

Communion: Preparation of our hearts for the Lord's table

by Jay Wegter

It's interesting that the instructions that were given through the apostle Paul actually come in a context in which he is correcting the abuse of the Lord's table among the Corinthian believers. It's shocking that these infant Christians or carnal Christians were so bound up in their own affairs that they didn't make the slightest effort to accommodate themselves to their brothers and sisters. There was a neglect of edification. This led to a desecration of the gifts of God in the ordinance of communion. Difficult to imagine that they would come to the Lord's table some intoxicated, some with a large amount of food unwilling to share with their hungry brothers and sisters.

1 Corinthians 11:18 says, "For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear there are divisions that exist among you; and in part I believe it." But then he goes on to say in verse 19, "For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you." And so, despite the evil one's efforts to work so hard, leaving no stone unturned, in order to break the unity of the Spirit of the church, the devil's contrivances only work to further demonstrate who the faithful are and revealing their uprightness more clearly. But also, it tends to demonstrate who the ungodly are as well.

So continuing in this text, look what Paul says in verses 20 through 22 describing the abuse there at Corinth, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." That's first Corinthians 11:20-22. The very oneness in mutuality and commonality in fellowship that the Lord's table was to celebrate was communicating the opposite message and people not caring for one another. This context of abuse is the context in which our Lord, through Paul, is going to give us the proper use of the Lord's table: how to be prepared for it, how to deal with it reverently, and really appropriate it as a powerful means of grace for the church. Starting in verse 23, "For I received from the Lord that which I also declared to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which 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 He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is a new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." - 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

So our Lord, on the night of the last supper, entrusted the remembrance of this new covenant to his disciples. This took place at a time just a few hours away from his own sacrifice on Calvary's cross. The disciples would not have to wait any longer before seeing what this supper foreshadowed, what these elements depicted--the broken bread and the blood of the grape--for he was crucified within hours of this supper. In verse 24, we are told that believers are sharers of the body of Christ. In other words, this visible sign or a symbol of the broken bread depicts a spiritual reality behind it. He was sacrificed for us and these benefits become ours only when we are indwelt by His Spirit. Only these benefits are ours only when He is one with us. We are members of His body, and we are united with Him in one life. The book of Ephesians is so replete with the passages about being in Christ. In Him in whom the book of Ephesians just unfolds so beautifully our union with Christ. He imparts, Christ does, His life to us by the secret power of the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit is the one who joins us and Christ together in this glorious organic union. In order to communicate how Christ's life is given to us via his death and resurrection, our Lord uses some very recognizable metaphors in John 6:50-51. Our Lord, speaking of His upcoming death, says the following, "This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh." Now this was a very hard saying. The Jews stumbled over this saying. Many of them walked with him no more, and yet, He's communicating through metaphors the fact that believing in Him and His finished work imparts eternal life. When we think about partaking of the elements of the Lord's table, it is a reminder that the Lord is holding out to us the benefits of his broken body for us. This body--which was so awfully broken, almost unrecognizable--is now a resurrected body in Heaven. From Heaven, as

our great High Priest and intercessor, our Lord, praying and interceding for His people, sends down the efficacy of His flesh once offered. This memorial of the Lord's table is designed in many ways to assist our weakness. For we have trouble focusing on unseen things. We're captivated by created things. We tend to let our interests settle onto temporal things. And we fall so far short of being sufficiently mindful of the power of His death, that regularly partaking of these elements in communion is designed to refresh our thinking on precisely what is the basis of our standing before God his spilled blood. According to verse 25 of first Corinthians 11, His spilled blood ratified the new covenant. His blood poured out is what reconciled us to God. So when we partake of the elements of the Lord's supper, it reinforces how willingly our Savior made the pledge of this covenant--this new covenant, that we shall be His people and He shall be our God. He'll write His laws on our hearts. He'll be merciful to our iniquities and remember our sins no more. This covenant, God's testimony of good will to His people, is the theme of this covenant. So as we partake of these elements in the Lord's table, it's designed to make our minds more sure of God's intent behind this covenant. Of course, this is summarized in the last part of Hebrews 6 were the author of Hebrews, speaking of God's motives, God wanted to make the heirs of the covenant more sure of His intention, so He swore by Himself that they might have greater assurance of His intent in bringing them to Himself. So this covenant contains promises that we are reminded of when we partake of the elements. When we take communion, it's designed to awaken our conscience--our conscience as to the assurance of salvation. This is why we must be prepared to take the Lord's table. If we take it in a haphazard way or an unprepared way we're not going to enjoy its benefit. It's designed to feed our inner life of faith that we might be more courageous and more bold and more active in living out of Christ's fullness. For he was given to make us complete. Everything we need for life and godliness is in him. In partaking of these elements, the death of Christ, this should be sealed upon our consciences. As it says in Colossians 3:15, "Let the peace of Christ umpire (or arbitrate) in your hearts." Let the peace of Christ make the call in your hearts. Let it move you to praise God more openly. When we partake of the Lord's table, Christ is reminding us of the benefits of his death. We are making a public profession that our faith in God rests completely on Christ's finished work

and his ongoing intercession for us in Heaven. I often tell my students at the Master's University that when you meditate on the Lord during communion, don't just think about the agony he endured, which certainly is part of our meditation, but think about the fact that in order to bring you to God and make you part of his forever family, a real divine objective justice had to be done in the case of your personal sins. So fully that God is satisfied with the justice done in the case of your sins. This is all that you might have an eternal love relationship with the God of the universe and be adopted as his children. Now because Paul is giving us the instructions in how to carry out the Lord's table, in terms of preparation, again the context is correcting abuse, and so we've seen in the last few verses here that this involves properly esteeming or properly discerning the offering of the body of Christ. Christ's body was offered to satisfy God, but it also produces incredible changes in a believing sinner. It quenches our lusts. It crucifies the dominion of our old life. It makes us new creatures. It carries the curse away. When we are partaking of the communion ordinance, it's designed to enlighten our hearts, to feed our hearts, to remind our hearts, and also communion in causing believers to examine themselves and cleanse themselves and prepare themselves.

