

# Understanding the Lord's Supper

*1 Corinthians 11:17-26*

I read a story about a small-town church in upstate New York:

They'd had the same pastor in that church for over thirty-five years. He was loved by the church and the community. After he retired, he was replaced by a young pastor. It was his first church; he had a great desire to do well. He had been at the church several weeks when he began to perceive that the people were upset at him. He was troubled.

Eventually he called aside one of the lay leaders of the church and said, "I don't know what's wrong, but I have a feeling that there's something wrong."

The man said, "Well, preacher, that's true. I hate to say it, but it's the way you do the Communion service."

"The way I do the Communion service? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not so much what you do as what you leave out."

"I don't think I leave out anything from the Communion service."

"Oh yes, you do. Just before our previous pastor administered the cup to the people, he'd always go over and touch the radiator. And, then, he would--"

"Touch the radiator? I never heard of that liturgical tradition."

So the younger man called the former pastor. He said, "I haven't even been here a month, and I'm in trouble."

"In trouble? Why?"

"Well, it's something to do with touching the radiator during the communion service. Could that be possible? Did you do that?"

"Oh yes, I did. Always before I administered the cup to the people, I touched the radiator to discharge the static electricity so I wouldn't shock them."

For over thirty-five years, the people of his congregation had thought that was a part of the holy tradition. I have to tell you that church has now gained the name, "The Church of the Holy Radiator."

I think a lot of people get confused about the Lord's Supper.

A little girl who was used to going to children's church, once decided that she was going to stay in big church to see what the grown-ups did after all the kids were gone.

On that particular Sunday they had the Lord's Supper. Her only comment afterward was "I like children's church. The snacks are better and you get more juice."

Unfortunately it's possible to come to the Lord's Table and celebrate the Communion service, & never really understand what it's all about. When we come to the Lord's Supper we want to have a fresh encounter with Jesus that leaves us awestruck at the magnitude of His great sacrifice for us.

Jesus established the Lord's Supper as a commemorative ordinance as He celebrated the Passover feast with His disciples. From the time of the Exodus, Jews celebrated the Passover. This reminded them of how God had sent the

death angel to Egypt and because they applied the blood of a sacrificial lamb on their doorposts, the angel passed over them. The lamb was then eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. In the upper room, on the night of His arrest, Jesus celebrated the last Passover and the first Lord's Supper with His disciples.

The Passover celebrated a temporary deliverance from the bondage of slavery under the Old Covenant. The Lord's Supper celebrates our permanent deliverance from the bondage of sin under the New Covenant. In today's passage Paul builds on what he had already taught the Corinthians about the Lord's Supper and he corrects their abuses.

Over and over the Scripture reminds us that we are a "one another" people. Fellowship has always been important in the Lord's church. Part of that fellowship has always been the sharing of common meals, breaking bread together. The early churches developed the tradition of a special fellowship meal the called the love feast. These feasts were sort of like a "pot luck dinner" where they celebrated the oneness, the unity of the church. Everyone brought what they could. Some brought much. Some brought little. Some brought elaborate dishes. Some brought common food. Yet at the table, they were all one. They concluded these love feasts with communion. The love feast and the Lord's Supper often went together.

Verse 17 says, "**Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.**" This church had a problem with the Lord's Supper. They were so far off the mark when it came to the Lord's Supper that there was nothing good Paul could say. It seems to me Paul is saying, "You would be better off not to have the Lord's Supper than to practice it as you do now."

As we work through this passage of Scripture, we will examine the PERVERSION of the Lord's Supper by the Corinthians and the true PURPOSE of the Supper given by the Lord. Next week we will learn how to PREPARE for the Lord's Supper.

