



Lord's Supper: An attitude of service

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night 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, 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." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Therefore, 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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

(1 Corinthians 11:23-29)

Familiarity can breed contempt – and the inability to hear what words actually say. The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper has within it a sizeable quote from 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 words we hear repeatedly in our church services. But I suspect that we have become somewhat deaf to what those words actually say.

Why do I come to that conclusion? It seems to me that in so many of our conversations regarding the Lord's Supper, the focus of discussion is on questions such as: who may attend, should we receive the elements at a table or in the pew, how many cups we ought to use, what's in the cup(s), and other such like questions. Legitimate as those questions may be, I learn from 1 Corinthians 11 that they can have a place only – *only* – after we have humbly embraced an attitude of service-to-the-other. Without such an attitude of *service*, any discussion about the cup or the pew or the guest is premature and will invariably be misdirected – and therefore lead to unnecessary heat. You see, Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 11 of the *Lord's Supper* and so sets forth the Lord's *attitude of service* when He instituted his Supper.

The circumstance triggering Paul's instruction

"When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat," wrote the Apostle Paul sharply (v 20). His point is clear: not every Lord's Supper is actually a Lord's Supper.

How is that possible? Paul explains in verse 21: *"For,"* he says, *"as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else."* The situation appears to have been as follows. The members of the church of Corinth lived, we understand, spread out all over town. When they came together, they regularly enjoyed a meal together – and in the course of the meal also celebrated what we today know as the "Lord's Supper." But they did not wait for each other. Those who arrived early opened up their bread baskets as soon as they arrived, so that they were gorged by the time the last of the congregation turned up. Those who arrived early were in all likelihood the freemen (and hence the more well-to-do and those who set their own clocks), while those who entered later were slaves at the mercy of slave owners (and hence persons who had little and could not come and go at will). Paul describes the result: *"One remains hungry, another gets drunk"* (v 21). There's division in the congregation of Jesus Christ.

So when the members of the congregation – some stuffed, some starved – pushed their tables together to eat “the Lord’s Supper,” Paul is emphatic: you’re not eating the *Lord’s* Supper. What makes a Lord’s Supper a Lord’s Supper?

The content forming Paul’s instruction

The term “Lord’s Supper” automatically sends our thoughts to the table we see in front of the church every two or three months. Paul, however, does not ask his readers to think of a particular table – where there’s bread cut just so and a cup containing a certain kind of drink, and a formula that is spoken and actions that are done – but Paul wants his readers to think of *attitude*.

That’s why Paul reminds the Corinthians of what he’d told them when he did his mission work in their midst some years ago. *“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you”* (v 23). What had Paul received from the Lord and passed on to the Corinthians?

This: *“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, 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.’”*

(1Corinthians 11:24f)

Jesus was being *betrayed* and He knew it! Yet He did not pass on to his disciples a sense of self-pity or of being full of Himself. Rather, though He knew one of those twelve was in the process of handing Him over to the chief priests, another would soon deny Him three times, and all the disciples would shortly flee, He calmly sat down with them to eat the Passover Lamb. In the course of a meal with such unworthy participants, He took some of the unleavened bread from the table and distributed a piece to each disciple present, with these explanatory words: this bread represents My body, *“which is for you.”* Jesus was telling them, *“I give My body, I lay down My life, for your benefit!”* Similarly, after the Passover meal was eaten, He took a cup standing on the Passover table and explained, *“This cup is the new covenant in My blood”* – and told all of the disciples to drink it. He would shed it so that his sacrifice could form the basis of a new relation between these sin-filled disciples and the Lord God.

Self-emptying to serve

What, then, was Jesus’ point in instituting the Lord’s Supper, in giving his disciples the bread and the cup? Was it that the disciples have to learn a ritual that must be done just so? This was not Jesus’ point. According to the Apostle Paul, Jesus added to both the words about the bread and the cup the command to *“do this in remembrance of Me.”* The disciples are to copy Jesus’ attitude. They are to *remember* the Lord, remember what He did on that night, how He gave his body and blood in order to pay for their sins and reconcile these unworthy sinners to God. They’re to remember his attitude of giving, of self-emptying for the benefit of another. As Jesus also said: *“I am among you as one who serves”* (Luke 22:27). Paul writes, *“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”* (1 Corinthians 11:1). The Lord’s people, including the Christians of Corinth, must adopt an attitude that produces an atmosphere where one puts self last and where seeking to serve the other is put first.

This, in fact, is something the first Christians after Pentecost understood well. Through the working of the Holy Spirit 3000 persons came to believe that there was forgiveness for their sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. In their gratitude for Christ’s self-emptying work they in turn emptied themselves, got rid of their selfishness. I read in Acts 2 that *“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”* (v 42). Yet they were not divided among themselves, were not so many camps where the rich congregated by themselves over here and the poor by themselves over there or those who were strict and straight gathered in this room and those who were (perceived to be) free and slack gathered in yonder room. Rather, all the believers were together and had everything in common.

