

Lesson Text

1 Corinthians 11:23-34 (NIV)

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. 32 Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

33 So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. 34 Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.

Today's Lesson Aims

- **Learning Facts:** To learn the true meaning of the Lord's Supper.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain Jesus' identification of His body and blood with the bread and cup, respectively.
- **Daily Application:** To create and implement a personal strategy for self-examination during the Lord's Supper.

INTRODUCTION

Sights, Sounds, Smells

The tang of hot apple cider, the crunch of leaves under our feet, and the sight of a pumpkin may instantly transport us back to our childhood. The scent of pine needles and peppermints, the sounds of sleigh bells, and a cold wind on our faces communicate a season of the year to us without a word being spoken. The sound of surf and the feeling of sand between our toes are all we need to think about summer. Earthy smells of freshly tilled gardens and the sound of bird songs bring us into

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springtime. We may not remember the same events that another might when having those senses teased, but we remember.

Our senses trigger memories. So that we never forget what Jesus has done, He has given us a sensory experience that helps us remember.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 50

Place: Corinth

Paul started the church in Corinth on his second missionary journey in the early A.D. 50s, barely 20 years after the death and resurrection of Christ. Corinth was not a center of renowned culture like Athens, but a city of hard-working folks from many backgrounds. It had a Jewish community, and it is here that Paul met Aquila and Priscilla (Prisca), Jews who had come from Rome and were running a tent-making business (Acts 18:2, 3). Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla worked together in other venues (see Acts 18:18; compare Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19).

The Corinthian church was a rambunctious and troubled group. It had problems with factionalism, immorality, rivalry, divorce, and false doctrine. Despite its troubles, though, the church in Corinth had a throbbing vibrancy and dynamism that shone through its mistakes. It had a large place in Paul's heart. He started the congregation and saw it through its birth pains, left and returned for at least one visit, and wrote two substantial letters to help it sort out problems (1 and 2 Corinthians). The trials of the Corinthians that caused Paul to write become a blessing to us, for we can see how the great apostle dealt with difficult issues in a godly and inspired way.

At the heart of the problems in Corinth was a disrespect that some members had for other members. This lack of concern caused a crisis in the way they practiced the Lord's Supper. Understanding the way the Corinthians met for worship will give context to today's lesson text.

First, the weekly meeting of the Corinthian church was likely on what we would call Saturday evening. In Jewish reckoning, one day ended and a new day began when the sun went down. The first day of the week, Sunday, therefore began on our Saturday night. The Corinthian church probably chose to meet in the evening because many of its members worked and could not gather during the day.

Second, the Corinthians observed the Lord's Supper each week as part of their worship service. It would not be an overstatement to say that this was the central part of their time together. Churches today celebrate the Lord's Supper with differing frequency and importance, but for these ancient Christians, it was central and

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weekly. This makes Paul's comments about the Lord's Supper very important, and this centrality causes it to be a reflection of deeper spiritual and social currents within the congregation.

Third, the Corinthian Lord's Supper was in the context of a fellowship meal. They did not have the option of tiny plastic cups or individual wafers purchased from the Christian supply house in Corinth. Rather, they used bread and wine that was a normal part of meals. How this worked, exactly, we do not know, but it created problems. Apparently, the meal began before everyone arrived, and sometimes there was no food left by the time they did arrive (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). This produced an awkward atmosphere of disrespect that belied the message of unity that should have been at the core of remembering Christ in the community.

The Meal of Remembrance: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

1. What happened on the night Jesus was betrayed? (1 Corinthians 11:23)

At the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) Paul had contact with most of the original apostles, so any of them could have told Paul about what happened the night in which Jesus was betrayed. However, Paul notes that he received his information of the Lord. This agrees with what Paul tells the Galatians about having received his message by direct revelation from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:12).

Paul frames the last supper in an unexpected way. He does not say it takes place the night before Jesus' crucifixion, but on the night he was betrayed. The memory of Judas's betrayal is strong (see Mark 3:19). That was an epic night, a night remembered for many things. It was Jesus' last night on earth before His death, and it set in motion a chain of events that changed the course of history.

Paul's recounting of the last supper begins with a simple loaf of bread. It is likely that this was unleavened Passover bread (Luke 22:15), something like the matzo bread used by Jewish people today.

2. What was the significance of the bread? (1 Corinthians 11:24)

Paul relates that Jesus gave thanks over the bread. The Greek word for "give thanks" is eucharisteo, and this is why some Christian traditions refer to the Lord's Supper as the Eucharist. It is appropriate that when we observe the Lord's Supper, we remember to give thanks to God for the sacrifice of Christ that the symbolic meal represents.