## **I. The Perversion of the Lord's Supper (vv.18-22).**

### **A. THERE WERE DIVISIONS IN THE CHURCH (vv.18-19).**

Verse 18 says, "**For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.**" The word "**church**" is from the Greek word *ekklesia*. *Ek* means "out." *Kaleo* means "to call." So literally *ekklesia* means "the called out" or the "called out ones." In the general sense, the church is God's elect, called out from every tribe, tongue, people and nation (Rev.5:9). However, *ekklesia* was also used to refer to a called out assembly like a city council or a local congregation of believers. That's the sense in which Paul uses the word here.

It was not that they had come together IN a church but "**as a church.**" So don't think of church as a place or a building but as a congregation or assembly of people called out by God from the world.

So when they came together as a church Paul says, "**I hear that there are divisions among you.**" The word for "**divisions**" here is *schismata* as in "schism." Literally it means "to tear or cut." The Corinthians were tearing the unity of the church apart; they were cutting the congregation into little schisms. Earlier in this letter to the Corinthians Paul already described this problem in great detail

in chapter 1 he and mentions it as a sign of their carnality and immaturity in chapter 3. When a church is divided, it has a spiritual disease.

Paul says, **“In part I believe it.”** Maybe he suspected that some of the reports of divisions were exaggerated, but he believed much was true. Verse 19 says, **“For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.”** This is why Paul believed what he had heard about the Corinthian church. He says **“there must be factions among you.”** This is true in almost every church. **“Divisions”** and **“factions”** cannot be avoided. There will always be immature, fleshly believers who cause strife.

Jesus said there would be tares among the wheat, pagans in the pews or unbelievers who masquerade as believers in the church. Paul says **“there must be factions.”** This comes from *dei* which means “necessary.” It is necessary that there be factions in the church because such friction reveals the mature from the immature and the wheat from the tares.

When divisions come **“those who are approved may be recognized among you.”** **“Approved”** is from *dokimos* and carries the meaning of having passed a test. The term was used of stones selected for buildings after having passed the mason’s test. It was used of precious metal passed through the fire. When trouble comes to a church, it quickly reveals the attitude of our hearts. Many times through my years in church I’ve watched how people handle trouble. Some are quick to take sides, gossip and even slander others. In doing so they reveal their own spiritual maturity or rather lack of maturity. On other hand I see others who refuse to be quick to judgment, who weigh questions with Scripture and are slow to speak and slow to become angry. Trouble in the church becomes a refining fire through which we are approved or disapproved.

I heard about a pastor whose son grew up watching his dad pastor a troubled church. He heard the terrible slanderous statements made about his father from so-called church leaders. He saw people act wickedly toward others. Most of all, he saw how his father worked through all this conflict. As a young adult, he confessed to his father, “Dad, as I saw how many of the ‘church people’ treated you and treated each other, it was enough to destroy my faith in God, the Bible and the church. But when I saw how you responded, it restored whatever faith I might have lost.”

What is your attitude when trouble comes? Will you pass the test and show yourself to be approved? Does your attitude draw people to the Savior, or does it repel them?

## **B. THE LORD’S SUPPER SHOWED THEIR DIVISIONS (vv.20-22).**

Verse 20 says, **“Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper.”** The context suggests that Paul is speaking here of both the love feast and the Lord’s Supper together. In the modern church, we most often celebrate communion as part of a worship service. In the early church **“the Lord’s Supper”** was a supper. It was the “breaking of bread” of a meal together to be completed by celebrating communion with the Lord.

The common food symbolized their fellowship together; the elements of bread and wine symbolized their fellowship with Christ. Yet to these Corinthians, Paul says that when they come together it is **“not to eat the Lord’s Supper.”** They were eating and drinking but their supper was not the Lord’s Supper. Neither the

meal nor the bread nor the cup honored the Lord. Their practice was a mockery of what God considered sacred.

Look again at verse 17, **“I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.”** Verse 21 describes the scene, **“For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk.”**

The problem with “potluck” dinners at Corinth was that if you didn’t have a “pot” you were out of “luck.” Picture this meal. Wealthy people arrive first because they can leave work whenever they want. Poor people and especially slaves could not arrive until much later. The wealthy brought much fine food and drink and consumed it before the others arrived. So when someone arrived late, there was no more food and he was **“hungry”** while perhaps someone who arrived early had drunk too much wine and was by this time **“drunk”** and that at a church service. There was nothing unifying about this event at all.