Communion is a very purifying ordinance for the church at large because in regularly taking communion we're dealing with the things that interrupt our fellowship with the Lord and with each other. Now in versus 27 through 32, the apostle is going to be dealing with the consequences of coming to the Lord's table in an unprepared manner. The warnings here are very graphic. Therefore starting in verse 27 of first Corinthians 11, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself and let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly." Now this is an interesting way of saying that we need to come to the Lord's table in an examined state—a state in which we have done some soul-searching. Are we living with sin, a detente, a peace treaty with sin? For when you take of the elements of the table, other believers are seeing you, and by taking of these elements you're literally saying, "I'm walking in obedience to my commander, to my champion, to my chief, the Lord. I'm walking in obedience to him. My life is conformed to what he requires of his followers."

Therefore, to take the cup in an unworthy manner is to live a lie. It's to basically say, "I'm not a hypocrite," when one actually is a hypocrite. Because the Lord sacrificing himself was designed to destroy the works of the devil, if we are living in sin and then partaking of the cup, it shows a deep disrespect for the entire reason that Christ was sacrificed to deliver his people, redeem them from sin and bring them to God and ultimately to glorify them. So Paul gives a warning here that God's discipline may be severe. "For this reason many of you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world." Let's just review these verses which describe what it means to come to the Lord's table in an unworthy manner. The Lord expects us to come to his table in deep gratitude. That gratitude is expressed in a willingness to examine ourselves, search our hearts, cleanse ourselves, and not be one of those who desecrate this ordinance. For God is saying that those who mock the sobriety of this ordinance, he's going to punish them. He's going to discipline them, and perhaps severely. So to live in sin and then take the Lord's table is to come to the Lord's table in an unjudged manner. This could open the person up to some severe punishments. Those who come to the Lord's table guilty are unworthy because they do not discern the Lord's body, that the Lord died, was crushed, that he might deliver his people from sin's control, penalty, and power. Yet if you're under the control and power of sin, then you're basically mocking what the Lord did to make us his holy servants. So no one should approach the Lord's table without being truly prepared and in self-examination of your life. We bring faith to this table that Christ is the reason we are accepted by God and have been justified and have his favor. But we also bring an attitude of repentance to this table. We come in a contrite frame of mind. We're humbled by the knowledge of our own wretchedness. We come to the table, in many ways, dissatisfied with our own performance. Therefore, the table is a reminder that we are not coming based upon our level of obedience. We're always willing to fall back completely upon the grace that is in Christ. We rest upon that grace. We examine ourselves under this attitude of repentance, and from that attitude repentance comes a more full and free unhindered love to God and the brethren. We must learn to devote ourselves to Christ and his service in a

wholehearted way, not compromised by having peace treaties with sin in certain areas of our life. Because the Lord's table is a celebration of communing or fellowshiping with the Lord and with his people, the Lord's table is designed also to promote a wholehearted unity of the body to which he has committed to us. Passages such as Ephesians 4:1-3 where we are commanded to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace that exists between the brethren. Now it's a fact that no saint is perfect—no believer is perfect—but faith and repentance and love and gratitude are important ways to prepare to partake of the table. It's a very serious thing, for those individuals who are not disturbed by their own sin will be disturbed by God's chastisements. The Lord is going to discipline those who come to his table in an unworthy unexamined manner. This is referred to in verse 29 as not discerning the Lord's body. In other words, as seeing it as common or just seeing it as a ritual or a religious tradition and not holy, truly holy. For the Lord's body was given that he might redeem his people and cleanse them and commend them to God. So what type of discipline does the Lord send to those to partake of his table in an unworthy manner? It's described in verse 30, some among you are weak, some are sickly, and some have died because of the sin of abusing the Lord's table. Now let's keep in mind that these are people who know God. This is a family matter even though some are sick and dying. God is not afflicting them in vindictiveness. He's not leveling on them the full penalty of their sin. This has a goal. He wants to bring them to repentance. They refused to consider the sins in their life. They refuse to really repent and mortify the sins in their life, and because they refuse to do that, through negligence, the Lord is going to wake them up. He's going to address their negligence with the full force of divine discipline in verse 31. This is intended to make them take stock of themselves, to look to the remedy, to stop being complacent, but to voluntarily condemn themselves--stir themselves out of their lethargy and stir them to repent. We call that stir them to penitents. This is important. The Lord's scourging of us is designed to break up the hardened soil of our heart, break up the sinner's stubbornness, and stir him to contrition. This contrition, this repentance, this mortification of sin, this is not the sinner making atonement for his sins. It's the sinner responding properly to Christ, his Lordship, and the full sufficiency of his sacrifice. So when God chastises in a severe way, he does it out of concern for the

salvation of the elect. God does not want nor permit his true sons to perish, and so he will chastise them for their recovery. He will call them back from the edge of destruction. He will cause them to submit themselves to him again in humility. This is what his correction is able to do. He'll bring them back to a place of obedience. They will mortify their permissiveness of their flesh; they will see their own weakness; and they will be far more consistent in bringing their hearts to times of prayer and spiritual gladness. For what an infinite privilege it is to belong to the Lord and to partake of this ordinance which refreshes and reminds us and feeds our hearts on God's kind intentions toward us in Christ.