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1 Corinthians 11:17-34 - Taking Communion Together

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So would you open with me tonight to 1 Corinthians 11:17 as we finish this eleventh chapter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians?

The Corinthian church had probably been in existence about eight years or so when Paul wrote from Ephesus to a church that he had spent a year and a half planting, in a place that was overwhelmingly evil. The letters that he wrote – two of them we have, 1 and 2 Corinthians; one that we do not have that he mentions in chapter 5 – were all motivated by reports that he received, both from elders in the church and just church members who had written to him about some of the lack of devotion and certainly the sin that had crept in amongst the body, mostly out of this wicked city. It's a tough place to minister, a tough place to be. I think the church is, in many ways, in that same situation now. We are surrounded by wickedness, and we're called to live holy lives, to honor the Lord, and to hold forth His Word.

So Paul, loving the church though he was far away from it, wrote as a father would to his children. He was greatly in love with the people. He had seen what God had begun, but he talks very directly; he doesn't beat around the bush much. He doesn't seem to couch his corrections with much sugar. But he's concerned for them.

In chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 as well, Paul – as really the basic topic, that one of liberty as Christians – he went over some of the things that were just stumbling blocks: the meat that was offered to all of these idols that were in town and how cheap it was to buy. But should we care about where it came from? And if we do, should we be eating that before one another if somebody has trouble with it and all? And he went from that to financial support and the fact that he felt he deserved their support for all the years he had spent in ministering to them, writing to them, but he didn't want it if it meant stumbling even the least. God was faithful, and he would rather win a lost soul than win their support. Paul talked about running faithfully. And then he concluded this section – at least by the end of chapter 10 – by saying whatever we do, we should make sure that the Lord is honored through it.

Beginning in chapter 11, which we did a couple of weeks ago before we went to Europe, Paul continued talking about life in the body. In fact, chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 are all about church life; not the church but church life: when the church gathers together, when we come together as God's people.

He commended them about their attitude towards women in ministry. We talked a lot about how that it can be controversial, but I think from a biblical standpoint, it's not controversial at all. But like everything in society, it is made that way because of the attitudes people take and not having much respect for God's Word.

Tonight we'd like to finish chapter 11 starting in verse 17 as Paul continues (and I guess keep that in mind) talking to the church and their times of gathering and including, in that gathering, a time of having communion. Beginning next week – in chapter 12 and then for the next three chapters – Paul will look at, particularly, the use of the vocal gifts of the Spirit in the life of a church. But this idea of the church gathering, that's what Paul's interested in. He uses the terms “come together” five times in these last eighteen verses; verses 17 and 18 and 20 and 33 and verse 34. He uses the words “when you come together,” “when you come together.” And so we want to focus on that time when the church comes together.

What's your idea of church life? I mean, if someone was to ask you, “What is the church all about? When we gather, what should we be looking for? What should we be getting out of sitting here together tonight? What do we ask the Lord for before we show up? What do we go home with and thank the Lord for in response?”

In verse 17, Paul says, “Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.” If you go back to verse 2, Paul had commended them in their willingness to seek the Lord in regards to women in leadership, in regards to the practice that was cultural – of wearing veils for the ladies as a sign of submission to the Lord. He complimented them, in fact, in seeking to do the things that Paul had taught them. But here, when it comes to the area of church gathering, their love feasts – which we'll look at in a minute – having communion together that celebrated the Lord's work for

us, Paul was angry. He was disappointed. And they had far removed themselves from the place God would have them to be as a church when they gathered together. And so he spoke to them about the fact that....he might have complimented them on their attitude in verse 2, but this wasn't good. And I think when you hear from Paul, he goes, "You're getting together....you're not getting any better. It's getting worse." Those are pretty strong words. "And so I'm not giving you any praise. I'm not complimenting you. You're not going in the right direction."

And he says, in verse 18, "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." It is interesting that the problems that the Corinthian church faced, in many ways, the church still faces today. There are certainly a lot of church gatherings where people tend to run to their same respective cliques. They are almost oblivious to the person in the back row in tears or the person who doesn't look like they're having a good week. We, rather, separate ourselves with different allegiances, maybe stand with different teachers, maybe gather together about specific persuasions. Maybe in this church we had the, "Well-we-can-eat-meat-offered-to-idols" group sitting over here in this corner; the rallying cry, "We-will-never-eat-meat-we-are-holier-than-you" over in that corner. And there wasn't any fellowship, any unity, if you will. There was a lot of division, though, there in the body of Christ.