In verse 22, Paul asks a series of emphatic rhetorical questions, **“What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? 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 do not praise you.”** Of course they had **“houses to eat and drink in.”** In other words, if they wanted to hoard their fine food or drink enough wine to become drunk they should do so in their own homes, not at a church fellowship where communion would be celebrated.

Paul asks them if they **“despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing.”** It almost sounds like they were intentional in their actions. How it must break the heart of God when church members don’t care about each other! Do you know what is most precious to God on this earth? It is His people, His Church. Acts 20:28 says, **“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”** Do we dare by our actions or attitude **“despise”** that for which Christ has loved so much that He **“shed His own blood?”**

Do you know who is near and dear to God? Those who are helpless. Those who are poor. Those who are weak and despised by the world. One of the most consistent teachings from both Old and New Testaments is that God’s people are to care for the poor, the widow and the orphan. For example, Deuteronomy 10:18 says, **“He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.”** In Psalm 68:5 God describes Himself as **“A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, Is God in His holy habitation.”** James 1:27 says, **“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”**

God loves His church. He especially loves the poor in the church, **“those who have nothing.”** There is strict judgment for believers who have been blessed by God if they do not share with those who **“have nothing.”** So Paul says at the end

of verse 22, **“What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.”**

Celebrating the Lord’s Supper means pursuing oneness, unity.

## **II. The Purpose of the Lord’s Supper (vv.22-26).**

John MacArthur writes: “These verses are like a diamond dropped in a muddy road. One of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture is given in the middle of a strong rebuke of worldly, carnal, selfish, and insensitive attitudes and behavior. The rebuke, in fact, is of Christians who have perverted the very ceremony that these verses so movingly describe.”<sup>i</sup>

### **A. THE PURPOSE OF PAUL’S TEACHING (v.23).**

Verse 23 says, **“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread.”**

First, Paul wants to make explicitly clear that this was not his own thoughts or ideas but that he **“received from the Lord”** and **“delivered”** it to the Corinthians and thus to us. 1 Corinthians was probably written before any of the gospel accounts, before Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. If so, that means this is the first mention of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament writings. Paul is saying that he did not get this teaching from Peter or James or one of the other apostles but it was **“received from the Lord.”** The Lord gave him these instructions directly.

Of course Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper **“on the same night in which He was betrayed.”** There in the upper room, at the end of the Passover meal, he **“took bread”** from the table to represent His body. Think of the significance of that night! While Satan’s evil plan was being executed by Judas the betrayer, Jesus was establishing one of the central ordinances of His church.

The Passover meal began with the blessing of the first of four cups of red wine. After the first cup came the eating of the bitter herbs reminding the Jews of the bitterness of slavery. Next came the singing of the Hallel from Psalm 113-114. Then the second cup would be passed around followed by the breaking and passing of the unleavened bread. Then the Passover meal, the roasted lamb was eaten. The third cup, after the supper was then passed and then the rest of the Hallel was sung. The fourth cup was drank at the end of the Passover.

### **B. THE PURPOSE OF THE BREAD (v.24).**

Verse 24 says, **“And when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’”**

After the sacrificial lamb had been eaten, while Jesus and His disciples reclined at the table, He gave **“thanks”** for the bread. Interestingly, **“given thanks”** is from *eucharisto* from which we get the word Eucharist, the name some Christians give to the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper truly is a thanksgiving meal where we give thanks for our Savior Jesus Christ and what He has done for us.

The ancient Hebrews at the original Passover ate unleavened bread. Leaven symbolized sin. They were not to wait for the bread to rise. It pictured their haste to leave slavery in Egypt. Now that bread became symbolic of Christ's body. Jesus said in John 6:35, "**I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.**"

Christ's body was fully human and physical yet it was the earthly abode of the eternal Son of God. It represents the mystery of the incarnation. According to verse 24, Jesus said, "**Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you.**" A more literal rendering would be "This is my body which is for you." Jesus gave everything, even His own body FOR us.

