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1 Corinthians 11:17-34

18th Message

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CORRECTING OUR ATTITUDES TOWARD THE LORD'S SUPPER

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The war in the Persian Gulf has evoked for me memories of the 1960's. As a high school freshman in 1963, I remember watching on television as a quarter of a million people, three-quarters of whom were black, marched on Washington D.C. It was there that Martin Luther King, Jr. shared his dream of a multi-racial America. Here is part of what he said that day:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice...and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... I have a dream that one day in Alabama, with its vicious racists...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers... With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

Martin Luther King's dream for our country is certainly God's plan for his church—that the love of God would be evident to the world in the unity of the church, as black and white, rich and poor, young and old, male and female, all worship together in genuine love.

Our thoughts today will center on impartiality and prejudice, for the passage we will examine from 1 Corinthians 11 is an attack on Christian snobbery. I have no axe to grind nor do I have anyone particular in mind. God wants to speak to each one of us, so I ask you to think of only one person—yourself. Each one of us struggles with partiality.

This was brought home to me a few years ago while I was watching a segment from the television show *60 Minutes*. Adolph Eichmann, one of the primary architects of the Holocaust, was the subject. Reporter Mike Wallace posed a central question at the program's outset: "How is it possible for a man to act as Eichmann did? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying. Was he normal?"

The answer came in an interview with Yeheil Dinur, a concentration camp survivor who testified against Eichmann at the Nuremberg trials. A film clip from the trials showed Dinur facing Eichmann for the first time since Eichmann had sent him to Auschwitz 18 years earlier. As Dinur looked at him he began to sob uncontrollably. Then he fainted, collapsing into a heap on the floor. Wallace asked Dinur what had happened. Had he been overcome by hatred or fear? Were the memories too horrid? No, none of those, Dinur explained. It was that he had suddenly realized that Eichmann was not some God-like authority in a military uniform when he sent thousands to their deaths; he was just an ordinary man. Then Dinur

said, "I was afraid about myself... I saw that I am capable to do this. I am exactly like him."

Prejudice is not confined merely to racists who wear white hoods. Prejudice is buried deep within our beings. It is a problem of sin and evil.

In previous chapters we have seen that the apostle Paul prohibited the Corinthians from becoming involved in pagan worship. In chapters 11-14, he now turns to address three areas of abuse in their worship services. The first abuse is related to the issue of whether a woman should wear a head covering when she was praying or prophesying (11:2-16); the second speaks to the abuse of the poor at the Lord's table (11:17-34); and the third concerns the practice of speaking in tongues in the worship service (12-14). Normally we would take these three abuses in the order in which they appear in the text. Since the first abuse concerns the role of women in worship, however, and 250 of our women are away this weekend at the women's retreat, we will take that issue next week. Today we will focus on the second issue, which was a more serious disorder in the Corinthian's worship services, that of the chaos surrounding the communion table during their services.

I. The situation at Corinth (11:17-22)

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you. 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 is 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. (1 Cor 11:17-22 NASB)

The early church's worship services, their "coming together," to use Paul's words, was a little different from our worship service in that they ate the Lord's Supper in the context of a community meal. The church often met in homes, similar to our home fellowships, and their gatherings frequently centered around a meal, a love feast called the *agapē*. The fact that communion was celebrated in the context of a meal is not at all surprising. The gods of the Ancient Near East were worshipped by eating a meal in their presence. The Jews ate special meals during religious festivals such as Passover. Jesus himself spoke of a banquet which Christians will partake of one day in the presence of God. He instituted the Lord's Supper in the context of that hope. He said, in effect, "I will not eat of this meal again until it is fulfilled in the end time. But you shall eat until that day." The Lord's Supper therefore is the "already" of that feast; it an-

ticipates the great meal in the final kingdom. Thus it is only natural that the anticipation of the feast should itself be a feast.

