

THE LORD'S SUPPER

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Introduction:

An older couple had trouble remembering common, day-to-day things. They both decided that they would write down requests the other had, and so try to avoid forgetting. One evening the wife asked if the husband would like anything. He replied, "Yes. I'd like a large ice-cream sundae with chocolate ice cream, whipped cream and a cherry on top." The wife started off for the kitchen and the husband shouted after her, "Aren't you going to write it down?" "Don't be silly," she hollered back, "I'm going to fix it right now. I won't forget."

She was gone for quite some time. When she finally returned, she set down in front of him a large plate of hash browns, eggs, bacon, and a glass of orange juice. He took one look and said, "I knew you should have written it down! You forgot the toast!" (www.bible.org)

Perhaps many of us could say we don't have the memory that we used to have... But there is something Jesus wanted us to never forget. That is the sacrifice he made to pay the price of our sin so that we could be set free from both the penalty and the power of sin.

Once a month we remember that sacrifice by a celebration we call communion or the Lord's supper. We are going to be observing that ceremony in a few minutes but before we do, I want to turn our attention to the Scripture passage we read a few moments ago. It concerns the church in Corinth and a problem there that had come to the attention of the Apostle Paul.

I have divided this passage into 4 sections. We are going to see:

- The Problem – vv. 17-22
- The Instruction – vv. 23-26
- The Warning – vv. 27-32
- The Summary (Conclusion) – vv. 33-34

We are going to go quickly through these points, but I trust that we will be challenged about our attitudes as we approach the Lord's table.

The Problem vv. 17-22

The Corinthian church was a church plagued with division and disharmony. Word of some of the splits and schisms in the church had reached Paul. In chapter 1 Paul addressed their division over leaders and teachers in the church. Now in the latter part of chapter 11, he addresses another issue that has come to his attention – this being an abuse of the Lord's supper and a rift that seems to have arisen between the wealthy and the poor, the haves and the have-nots.

A couple of notes:

1. Paul's comment – *"...I do not commend you..."* There is very little commendation in this letter for the Corinthian believers. In 11:2 he commended them for their respect for him and their faithfulness to certain teachings and traditions. But now he has come to a subject where he must once again rebuke them.
2. *"...there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval."* (NIV) It is the divisions that indicate that there is something wrong and leads to separating truth from error.
3. The custom in the early church. They would meet together regularly for what is referred to as love feasts. People would bring food and it would be shared together. Those who had plenty would share with those who had little or nothing. It would be much like our potluck meals. But at the conclusion of the meal they would take some bread and wine and observe the command of the Lord to remember his sacrifice and death for them.

So, this is where we see the problem that Paul was hearing about in the Corinthian church. *Read vv. 20-22.*

There are several problems that are apparent here. First, those who had plenty were not sharing their food with those who had little or none. As a result, some were going hungry. Second, they were not waiting for one another. There was no sense of family or community. It was each one for himself. Third, some were over-indulging while others were humiliated because they did not have enough.

Because of all this, Paul says, by the time they came to the celebration of remembrance, it could not even be called the Lord's supper.

Some were drunk, some had not had anything to eat, and the whole scene was one of disorder and conflict. It was hardly a picture of unity in the body of Christ. In fact, Paul suggests that their actions were a disgrace and showed complete contempt for Christ's body, the church.

The Instruction vv. 23-26

In the next few verses, Paul reviews for them the pattern and the purpose of the Lord's supper. We are not going to spend much time on this as I believe it is quite familiar to most of us.

The pattern: There are two elements to the Lord's supper – the bread and the cup of wine or grape juice. The bread is the symbol of Christ's body – given for us. The juice or wine is the symbol of his blood that instituted the new covenant, a covenant of grace and forgiveness. There is much that could be said about these symbols, but I am going to leave that for another time.

The purpose: *read v. 26* – the purpose is twofold. It is a look back as a reminder of what Jesus did for us when he offered himself up as a sacrifice on the cross. It is also a look ahead as we anticipate the day when he will return to establish his kingdom of justice and righteousness.

With that, let's move on to...

The Warning vv. 27-32

Following his instruction concerning the pattern and purpose of the Lord's supper, Paul returns to the issue at hand for the Corinthian church. You see, they were suffering under the judgment of God because of their abuses. Paul had a severe warning for them. While his warning is specifically for the believers in Corinth, I believe that we can learn something from his counsel as well.

Read vv. 27-32 – There are a couple of important warnings to note. First, there is the warning about eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. Clearly the celebration of the Lord's supper is intended for believers, those whose sin has been cleansed through faith in Christ's sacrifice. One who has never turned from sin to trust in Christ is unworthy to partake in the celebration. But even as believers, we should not come to the table of the Lord with a ritualistic, indifferent attitude or an

unrepentant heart. To do so dishonors the body and the blood of the Lord and renders the ceremony meaningless.

If we are to come to the table worthily, with the right attitudes and with our heart clean before God it is incumbent upon us to take time to examine ourselves as Paul instructs in v. 28.

The second area of warning is in v. 29 – *read it*. What does it mean to not discern the body? It is most commonly understood to mean not understanding the significance of the bread as the symbol of the Lord's body, and so not acting in a Christ-like manner when partaking of the communion meal.

However, there is also the possibility that Paul is moving beyond the symbolism of the bread as Christ's human body to refer to the body of Christ as the church—the body of believers that make up Christ's body. If so then this could be a reference back to the lack of consideration and disregard shown within the congregation in Corinth. There was a lack of understanding of how the body of Christ should function. In chapter 12, Paul goes on to talk more about the interdependence of the members of a body and how that relates to the church, Christ's body.

Verse 30 reminds us that disregard for the body and the celebration of the Lord's supper can have serious consequences. Paul even suggests that because of their irreverent and self-centered approach to the Lord's table they were facing the judgment of God, to the extent that some had even died under God's hand of judgment.

If we are to avoid that kind of judgment, we need to judge ourselves – v. 31. We need to examine our own hearts and our motives to be sure that we are right in our attitudes and clean before God as we come to the table.

Conclusion vv. 33-34

Read vv. 33-34. In a few moments we will come to the table of the Lord to remember together our Lord's sacrifice. But as we do so let us consider our own hearts and deal with anything that might bring God's judgment on us as individuals or as a body of believers.

Prayer...