Jesus said, "**Do this in remembrance of Me.**" This is an imperative, a command. We do not have the option of partaking of the Lord's Supper or not. We are commanded to take it by the Lord Himself. We are to be faithful and regular at His table. So when we eat the bread from the Lord's table we do so "**in remembrance**" of the sinless body of the Lord Jesus given up for us on the cross.

### **C. THE PURPOSE OF THE CUP (v.25).**

Verse 25 says, "**In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'**"

The cup was taken "**in the same manner**" as the bread. He blessed and gave thanks for it. This was the third cup of the Passover meal. It represented the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts of the house. Something had to die because of their sin. Hebrews 9:22 (HCSB) says, "**According to the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.**"

A lot of people complained about the movie, "The Passion" after it was released because they said it was too violent and too bloody. I understood their sentiment, but, if you take the blood out of this story, you have robbed the story of its central element. If you take the blood out of the gospel, you have no gospel.

The blood in the story of what Jesus did for us is essential. You don't have salvation, if you don't have a bloody cross.

(sing) "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus; What can make me whole again: Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Nothing can for sin atone— Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Naught of good that I have done— Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all my hope and peace— Nothing but the blood of Jesus. This is all my righteousness— Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Oh! Precious is the flow That make me white as snow; No other fount I know, Nothing but the blood of Jesus."

Jesus said, "**as often as you drink it.**" The Scripture doesn't tell us how often to come to the Lord's Table. It seems likely the early church celebrated it often,

maybe weekly or even daily. While we don't want communion to become stale and ritualistic we do want to partake "**often.**" Again Jesus said we are take the cup "**in remembrance**" of Him.

When you come to the Lord's Table, remember Him! Concentrate, meditate and focus your attention on His death for you. Remember His passion, suffering and agony. Praise Him. Thank Him and renew your love for Him.

#### **D. THE PURPOSE OF THE SUPPER (v.26).**

Verse 26 adds, "**For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.**" When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we "**proclaim the Lord's death.**" We remember His death. We proclaim it and preach it to others by our actions. We are to keep doing this "**till He comes.**" He will come again. Jesus says in Revelation 22:20, "**Surely I am coming quickly.**" John then adds, "**Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!**"

During the war in Vietnam, a young West Point graduate was sent over to lead a group of new recruits into battle. He did his job well, trying his best to keep his men from ambush and death. But one night when they had been under attack, he was unable to get one of his men to safety.

The soldier left behind had been severely wounded. From their trenches, the young lieutenant and his men could hear him in his pain. They all knew any attempt to save him – even if it was successful—would almost certainly mean death for the would-be rescuer.

Eventually the young lieutenant crawled out of hiding toward the dying man. He got him to safety but was killed before he could save himself.

After the rescued man returned to the States, the lieutenant's parents heard that he was in their vicinity. Wanting to know this young man whose life was spared at such a great cost to them, they invited him to dinner.

When their honored guest arrived, he was obviously drunk. He was rowdy and obnoxious. He told off-color jokes and showed no gratitude for the sacrifice of the man who died to save him. The grieving parents did the best they could to make the man's visit worthwhile, but their efforts went unrewarded.

Their guest finally left. As the dad closed the door behind him, the mother collapsed in tears and cried, "*To think that our precious son had to die for somebody like that.*"

Think about it... That's what Jesus did. He died for sinners. Even for the worst of us. His body had to be broken. His blood had to be spilt. He had to die for people just like that—sinners just like you and me.

Have you put your trust in Jesus? Have you believed in Him and His payment of His blood for your sin? This is His invitation to you today.

<sup>i</sup> MacArthur, J. (1996, c1984). 1 Corinthians. Includes indexes. Chicago: Moody Press., p.270