The traditional Passover meal features a time when bread is shared. We do not know how closely modern Passover observances reflect practices from the time of Jesus, but the use of unleavened bread is significant because of its connection with the original Passover meal. The exodus from Egypt was a hurried undertaking, so much so that it did not allow for the making of bread that had time to rise from its yeast (Exodus 12:39). Eating unleavened bread is a way for Jewish people to remember their hasty escape from the land of slavery. Jesus transformed this

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ancient symbol into a new focus of remembrance.

3. What is the significance of the cup? (1 Corinthians 11:25)

The modern Passover service has four cups that are shared, each with an important symbolic function. Luke's account of the last supper includes two cups, one that is given thanks over (Luke 22:17) and one that Jesus uses to symbolize the new covenant (22:20). Paul teaches the Corinthians to follow the example of drinking of the cup that comes after the breaking of the bread.

This symbol from the last supper is designed to remind us of blood. Blood is associated with sacrifice in the Old Testament (Leviticus 9:18). Blood removed from the animal is a sign of death and is associated with making a testament, a binding agreement between two parties. The covenant between God and the Israelites was sealed with a bloody ceremony. The blood used in this was called "the blood of the covenant" (Exodus 24:8).

Jesus' words show His intention to move beyond this earlier agreement at Sinai and inaugurate a new, superior agreement. This is the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31. A new relationship is to be established where laws are a matter of the heart (31:33) and where sins are forgiven forever (31:34). Paul teaches that the shedding of Christ's blood is "a sacrifice of atonement" (Romans 3:25), an acceptable substitute to God for the punishment for sins that we deserve. When we drink the cup of the Lord's Supper, we should remember that Christ's death makes our forgiveness possible. We are not simply remembering our Savior and His death. We are remembering that we are forgiven people, saved by His blood. This is the essence of the new testament, meaning the new covenant.

4. What else did Paul say was significant about eating and drinking the elements of the Lord's Supper? (1 Corinthians 11:26)

We are accustomed to remembering this sacrificial death of Christ when having communion, but Paul adds something more. The meal of remembrance indicates a waiting period. It is necessary until Christ comes again. As we wait, the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a way of showing the central truth of the gospel, which is Jesus' sacrificial death.

The elements of the Lord's Supper speak through actions in powerful and beautiful ways. Rather than just hear words, when we take of the loaf and cup we see, touch, smell, and taste. We share in a way that is visible to all onlookers. The celebration is intended to be done in community, therefore serving as a witness to the unity of the church. Paul knows this is important for the Corinthians, because they seem more focused on divisions than harmony (see 1 Corinthians 11:19-21).

The Implications of the Meal: 1 Corinthians 11:27-34

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5. What are the consequences for those who participate in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner? (1 Corinthians 11:27)

Having rehearsed the origin of the Lord's Supper and explained its meaning, Paul now gives some implications for the participants and the church that hosts it. These serve as warnings for the Corinthians. They have badly distorted the practice (1 Corinthians 11:17-22), and these distortions have serious consequences.

First, Paul warns that those who participate in observing the Lord's Supper must do so in a worthy manner. To participate unworthily is to become guilty of the same type of disrespect for Jesus that fueled the angry mob at His crucifixion. Jesus' self-sacrifice was met with abuse and ridicule. Pilate allowed His death, knowing He was innocent (Luke 23:4; John 19:4). Herod and the soldiers mocked Jesus by dressing him in a royal robe and jamming a crown of thorns on his head (Luke 23:11; John 19:2). The chief priests and the crowd countered Pilate's verdict of innocence with demands to kill Jesus (Luke 23:13-21). The way the Corinthians are observing the Lord's Supper is a mockery in the spirit of those who conspired to kill Jesus. Such unworthy participants do not leave the meal of remembrance with blessings, but with symbolic blood on their hands.

6. What should we as Christians do prior to participating in the Lord's Supper? (1 Corinthians 11:28, 29)

How do we properly heed Paul's dire warning? The key is one of self-examination before the time of observing the Lord's Supper arrives. Are we coming with an attitude of humility and thankfulness? Have we looked into our hearts to root out hidden and persistent sin that damages our relationships with the Lord and others?

