

“Let a Person Examine Himself”

The Twentieth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 11:27-34; Isaiah 1:10-20

Our text contains a warning which should give us all a moment’s pause. Paul warns that unless we examine ourselves before we come to table of the Lord, we risk coming under God’s judgment, and as a result, getting sick or even dying. Now that I have your attention, we are a church which celebrates weekly communion, therefore this is a passage with which we need to wrestle and consider with great care. But great care is not fear. Since Jesus has died for our sins (taking the covenant curse which we deserve upon himself), we need not fear coming to the table of the Lord because we are sinners and are struggling with our sins. But we do need to examine ourselves in the matter prescribed by Paul, and that is the theme of this sermon—how do we properly examine ourselves before we come to the table of the Lord?

We are making our way through 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, where Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for the way in which they were observing the Lord’s Supper. As we saw when we tackled verses 17-26 of this same chapter, this is an important passage, because in it we find the oldest account of the Lord’s Supper anywhere in the New Testament, written by Paul about A.D. 54, a decade or so before any of the canonical gospels had been written. Give this early date, this passage provides an invaluable window into how the apostolic church worshiped just twenty years after the life and ministry of Jesus. Throughout this section of First Corinthians (chapters 11-14), it is clear that the early church focused upon the preaching of Christ crucified, followed by the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. No doubt, this was the ordinary Lord’s Day practice of the apostolic churches.

As we read through this chapter, it is readily apparent that Paul is fit to be tied with the Corinthians. Just as with Jewish Passover, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper took place within the context of a fellowship meal after the worship service had been conducted. But in Corinth, the church’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper had sadly degenerated into something like what went on in one of the city’s pagan temples or guild halls. Some people were not waiting for others to be served and ate all the food which had been prepared, leaving the poor without anything to eat. Others were drinking all the wine, getting drunk, and behaving in an unruly manner. Paul is disgusted by this behavior and rebukes the congregation accordingly. He has nothing good to say about this (“I do not commend you”) and is even worried that the Supper is actually doing more harm than good. Things have gotten so bad, Paul can even say, “*when you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat*” (or at least as it was instituted by Christ and taught to the Corinthians by Paul).

After rebuking the Corinthians and exhorting them to eat and drink at home (if they cannot behave themselves in public), Paul goes on to explain the words of institution which he received from Jesus himself and which the Apostle, in turn, has passed along on to the Corinthians. During the Last Supper, while distributing the bread, Jesus referred to it by saying “*this is my body.*” And then in verse 25, Jesus went on to speak of the wine in the cup saying, “*this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.*” But what does Jesus mean when he speaks of the bread as his body and the wine in the cup as the new covenant in his blood?

As we have seen, Jesus is using sacramental language when instituting the Supper. There is a sign (bread and wine), and a thing signified (Christ’s body and his blood). When Jesus and Paul use sacramental

language, the sign (the bread or the wine) can be spoken of as though it were the thing signified (Christ's body and blood). The same Savior who gave himself *for us* on the cross, also gives himself *to us* in the Supper. By faith, we take ordinary bread and wine (set apart and consecrated by prayer for this purpose) to be the body and blood of Christ. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we truly receive what Jesus has promised—his body and his blood.

This means that the Lord's Supper is not in any sense a re-sacrifice of Christ to secure the forgiveness of sins as in Romanism. Neither is the Supper merely a memorial meal in which the primary requirement for partaking is whether or not we are sufficiently sorry for all of our sins, or whether or not we have overcome all our sinful habits and behaviors. If, in the Supper, we are truly receiving Christ's body and blood through faith, then Paul's exhortation to discern the body means that we are to focus upon the body of the same Savior who gave himself for us, and who gives himself to us at the table of the Lord.

Paul speaks of that body in two ways in this passage. Paul not only refers to Christ's own true human nature which Jesus gave for us on the cross and in which our Lord rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, Paul also refers to Christ's spiritual body which is the church. This dual reference to Christ's body becomes apparent as Paul's discussion unfolds.