This *agapē* feast grew out of that atmosphere in the early church where no one counted anything as belonging to himself alone, but everyone freely shared with others the resources and riches that God had provided, so no one was left out. This resulted in a common meal which they shared together. We would call it a “potluck dinner.” (Ray Stedman used to refer to these as “multiple choice” dinners. He said he didn’t believe in luck, and he was very sensitive about the word pot!)

In Corinth, serious problems had arisen during these times. Paul has already dealt with the personality cults that grew up in the church around certain figureheads. But there was another problem among them that manifested itself in an obnoxious snobbishness demonstrated by the rich toward the not-so-rich. Their times of worship and fellowship were so negative as a result that some Christians went away in a spiritually worse state than when they arrived. There was a callous insensitivity, almost to the point of humiliation, to the physical needs of those who possessed very little. When the church came together, there was no sense of their being one family in the Lord. Each group kept to themselves. Some were carrying over to the love feast the distinctions that divided them economically and socially, splintering the church in the process. Paul is not trying to eliminate social distinctions (the wealthy would still have their own homes to eat private meals), but he will not allow them to introduce their social distinctions into the common meals which they shared as believers.

We can get a better picture of what was happening in Corinth. These meals were often held in the homes of the richer members in the church. We know from archaeology that the dining room (known as the *triclinium*), in such a home did not accommodate many guests (10 to 15 at the most), therefore the majority ate in the entry courtyard (the *atrium*) which sat about 30-50 guests. In a class-conscious society such as Roman Corinth it would have been natural for the host to invite his or her own class to eat in the *triclinium*, while the others ate in the *atrium*. Furthermore, it would appear from verse 21 that the rich ate their own sumptuous meals before the others arrived. Many in the church were slaves; they weren’t free to arrive on their own time, and the others were just not waiting for them. We are not quite sure what these private meals included, but it is clear that they were both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to those of the “have-nots.” The net result, says Paul, is that “one is hungry and another is drunk.”

I have heard messages on drunkenness preached from this passage, but I do not think that is Paul’s concern. What he is doing in this expression is taking words used of both parts of the meal, eating and drinking, and expressing them in their extremes. The one extreme is to receive nothing to eat, and the other is to be gorged on food and wine. In fact his main concern is not with the drunkenness of the one, but with the hunger of the other—especially in a context where some believers had more than enough to eat and drink. Thus it seems that the food that was brought was not shared in a common pool, but each enjoyed his own provisions. Such behavior merely emphasized the things that made these believers different. It destroyed the very unity which the meal was intended to proclaim. Paul admonishes the Corinthians that whatever they felt they were doing they were not partaking of the Lord’s Supper, even though they ate the bread and drank the wine. The Lord’s Table is an expres-

sion of our unity in the church. What the Corinthians were doing was a far cry from that.

In contrast, Paul goes on to remind them of what the Lord’s table was originally meant to be, and of things which he had already taught them.

II. The significance of the meal (11:23-26)

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered 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 the 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. (11:23-26)

Since the Corinthians were not keeping this tradition, Paul feels compelled to remind them of the meal’s significance by repeating the actual words used at its institution, saying that it was Jesus himself who told him what went on in the Upper Room on that dark betrayal night. From the book of Galatians we learn that it was Jesus who taught Paul about himself, and what it meant to live in Christ, and this was before the gospels were even written. Thus we have here the earliest description, coming from the lips of Jesus himself, of the initiation of the Lord’s table in the Upper Room.