Failure in self-examination results in failure to discern the Lord's body. These words anticipate 1 Corinthians 12:12, where Paul uses the metaphor of a human body to represent the church, Christ's body. This calls the Corinthians to pay attention to the others who are observing in the Lord's Supper with them—their fellow church members. The self-examination Paul demands involves correcting attitudes toward others. The Lord's Supper should remind us of reconciliation. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. We are all forgiven as a result of the same sacrificial death of our Lord. There are no privileged diners at the Lord's table.

7. Why is self-examination so very important for Christians? (1 Corinthians 11:30, 31)

As there is nothing in the context to associate that these terms are being used figuratively of moral infirmities and spiritual decline, they should be taken in their literal sense. Paul knew that the judgments of God many times take the form of physical illness and even death (c.f. Act 5:1-10). It is his conviction that such judgment has already occurred in their midst, and that the *many* sickness and frequent deaths among the Christians of Corinth were a judgment from God because

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of the irreverent way they had celebrated the Lord's Supper. This is why self-examination must be honest, even brutal.

The benefit of such examination is that *we would not come under judgment*. Paul gives his readers a choice. They may either exercise their own judgment upon themselves, or they may await God's judgment.

8. What are some benefits of self-examination? (1 Corinthians 11:31-33)

In case his readers misunderstand what he means by judgment, Paul adds, "when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined." Disciplining itself is evidence of sonship (Hebrews 12:6). The purpose is that we should not be condemned with the world.

Paul concludes his discussion of the Lord's Supper with a practical exhortation that the Corinthian believers show proper concern for the Lord, and for one another. The two great evils connected with the observance of the Lord's Supper at Corinth were, first, that it was not a communion – one took his supper before another (1 Corinthians 11:21,33); and secondly, that they came to the Lord's table to satisfy their hunger. That is, they made it an ordinary meal. They thus sinned against their brothers (1 Corinthians 11:22), and they sinned against Christ (1 Corinthians 11:27). In the conclusion, therefore, of the whole discussion, Paul exhorts them to correct these evils; to wait for each other, and make it a joint service, and to satisfy their hunger at home, and come together only to commemorate the Lord's death.

The time of the Lord's Supper is an ideal opportunity for self-examination and self-judgment in light of the sacrifice of Christ. If we all practice sincere self-judgment, focusing on our areas that need correction, we are less likely to judge others. There seem to be other issues to resolve concerning the Lord's Supper, given Paul's concluding statement that *when I come, I will give further directions*. However, Paul's two directives are the most important correctives for the time being.

The way the Lord's Supper is observed in congregations today varies widely. However, the principles behind Paul's directives to the Corinthians are still authoritative: remember what the loaf and cup signify, and respect your fellow participants.

What Do You Think?

- What steps can we take to avoid observing the Lord's Supper in an unworthy way?
- What are some ways to become more discerning or recognizing the Lord's body?

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- What self-correction procedures do you find especially noteworthy?

CONCLUSION

Celebrating

I had the honor of sharing the Lord's Supper with an African village congregation a few years ago. This was a very poor community. The church building was a thatched-roof hut with a dirt floor. There were no modern facilities, padded chairs, or technical enhancements as I was accustomed to at home. The worship service was much longer, with energetic singing, multiple sermons, and performances by joyous children's choirs.

In the end, we celebrated the Lord's Supper. It was a little different, with an assortment of glasses and a freshly baked loaf of bread. We took turns coming in an unhurried manner to the little table where the elements sat. The number of glasses for the red juice was insufficient for the people, so they were refilled and reused as the service proceeded. People came to the table in groups, often holding hands. Expressions of praise and prayer peppered this time. It took about 30 minutes, much longer than the efficient five-minute celebrations at my church back home!

I felt I was at home. The culture shock for me of being in an African village was great, but the comfort of meeting with fellow believers around the Lord's table outweighed this. Jesus' presence was there too, and I could not help but remember Him and the sacrifice He made for my fellow believers and for me.

The Lord's Supper is a time to remember our new covenant with God, founded on the fact that Christ's death makes forgiveness possible. It is also a time to remember that He did not die for me alone, but for all who come to Him as the New Testament directs. I still see their faces when I come to the table.

PRAYER

- Heavenly Father, before celebrating the Lord's Supper, may we examine our hearts to clear them of unworthy distractions and disrespect for those with us as we remember the new life we have because of Christ's death. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

- The Lord's Supper connects us with God and fellow believers.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

- Next week's lesson is "**Faith in Jesus,**" where we learn that everything is possible if we let our faith rest in Jesus Christ. Study Acts 3:11-21.

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