In verses 27-34, Paul informs the members of the Corinthian church how they should properly celebrate the Supper so as to avoid coming under the judgment of God. The Lord's Supper has been instituted by the Lord himself as the sacrament of his own body and blood and as a sign of the unity of Christ's mystical body, which is the church. Therefore, Paul will now ram home the point that the Supper can be properly celebrated only when we understand the nature of the Supper (Christ giving himself to us through bread and wine) and when we seek to build up Christ's body (the church), by avoiding those things which cause division in the church, and which bring shame upon the congregation.¹

Beginning in verse 27, Paul discusses the consequences of failing to observe the Supper in an appropriate manner. In verse 27, Paul writes, "*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.*" This is a significant warning. What follows is the obvious consequence of the failure to observe the Supper properly.² Because the Lord's Supper involves the receiving of the body and blood of the Lord through faith, it is necessary to eat the bread and drink the cup in the proper manner, i.e., "worthily."

To partake in a worthy manner has a two-fold reference. The first point of reference is the proper consideration of what is being received through the eating of the bread and wine in faith (Christ and all his saving benefits). The second point of reference is our attitude toward our brothers and sisters in Christ—many of whom are from different races and from different socio-economic backgrounds. We are one body, Paul says, who are to partake together from the same loaf of bread. The Corinthians must keep this in mind, lest the celebration of the Supper degenerate into something like a pagan feast.

While some interpret the warning not to take the Supper in an unworthy manner to be directly connected to the current state of an individual's sanctification—the person is at that moment worthy of receiving the Supper—this is not the case, or else none of us would be worthy to partake. Remember, before we come

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 160.

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 160.

to the table, we have already confessed our sins, we have already heard the declaration of pardon, and we have already heard the promise of the gospel as the word of God is preached. Although we are all unworthy to partake because we are all still sinful, nevertheless we confess our sins before we come to the table, and we hear the word of pardon, as well as Christ's invitation for us to come and receive all the wonderful things he has for us. This tells us that the Lord's Supper is for those who are weak in faith, those who are struggling with their sins, but who are also repentant and who are seeking the strength to continue on with the Christian life, and to continue the war against the sinful nature (i.e., the flesh).

Therefore, if we are united to Jesus Christ through faith and believe the sacrament is what our Lord says it is—"this is my body," "this is my blood"—then we partake in the proper fashion ("worthily") by coming with the empty hands of faith and simply receiving what is promised.³ It is when we neglect to do this by not partaking in faith, that we sin against the body and blood of the Lord—i.e., we do not take the Supper as Jesus offers it to us, as his own body and blood. On the one hand then, the reference to the "worthy" partaking of the Supper has to do with recognizing Christ's body and blood offered to us through bread and wine. This is not a reference to someone being worthy to partake of the Supper because they are (for that moment) personally worthy of coming to the table.

On the other hand, we have to consider the stern warning that Paul gives to the Corinthians comes in the form of an exhortation not to fall back into their old habits acquired during years of feasting in a pagan context.⁴ Paul's warning is not so much a threat to the Corinthians that God is about to kill them all, but should be seen as the apostle calling them to behave as Christians should behave during the celebration of the Supper. The Corinthians need to remember that this meal was instituted by Christ himself, and is not in any sense connected to the pagan feasting of Greco-Roman culture. The rich must not shame the poor, the Jews must receive the Gentiles as members of the covenant community, Gentiles need to respect the dietary scruples of the Jews, and all the members of Christ's church must seek to be one, and not be divided along racial or cultural lines, or divided into factions because some of them follow a particular teacher (i.e., Peter, Paul, Apollos).

This means that we not only receive Christ's body and blood by eating the bread and wine in faith, but together we partake of Christ's body because we have a common faith, a common Savior, and are all members of Christ's church, despite our race, social standing, or wealth. Paul's warning about "partaking worthily" therefore applies to all those who don't discern Christ's body in the two-fold sense Paul describes here. There are those who do not take seriously the act of feeding upon Christ himself through faith. By this I am not referring to people who don't fully understand the Supper, but to people who partake but who do not believe the gospel, and who mock Christ by coming to this table in their own righteousness. And then there are those who seek to divide what Christ has made one—his spiritual body, which is his church, the members of which are purchased by his shed blood. People who are actively promoting factions, who exploit racial or cultural differences causing division, and who demonstrate contempt for others in the body of Christ not like themselves, are also not partaking worthily.

This is why Reformed churches have historically "fenced" the table. Visitors or those who are new to Reformed theology will often times take offense that our elders interview visitors before admitting them to the Lord's Supper. The reason why Reformed churches "fence the table" is because of Paul's

³ Contra Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 560.

⁴ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 562.

warnings here. We fence the table not because we are exclusive, unfriendly, or self-righteous. We fence the table because we are protecting people in light of the serious warnings given us by Paul in this passage. The blessings found at this table are great, but Paul's warning is very serious.