And division is always a tool of the enemy, isn't it? And it's easy to fall into that. Birds of a feather. What do you think about the church when you come? Where would God have you to be? What would God have you to do? What's your responsibility as you sit in the pew you're sitting in, sit by the people you've chosen to be by? What's your responsibility to.... those over here to those people over there? How does that work? And the problem, so often, is that there's division that comes because birds of a feather; we are naturally drawn together. But unless we're drawn to the cross and to the Lord who has saved us – which we could all hold in common – we can easily get our eyes off of what we're supposed to do and why we're here.

Paul had certainly written - in the first four chapters - enough about the carnal divisions that were happening, about the spiritual immaturity in this church. And understand Corinth was a horrible place. It was about as destitute of spiritual life as you would find. The infighting, the side-taking, the selfishly demanding rights, the....you know, everything hindered their witness. They were in a town to be a light, but the light was pretty dim. And the celebration at the communion celebration was just another long line of childish, immature kinds of ways. And so Paul said, "Even when you get together as a church, all you do is find division," and he says, "in part I believe it." It wasn't out of the realm of possibility to him, after all that he heard, that this is the way the church gathered together. But is that really the way the church should gather together?

Paul says in verse 19 – it's a great verse, and it's easy to miss - Paul said, "For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." If there is a benefit to the factions and the division and to the childishness that sometimes is found among the body, it is that shining through all of that sin will be those that are qualified to lead; that will not join in, not follow along, but will set a different standard; will be above the fray, will not take the sides; will find themselves, in their behavior, leading and serving; and their behavior in the love of Jesus and the unity of God's Spirit being seen as the godly, just by contrast. Certainly much can be learned about someone's spiritual qualifications in how they handle division, criticism, disputes amongst the saints. How easy if someone says something about you, "Well, I'm going to fix that! Really? Do you care that much if you're doing what's right before the Lord? And Paul said one of the good results of, if you will, the divisions that you can find when folks aren't walking with God, is that out of that turmoil will come godly people that you can follow, and they will be seen by the contrast in the position that they hold. They won't be followers. They won't be in the midst. They won't go down with the ship. They'll be leading.

Paul, when he wrote to Titus (in chapter 3:10), said that you should "Reject a divisive man after his first or his second admonition, and know that that person is warped, he's sinning, he's self-condemned." Look, if he's going to be a problem, just avoid it. Get on with the work that God calls you to. And I certainly have seen...it's like the church is such an interesting place with all those kinds of things because there's always that struggle underneath the surface where people disagree with one another, sometimes they're not happy with church policy, they don't like somebody in the church. They storm off in anger, sometimes irreconcilably. They're bitter, they're angry. But we're a family! How in the world does that work?! But out of that turmoil, you can always tell the godly, the leader, the committed person who loves the body more than they love themselves; who stand strong in Jesus and are submitted to God's work.

We read in verse 20 – Paul goes on, and he said, "Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper." The early saints gathered as a church often including potlucks. They were called – and Jude will call them such – agape feasts (the love of God in a feast, in a dinner, in a gathering together). Jude will write about the unbelievers and the so-called believers that aren't, that they "are spots in your love feasts, they feast with you without fear, but they only serve

themselves" (verse 12). So these gatherings – early Christian gatherings – and there's certainly enough historical evidence to support our understanding of them is that a lot of times, and most every week, the young church, not having a building, met in homes or in parks, outside oftentimes, sometimes near the temple. But they were designed to have gatherings where people could come for fellowship and where the poor could be fed. Most of the folks in the early church were slaves; 80% of the population under the Romans, early on, were slaves. There was no upward mobility for most. It was a difficult time to be alive. It was even more difficult here. And for some folks who were struggling, it might be the only good meal they had all week. So the church did well to be able to begin to minister to one another, to eat together, to worship together, to study together and then to have communion together in remembrance of that which Jesus had established for them.

The idea was that the body was one. It was a place where we could find strength and hope. I kind of like the idea of going to church because it gets you away from the world, doesn't it? It should. Away from the nonsense, away from the lying, away from the deceiving, away from the temptation. Aha! Church is a great place to be. It's like going home and taking your shoes off. Well, don't do that. But you know, like that. (Laughing) Some of you really don't do that. (Laughing) But it's great, isn't it? It's church. It's a haven, it's a respite, it's an escape. And it was designed to be that, in many ways, for the early church as well. Giving of ourselves for one another perfectly fitted the celebration of communion, which spoke of what Jesus had done for us. But Paul said that from all that he had heard, they had lost that understanding. And so he's pretty negative here. He says, "When you get together, it's not to have communion, not to take the Lord's Supper. This is no way that you can make that approach," if you will.

