



## Partake Unworthily?

1 Corinthians 11:27 tells us that it is possible for members of true churches to partake in an unworthy manner.

*"Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."*

What does that mean to partake unworthily? How can I be sure I am partaking *worthily*, that is, in a manner which God finds acceptable?

First, if "*worthily*" or "*worthy*" means "*deserving*," who *is* deserving? Because we are all declared by God's Word to be sinners by nature and practice, and are deserving of eternal damnation, no one is therefore deserving of eternal life. "*For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23) Then, on that basis, *no one* can come to the Lord's Table, if this is what is meant by "*eateth and drinketh unworthily*!" For who is worthy? As one covenant believer once confessed,

*"I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant..."*

(Genesis 32:10)

Indeed, the Scriptures affirm that "*there is none righteous, no, not one.*" (Romans 3:10) Likewise, there is none worthy, no, not one, when measured by the absolute perfection and holiness of God's Law. There never was, nor are, nor ever will be in the history of the world, a sinless human being, except for the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 3:5). As the sinless Son of God, Christ is worthy on behalf of those who are justified by His precious blood before a thrice holy God. His is the perfect righteousness of God imputed to His elect people, and received by them by none other than God-given faith (Philippians 3:9).

Heidelberg Catechism Question 60 asks: "*How are you righteous before God?*"

The answer given: "*Only by true faith in Jesus Christ: that is, although my conscience accuses me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.*"

If this is what is meant by not partaking unworthily, only those without sin may partake. With this understanding, then the Lord Jesus would have been the only one to partake of the Lord's Supper! But this cannot be. We know there were others present at the first Lord's Supper who partook with Christ. It should be noted that in that initial Lord's Table there was an unworthy partaker – Judas Iscariot, the son of perdition! (See Mark 14:17-25; John 17:12.) All twelve disciples were present. I think one reason this is in the Bible is to show that the visible church is made up of a membership of wheat mixed with hidden tares (See Matthew 13:24-30). There will be those who partake of the Supper unworthily, as careful as the oversight of any given church may be. To "screen" the Table perfectly would require screening those who apply for membership perfectly, which is impossible. This brings us to the next point.

Second, the Scriptures plainly teach that the Lord's Supper is for believers, and not for sinless people. There is none sinless, no, not one, as already has been established. The following Scriptures clearly point out that the Holy Supper is designated to be for the people of God only.

*“And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: **this is My body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.**”*

(1 Corinthians 11:24)

*“Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in **My blood, which is shed for you.**”*

(Luke 22:20)

Why is it only for true believers? Because it is for these, and these alone, that Christ came and lived and died and rose again to be their Savior. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you have publicly confessed Christ before the witness of the living God in His church, and by a credible profession of faith and baptism have become a member of Christ's body, you may partake!

Third, this brings us to the main point of this study. While the Lord's Supper is for believers, yet we as believers may partake unworthily. The word “unworthily” found in 1 Corinthians 11:27 and 29 speaks of partaking in a careless or improper manner that violates God's Word. We have an example of this in our passage. In the “*agape*” (or love) meal, held prior to the Lord's Supper, the well-off Corinthian believers would not see to the hunger of their not-so-well-off brethren. This is not to mention the abuse of drunkenness and revelry in the house of God. It is such hypocrisy to have a love feast and not show the love of Christ to others! The bond of brotherly love was turned into an instrument of discord and division (vs. 20-22). The Corinthian church had some very serious spots in its feast of charity! That is why the Apostle gives the injunction for us to examine our hearts before God for unrepented sin in our lives, before considering to partake of this sacrament of the Lord (v.28).

There are serious temporal consequences to partaking unworthily, such as having physical weakness, being afflicted with sickness, and even death (vs. 29-30). But even if the believer is chastised in this life, it is nothing like the condemnation of unbelievers to eternal hellfire! For it represents our heavenly Father's chastening love in conforming us to His holy character (vs. 32 cf. Hebrews 12:10). The worship of God, of which the Lord's Supper, when properly administered, is a part, involves more than the outward form. It will be truly accomplished on our part with broken and contrite hearts before the One with Whom we have to do.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks in Question 81: *“Who are to come to the table of the Lord?”*

The answer given: *“Those who are displeased with themselves for their sins, yet trust that these are forgiven them, and that their remaining infirmity is covered by the suffering and death of Christ; who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to amend their life. But the impenitent and hypocrites eat and drink judgment to themselves.”*

So, judge yourself before God does, and repent (v. 31-34). The Lord is still walking through the churches. Christ, who *“holdeth the seven stars in His right hand”* declares, *“and all the churches shall know that I am He which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto everyone of you according to your works.”* (Revelation 2:1, 23)

Fourth and last, the converse of the believer's partaking of the Lord's Supper *unworthily*, is his partaking of the Lord's Supper *worthily*. Why? Because we remember it in a manner which is pleasing to God. Of course, it will never be perfect, as it is the work of a sinner. But it is nonetheless acceptable in God's sight because of our having been accepted in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6). And also it is because of the work of the Holy Spirit who causes us to walk by faith and obedience to Christ, and in love to our brethren.

*“Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.”*

(1 John 3:21-24)

The Lord's Table is a wonderful means of grace to reflect upon our need to repent and turn from our evil ways to the Lord Jesus for cleansing (1 John 1:7-10). Yes, by our regularly commemoration of the Lord's Supper in this spirit and manner, we enter into the fellowship of His sufferings and are made more conformable to His death. Like Paul, your overseers are delighted when they are able to observe in the heart and life of the congregation "*Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*" Thus, "*ye do shew the Lord's death till He come.*" (See Philippians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 2:2; 11:26) It is not too late to repent and turn to seek His forgiveness and grace, even at this eleventh hour of the Lord's Supper.

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