People who are under church discipline in one church, should not seek to come to the table of the Lord in another church. People who are indifferent to church membership, who are unwilling to submit to a group of elders, or who refuse to embrace a particular doctrinal statement, who don't think that the doctrine which underlies the celebration of the Lord's Supper really matters that much, shouldn't come to this table. That said, this is a table for sinners. It is a table for those who seek and desire the unity of Christ's church and who are striving to love their brothers and sisters even when they have different family trees and live on opposite sides of the tracks. To put it another way, Paul's comments here presuppose that someone who partakes in such a way as not to sin against the Lord's body and blood believes the gospel, and understands that all their fellow church members are also members of Christ's one spiritual body. This is why the Supper must be celebrated with a proper reverence.

If people have an agenda to divide the church, or if they reject the promise that Jesus died for our sins and then offers himself to us in the bread and wine, they do indeed risk coming the kind of judgment described in the following verse. *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* The word “examine” is the word “to test,” and has its roots in the testing of metals as to their purity.⁵ The Lord's Supper is no ordinary meal—like the church potluck. It is a sacrament instituted by Christ himself, who invests it with a very significant meaning. This is why participation in the Supper is a serious matter, and requires self-examination before partaking.

It is interesting to note that in the previous verse, Paul speaks of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord, while here he speaks of eating bread and drinking from the cup. Not only does this effectively refute transubstantiation (in the sacrament we eat bread, not Christ's body), but it is exactly what we would expect given the way in which sacramental language is used interchangeably of either the sign (the bread and wine) or the thing signified (his body and blood).

The proper manner of self-examination is spelled out in what follows. *“For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”* To partake in a worthy manner is to discern Christ's body and blood in the two senses just described. To partake in a worthy manner, we must understand what is received by faith (Christ's body and blood), and we must reject those sinful categories which tragically divide Christ's people (race, social standing, wealth). Failure to discern Christ's body (and by implication, his blood), risks God's judgment as described here by the apostle.

Although the words of institution define the body in view here (as Christ's), it is vital to notice that Paul uses the body metaphor in two ways. Again, there is Christ's body given us in the Supper, and there is Christ's spiritual body of which we are all members. As one commentator points out, “there is a marked stress throughout this passage on the corporate nature of the service and on the responsibility of each to all.”⁶ The particular sin of the Corinthian congregation was to forget the true significance of the meal, so that some were rushing ahead and consuming all the food or getting drunk, only exacerbating the divisions already present in the congregation. Paul has just told the Corinthians that they all partake of

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 161.

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 161.

one loaf (1 Corinthians 10:17) which is Christ's body. They are all members of Christ's spiritual body (the church), so they are one (or should be one), even as Christ's body is one. What is in view (discerning the body) applies not only what is received (Christ's body), but how it is received (through faith as one body).

Failure to discern Christ's body in this two-fold sense has very serious consequences as made plain in verse 30. *"That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died."* The context for this seems to be Paul's discussion of the fate of the Israelites mentioned back in 1 Corinthians 10:5. That entire generation of Israelites who left Egypt wandered in the wilderness for forty years only to die in the Sinai desert because of their lack of faith in God's promise as seen in the grumbling and complaining. There are also echoes from the prophets (such as that found in Isaiah 1, our Old Testament lesson) who warned Israel about the sin in oppressing the poor, the alien, the widow and the orphan, as well mistreating the prophets God sent Israel to warn them of the consequences of their actions.

The Corinthians were also familiar, as likely were all the members of the apostolic churches, with the account of Ananias and Sapphira as recounted in Acts 5:1-11. These two were struck dead by God because they lied to the Holy Spirit. Paul takes this occasion to remind the Corinthians that a number of them had gotten sick and a number have died, *because* they failed to discern Christ's body in the Supper. The point is clear—while most illnesses have natural causes, in this case, some in Corinth have gotten sick and some have died as a direct result of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

While we must not think of the Supper as poisonous to a non-Christian, or even to a Christian who partakes in an unworthy manner, the fact of the matter is that those who do not take the Supper seriously (by examining themselves in the sense of reminding themselves that they are partaking of Christ's body and blood, or who are actively causing division) do indeed risk coming under Christ's temporal judgment, just as Israel did in the wilderness. Again, the gravity of this warning is an important reason to fence the table. The gravity of the warning is also why we must examine ourselves before we come and eat—which we do through the confession of our sins, and through accepting the declaration of pardon.