The rich and the poor, the slaves and the free, the Jews and the Hellenists, the strict and the slack, the ones with body odour and the ones without, were all *together*. And they showed their togetherness in their actions; they sold *“their possessions and goods”* and *“they gave to anyone as he had need”* (v 45). Moreover, *“they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts”* (v 46). Here was interest in and care for the other without regard to self – just as the Lord had displayed in his last supper. Here the fruits of the Spirit of Jesus Christ were manifestly present.

How different was the behaviour amongst the Christians of Corinth! That's why the Apostle tells them that *“when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.”* It's not the Lord's Supper because the *attitude of self-denial* that characterized Jesus' activities during his last supper were so obviously absent from the supper of the Corinthians.

Self-examination

Consequences follow and the first is obviously that the Corinthians must repent. Paul says that *“whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.”* Actually, the Greek does not have the words *“sinning against,”* the Greek simply says that one is *“guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.”* Those who first crucified Jesus were *“guilty of the body and blood of the Lord,”* for they murdered an innocent man. The Jews demanded Jesus' death because they saw Him as a threat to themselves. They were busy thinking about themselves. The Christians of Corinth can be guilty of the same sin of crucifying the Lord by eating and drinking in the name of Christ while their heads and their hearts are void of serving another, are instead full of serving themselves. That's the point of the phrase *“in an unworthy manner.”* The Corinthians ate and drank *“unworthily”* because their attitude contained nothing of the *attitude* of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Corinthians need to *“examine”* themselves before they eat the bread and drink of the cup (v 28). They need to consider what sort of attitude produces a conduct whereby it's acceptable to gorge oneself while another receives nothing. And they need to repent not just of their self-centred conduct, but of the attitude that generates this self-centred conduct. They need to know that the attitude that drives them leads to God's judgment. In fact, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul tells them there is a direct connection between the sicknesses and deaths now happening in Corinth and the self-centered conduct within the communion of saints. The Lord God is pressing his hand of judgment upon those saints of Corinth so that they might repent – lest they end up crushed under the heavy hand of God's judgment on the Day of Judgment (v 30-32). In the situation as it was in Corinth, true self-examination involved staring down their selfishness and repenting of it for Jesus' sake – and being determined instead to empty self in order to serve the other, as Jesus did.

Respect

As consequence of such repentance, an improved approach to each other would follow. In verse 33 Paul says: *“So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other.”* If you're too hungry to wait, eat at home before you come together. Respect the other, be sensitive to his circumstances, and deny yourself for the good of the other. No meal can truly be the *Lord's Supper* if service does not determine your actions.

Today

What lesson follows for us? The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper quotes the middle part of 1 Corinthians 11 and draws out at length what self-examination is all about. It tells us that before we can come to the table we need to consider our sins and accursedness and so humble ourselves before God. It tells us to search our hearts for whether we actually believe the gospel of Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary for sinners. It also tells us to examine our conscience, whether we truly want to show true thankfulness to God with our entire lives. Those three points – they're actually the three parts of the Catechism; Sin & Misery, Deliverance and Gratitude – are indeed what the

Scriptures require of us. At the same time we need to be aware that Paul's actual instruction about examining oneself arose in a particular set of circumstances. Those circumstances revolved around self-centredness verses the attitude of the Lord Jesus Christ whereby He emptied Himself to serve the unworthy. Without that sense of serving the other one does not eat the Lord's Supper – despite what one claims to do. Let each of us examine *oneself* so that we treasure, both in attitude and in action, a mindset fitting for the *Lord's* Supper: that we empty ourselves to serve another.

Over the years several of our churches have gone through times of difficulty because of disagreements surrounding the *how* of celebrating the Lord's Supper. In such congregations there may still be scars, with brothers and sisters feeling alienated from one another. Other congregations may feel some pressure to conform to changes they've seen elsewhere. In both situations, to greater or lesser degree, there is talk about the manner of celebrating the supper of the Lord. That is why we all need to know from the start that it is not the presence of a table that makes the *Lord's* Supper. It's not the presence of a communal cup or the content of the cup. Certainly there are arguments for doing it this way or that way. But the ritual, the outward form, is secondary to the fundamental point, and that fundamental point is the *attitude*. Where there is division, where there is not sensitivity for the other, where there is no self-emptying to respect the scar a brother has, where there is no bending to serve the other, *there* one does not celebrate the *Lord's* Supper – even if the Form is read just so, the table is set just right, and the congregation comes forward just so. The Apostle's point, in the words that are so familiar to us, is that we need to follow the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

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