What the apostle wants to pass on to us is the significance of this meal. The death of our Lord, and its implications on our relationship together as Christians, must dominate the proceedings. The Lord’s Supper is a continuation of the Last Supper that Jesus ate with his own disciples, the Passover meal at which he reinterpreted the bread and wine in terms of his own body and blood to be given over in his death on the cross. The head of any Jewish home would have performed such actions with bread and wine at any meal, and with special seriousness at the Passover. It is thus the words which gave the actions their unique significance, as well as the identity of the Person who uttered them. “He took bread... He gave thanks... He broke it... He said...” “This is my body which is for you.” Then he added the world-shaking command, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Similarly with the cup, after supper, he said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

Two simple, yet profound symbols: Bread, representing Christ’s body given for us, pointing to his death, whereby he gave himself freely for the sake of others; and wine, signifying his blood poured out in death, ratifying this New Covenant between God and his people. It was at this point that the Corinthians failed, not in the sense that they were not thinking properly about Christ, but by their abuse of one another they were negating the very point of that death—that Jesus was creating a new people for his name’s sake in which the old distinctions based on human fallenness were no longer relevant. It is to be eaten as a “memorial” of the salvation that he has effected through his death and resurrection.

The word Paul uses to describe what has happened is covenant. Through the shedding of the blood of Jesus, the paschal lamb, it is now possible for Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, men and women, educated and uneducated, to know the glorious freedom of forgiveness and to have a personal relationship with God. Those who enter this covenant relationship with the Lord enter at the same time into

a covenant relationship with one another, and the covenant community is thus established. That is exactly what the Corinthians were destroying by their behavior.

In verse 26 Paul tells them why he is repeating the Lord's words to them. It is not because they have forgotten the words, or because they have abandoned the Supper; it is because their version of the supper is untrue to the original intent.

The apostle then goes on to say how seriously God himself regards the Lord's table.

III. The seriousness of the abuse (11:27-32)

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so 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. For this reason many among 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. (11:27-32)

This paragraph has an especially solemn ring about it. Paul insists that the Corinthians (and indeed all Christians) must stamp out worship that is unworthy. The privilege of sharing in the Lord's Supper demands a strict self-examination. To do it unworthily is to "be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord"—to place yourself, in other words, not in the company of those who are sharing in the benefits of his passion, but in the company of those who are responsible for his crucifixion.

How then should we approach this time of the Lord's Supper? What does it mean to "partake worthily"? What does it mean to "judge the body rightly"? This paragraph is often read independent of its context, before communion, thus it is often misunderstood. As a result many hold back from partaking because they do not feel worthy. Others presume to partake without exercising any self-examination. Paul's instructions therefore are very important. He says, verse 28, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup." It is clear from the context, which is critical to a correct interpretation, that this self-examination will be directed to ascertaining whether or not we are living and acting in love with our brothers and sisters. The Corinthians were partaking in an unworthy manner because they were selfish and indifferent toward the needs of others.

The danger comes from eating and drinking without "judging the body rightly." The context also helps us understand what it means by the words to "judge" or "discern" the body. The predominant meaning in this context is to give due weight to the church as the body of Christ. This table is not just like any other meal. It is a common table, with one loaf of bread and a common cup, and by partaking in it we are proclaiming that through the death of Christ we are one body—the body of Christ—not just any group of diverse individuals. We must discern, recognize as distinct, the one body of Christ of which we all are parts and in which we all are gifts to each other. To abuse others in the body because they are lesser than us economically, educationally or socially is to incur God's judgment.

The early church was largely made up of the poorer classes. Paul says in chapter 1 that were not many in the church who were politically powerful or descended from noble birth. The wonderful truth,

however, is that God didn't have to settle for the poor (which is a common misconception)—he chose them! They are the special objects of his love. He embraces them. How can I reject them? Every member of the body of Christ becomes a member as a result of God's sovereign, loving choice. He never asked me whom he should include in his body. He has chosen Democrats as well as Republican, the tall, dark and handsome, as well as the short, shot and shapeless. How then can I exclude from my home and table, my friendship and love, anyone whom God has called into fellowship with him?

C. S. Lewis has a word for us in this regard:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or more of these destinations.

