over again. The physical signs of bread and wine support and strengthen your faith. In the Lord's Supper, a believer receives Christ's benefits anew."

I love how J.I. Packer describes how the Lord's Supper helps us receive Christ's benefits anew, strengthening our assurance of salvation. "As surely as I see and touch and taste this bread and this wine, so sure is it that Jesus Christ is not a fancy but a fact, that he is for real, and that he offers me himself to be my Savior, my Bread of Life, my Guide to glory. He has left me this rite, this gesture, this token, this ritual action as a guarantee of this grace."

When we share the Supper, we're not only remembering the price Jesus paid to make us one. We're also affirming and receiving anew all the privileges of covenant relationship with God and one another, including the promise that Jesus will not fail to bring us home. In Matthew 26:29 he says, "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

When will that happen? When Jesus returns for his bride, the church, and the wedding supper of the Lamb begins. The bread and cup direct our gaze to the future, to the day our faith becomes sight. In that sense, the Lord's Supper is only

an appetizer. It's designed to awaken and stir up our longing for the banquet to come. All who eat in a worthy manner at the table Jesus has spread before us on earth are guaranteed a seat at the table he will spread before us in heaven.

So when you come to this table and feel weary and disillusioned, and lamenting the sorrows of this life, take heart in knowing the real feast is yet to come. The Supper, rightly received, is an act of grateful longing and tearful expectation. As we follow him on the road of suffering, we give thanks as he did, that it will surely end in glory.

3) OUR PRESENT PRACTICE: HOW SHOULD WE CELEBRATE THE SUPPER?

Having told the Corinthians how they should not celebrate the Supper and reminded them of the true meaning of the Supper, Paul turns in verse 27 to explain how they should practice the sacrament together. He begins with a sober warning that has been both ignored and misunderstood. "Whoever, therefore, eats of the bread or drinks of the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord."

What does it mean to partake in an "unworthy manner"? It means to do what the Corinthians were doing – to eat and drink when the conduct of your life reflects the absence of the spiritual realities the Supper affirms. If you haven't turned from sin to follow Jesus, if you haven't stopped trying to save yourself through your good works and trusted wholly in Jesus to save you, then the cross of Christ doesn't speak a word of salvation over you. It speaks a word of judgment. You are guilty of the very sin that nailed him to that tree and must not eat a meal affirming fellowship with God when you have nothing of the sort.

We all need to examine ourselves before we eat. Verse 29, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." To discern the body is to consider the connection between our relationship with Christ and our relationship with his body. Anyone can say they are good with God. But has Jesus authoritative representative on earth, the church, affirmed as much through baptism and membership? Your own assessment is important but insufficient. The family of God must recognize you as one of their own before you can sit down at the family table.

You say you've been united to Christ, but are you acting like Christ in the way you love and relate to his people? Are your attitudes and actions toward your fellow



believers strengthening the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, or are you nursing resentment and bitterness toward your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? The goal of examining ourselves before we share in the Supper isn't to swim through a sea of morbid introspection. The goal is practicing spiritual integrity that honors the Savior who has invited us to his table.

To publicly affirm union with Christ and his body by sharing the Supper when our life suggests otherwise is to lie to God and his people, to act as if one thing is spiritually true when our conduct suggests it's not true at all. It's a family meal. And if you've never become part of the family or are refusing to live as a member of the family, you can't just pull up a chair at the family meal. You have some serious spiritual business to do first – with God and his people.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul sternly warns the church to not share the family meal with a professing believer who's refusing to live as a member of the family. Why? Because the unrepentant sin in their life denies the very thing the Supper affirms – union with Christ and his body. Does that mean if you're struggling with sin or working through a conflict with a fellow member of our church, you shouldn't share in the Supper? Absolutely not.

The question you must ask is this, "Is there any sin in my life, any area of disobedience to the Word of God, where I'm refusing to fight for godliness? Am I stubbornly going my own way or am I struggling to submit to God's way? It's not about discovering every last sin so we can confess them in a hurried attempt at self-atonement. It's about evaluating the spiritual direction of our life, especially the way we're handling relationships with other Christians. Are we working for the unity and oneness the Supper proclaims? Or are we creating and deepening relational divisions in the church?

A lack of spiritual integrity in coming to the Lord's table is a serious matter, friends. Verse 30, "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." The host at the table is Christ. You may fool me. You may fool your parents or friends. You can't fool him. The Lord's goal in warning us against unworthy participation is to help us accurately assess the spiritual condition of our heart so we might not be condemned on the final day of judgment. The conviction of sin is painful, but the discipline of repentance ultimately works for our good and God's glory.

CONCLUSION



Let me conclude by addressing those who tend toward the other end of the spiritual spectrum. Your struggle is the exact opposite of the Corinthians. You hear Paul speak of examining ourselves, discerning the body, taking care to honor Christ by eating and drinking in a worthy manner, and you feel waves of condemnation rising in your heart. It's not the gracious conviction of unrepentant sin. It's a creeping sense of unworthiness over the presence of remaining sin.

If that's you, Friend, hear the words of Martin Luther's good friend, Philip Melancthon: "Some will not venture to profess Christ until they can profess themselves. They wait for worthiness to come to the Lord's table, not considering that it is unworthiness which they are to profess, along with Christ's worthiness – their sins, along with His name for remission of sins."

What does the Supper remember and celebrate? It's not your worthiness. It's Jesus. The whole point of the meal is that we are unworthy, but he is worthy, and all who by faith are found in him are worthy in him. The beauty of the gospel is that Jesus both invites us to his table and gives us the right clothes to wear – garments of spotless righteousness to all who despair of saving themselves and run to him for mercy.

The Lord's Supper is the family meal by which we remember the price Jesus paid to make us one, affirming and receiving anew all the privileges of covenant relationship with God and one another. Whenever we take and eat, we need to look in three directions: at Jesus, at one another, at ourselves, and then back to Jesus.

It's also a picture of what church membership is all about – living out our unity in Christ as members of his body. In many ways, our church covenant makes explicit the responsibilities of mutual fellowship that are implicit in the Supper, which is why I'm excited to welcome thirteen adults into membership at KingsWay before we share communion as a family.