And this is precisely the point Paul makes in verses 31-32. *"But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world."* The verb "judged" in verse 31 means "to distinguish." It is in the imperfect tense, meaning that we are to make this judgment a regular practice. If we distinguish what we are (sinners), in light of what we are in Christ (righteous) then we will not come under God's judgment. In other words, we need to acknowledge and confess that we are sinners, and that we cannot come to the Lord's Supper through our own righteousness or because of our good works. Rather, we come to this table as beggars, seeking the good things that God has for us (the body and blood of Christ), not because we are worthy, but because God is gracious, not because ministers are priests but because Christ freely gives us what he has promised us.

But if we fail to make such a judgment, and come to the Supper without regard for the body and blood of Christ and the unity of Christ's body, then we do indeed risk God's judgment. This is why confession and absolution should precede the celebration of the Supper, so that we come without fear and without any confidence in our own righteousness. But the Corinthians were doing none of this. For many of them, this was a chance to eat good food and drink good wine with little or no regard for the body and blood of Christ, nor to the unity of the church. The Corinthians were not only mocking the redemptive work of Christ, they were giving no consideration for the poor, nor behaving properly in the church which is not a pagan banquet hall.

That the judgment spoken of here is temporal and not eternal is likewise spelled out in these verses. God judges us to discipline us (as a loving father would), so that we will not be judged in the eschatological judgment which the unbelieving world will face on the last day.

Finally, in verses 33-34, we come to the conclusion to the problem set forth in verse 21. Some people were not waiting for others and ate everything before others had a chance to eat. Some were getting drunk and acting rudely. Such conduct was unacceptable. Paul writes, *“So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.”*

Paul’s advice is, once again, characterized by its utterly simplicity and common sense. The purpose of the Lord’s Supper is not to satisfy physical hunger. It is a spiritual meal meant to satisfy a spiritual hunger. Therefore, to avoid having people gorge themselves on the food before others can eat—thereby shaming the poor—Paul’s advice is for people to eat at home, so that people will not be hungry when they come to worship and so that they can properly reflect upon the true meaning of the Supper so as to avoid coming under God’s judgment. This is why it is perfectly appropriate the celebrate the Supper as modern churches do, not in the context of a fellowship meal, but in the context of public worship, after sins have been confessed, the pardon has been pronounced, and the gospel has been preached.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he plans on coming to see them, and when he does so, he will give them further instructions about how to celebrate the Supper. But there is no evidence Paul ever made it back to Corinth. The Corinthians will have to get by on the instructions in this letter.

What, then, do we say in terms of application?

The Lord’s Supper is a gospel sacrament in which we show forth Christ’s death until he comes again. Given the stern nature of Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians in terms of their selfish behavior and shameful treatment of the poor, coupled with the solemn warning Paul issues regarding discerning Christ’s body before we partake of the bread and wine, many see in this exhortation a reason to fear coming to the table. Non-Christians should not come. You should be afraid. But, as Paul points out, we need not fear *if* we examine ourselves (test our metal so to speak) before we come to this table and partake of Christ’s body and blood.

Proper examination begins with confessing our sins and receiving God’s word of pardon. This table is for repentant sinners who are washed, sanctified, and justified through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Since Jesus died for all our sins, and since his righteousness is imputed to us through faith, we need not fear God’s judgment because Christ has borne that judgment for us in his suffering upon the cross. But if we do not examine ourselves—and fail to acknowledge that we are sinners—then we mock God if we dare come to this table thinking we are worthy of coming to this table, and that we belong here without trusting in the shed blood and perfect righteousness of Christ.

We also properly examine ourselves by discerning Christ’s body in the two-fold sense Paul spells out here. By faith, we receive Christ’s body and blood through the bread and wine. And because we are Christ’s, we discern Christ’s body when we consider that we are part of that one body, knit together by Christ, despite our racial, cultural and socio-economic differences. We partake together, as one people because we are Christ’s. And those who come to this table while sowing seeds of division, spreading false doctrine, organizing factions, or profaning the table by their unruly conduct, should amend their ways, lest they find themselves coming under the judgment of God.

The blessings of this table are great. The same Savior who gave himself for us on the cross, now gives himself to us through bread and wine. At the same time, the warning Paul gives to us is something we must consider. This why we all must listen to Paul, who exhorts us “Let a person examine himself” so that we are worthy partakers when we come to the table of the Lord.