Paul's exhortation to us is not to try and reach some moral standard of perfection, but to do a little honest reflection. Even with the Spirit of God in our midst, there are failures and weaknesses. There are times of outright, and I know in my own case, deliberate evil. We must handle those sins honestly. Do not try to cover them up or persuade yourself that they aren't there. It is sin. Admit it. Call it what God calls it, and repent. Bring it to God and let him cleanse you. Remember David's words in Psalm 51: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." That is what God wants to see in us. If your heart is heavy with bitterness or resentment, the answer is not to just pass by the elements. That's a cop-out. It is also a lie to think that God is only going to judge you if you eat. God is not interested in surface things. He reads our hearts—and he is looking for a heart that doesn't lie to itself, one that is honest about its failures and is willing to put away a wrong spirit. Paul tells us in Eph. 4, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."

The apostle is clear about the seriousness of such sin among the Corinthians. He attributes sickness, weakness, and even death to their carnal view of the body of Christ as reflected in their fellowship. Now it is clear from Scripture that not all sickness is God's judgment in discipline. Oftentimes, however, this is God's way of getting our attention, slowing us down, and giving us time to reflect on how we are living.

Having argued theologically, on the basis of a proper understanding of the Lord's Supper, that we should judge the body rightly, Paul now concludes with a solution that is simple and direct.

IV. The solution to the problem (11:33-34)

So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment. And the remaining matters I shall arrange when I come. (11:33-34)

When Paul tells the Corinthians to wait for one another, he has in mind much more than time. In fact in other places in the NT that same word is the word used for hospitality—"to welcome and receive one another." When you come together, make sure that there is acceptance and sensitivity to the needs of those present.

This is the central thing, says the apostle. There are other little things that he will set right when he comes, but those can wait. The important thing is that the Corinthians begin to act out of the central meaning of the Christian life. The old selfish life is ended; the

new life which thinks of others is begun. These are the truths that the bread and wine reflect.

I have expressed to our home fellowship leaders something that is equally true of our corporate worship on Sundays. We must view our times together not merely as meetings which we must attend, but as a family to whom we belong. We are primarily not an organization, but an organism, the body of Christ.

We cannot separate our relationship with God from our relationships with people. Some of us have a narrow view of love. Our circle of friendships is often limited; it consists of people just like us. We need to evaluate our attitudes. God wants us to be a channel of his love in our community. As we focus on the implications of the crucifixion and resurrection in our life, then his love will indeed flow without partiality.

Harold Myra's poem, "I Wish I'd Reached Her," describes the struggles of a lonely, unloved girl whom everybody rejected because of her looks. Even after she came to know the Lord she still dealt with desperate loneliness. Then she became pregnant. The narrator reacts:

I don't know about that summer.
 But one thing she needed besides her Bible and prayers:
 Christ to come alive in friends.
 Could I have touched her on the shoulder, laughed with her?
 Could the girls have been more like sisters than superior beings?
 Maybe she could have found a love that wouldn't have left her
 pregnant and alone.
 Maybe she could have been strong and chosen for herself,
 If she'd found more of you in some of us.

The narrator continues with similar incidents in which boys and girls have found themselves despised and rejected because they did not meet the standards for social success. Finally, the voice concludes:

How much have I grown, Lord, beyond seeing friendships
 as plus or minus status coupons?
 Surely I still don't act that way!
 But do I find more sophisticated ways to shun the misfit?
 Do I love the nobody, the social embarrassment?
 Lord, help me not to be molded by the world's ad campaign
 of luscious lovelies and wind-blown men on boats and horses.
 By your Spirit, help me to see beneath the skin and posture, style
 and hair.
 For I'm told you yourself, Jesus, were nothing for looks.
 But you sure are worth getting to know.

If you look around this morning you can see that all of us are very different. I have always appreciated the diversity of this body. It includes rich and poor, well educated and simple folk, men and women of different nationalities and races. I pray that will never change; that Martin Luther King's dream might well be a living reality. That indeed is the testimony of the Living God.

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