In fact he says, in verse 21, "For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk." Welcome to Corinth. Now we've had some drunk people show up at church. We usually let them stay unless they're loud because I think they need to be here. But this is no way to attend a potluck. Their gathering together, which should have been honorable to the Lord and caring for His people, had degenerated into a selfish kind of self-serving practice which saw everyone vying only for their own needs. "Let me get into that meatloaf before it's all gone. Let me get that second piece of pie before everyone else has one." Oblivious to the needs of others, even under false stimulus in the church, eating before everyone had arrived, taking more than necessary. I don't know if you've ever gone to a potluck and you're kind of late in the line, and you see a guy go by with two plates... "I'm gonna get there." And you swear next time you're going to get ahead of that guy. What was taking place in Corinth was certainly not a display of the love of Jesus for us. Paul writes to the Ephesians (4:32), "Be kind to one another, be tenderhearted." He writes to the Philippians (2:3) about "not doing anything through vain ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind esteeming others better than yourself." They might have been talking about love, but they certainly weren't practicing it. But this was the picture of the love feast in Corinth. This is the church of Jesus gathering together – saints vying for position, taking care of themselves while some were left hungry, overindulgent. It sounds more like the rush in between innings at a baseball game to the snack bar than it does the love of God amongst His people. No serving the one another. And Paul says, "This is not the way you do it. This is not right! No way this is how it goes."

He says, in verse 22, "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." It was a mockery. Nothing honored the Lord. The words "love feast" were anything but. There was no corresponding reality in the hearts of the people. They were going through the motions, but there was no heart, no emotion to follow. So Paul says, "What!" Pretty sarcastic. "Go home! Look, you can feed your face and drink all you want and serve yourself. Do it at home! This isn't the way the church operates. Just go home. Be carnal and self-serving and civil at home. But why would you come here and act like that, despising God's people and, in so doing, shaming those who don't have anything? It's all about that life in the body. I can't praise you for having love feasts on the calendars that are so abused and misused and only bring shame and dishonor to the Lord and to the needy here. I give you no approval."

Now, look, there's a way to go to church and do the same thing. You come in the same door, you sit in the same place, you look for your three friends. If they're not there, you're upset. "Where are they? Got no one to talk to now." You run into your little group. No one really exists among.... You probably don't know 90% of the people around you. But it's just, "I'm here to be served. I'm here for my benefit." But you're not! We're here for our benefit, and the church is designed so that we can care for one another. You know, as a pastor, here's my goal – I want you all to get to the door, to the door of the kingdom and get in. I don't want to leave you behind. You shouldn't be left behind.

So, we can sit and talk and be oblivious to the folks around us. Maybe the fellow who's here for the first time and he's lost. Or a parent who doesn't know where to take their children. And you can just look up and see....but we're too busy serving our-

selves. But to be here physically in the body hardly accomplishes the will of God. You might as well stay home, you act like that. It doesn't do anybody any good. We have needs. People have needs here. They need prayer and love and encouragement. They don't all have families like you do or people that care for them or jobs that provide for them or health that you have. And Paul was so ashamed of the church and what had gotten into them. But it really was just sin, isn't it? It really took over from the ground up. Church, by definition, is a place to come die to yourself. It's a place to serve the Lord, to honor Him by loving His people, and even more so as you approach the sacrament that God has established that will cause us to constantly be dragged back to the cross where we find our life - the ultimate sacrifice of love.

So, verse 23, Paul now turns from that love, that feast, that selfishness, the conduct, to say, "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; 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.' 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.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." I love verse 23 because you and I ought to be able to say what Paul said here. And the words he started with, "I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you." I've been teaching for 51 years, I think. I have in my office ninety binders full of Bible studies; some of them in pencil, some of them in ink, some of them I even typed (like this). Now they're all on the computer, too. In fact, I pull them up on my phone now. But as many studies as I've been able to do over the years, as many books I've been able to read, as many hours I've been able to study, one thing I'm sure of: I can't just pull up a study and stand before you and teach it to you if I haven't spent time with the Lord to hear what He wanted to say. You can have a basis for any of your studies, and certainly the framework doesn't change, the gospel isn't altered, the Scriptures, in their context, don't move very much. However, God certainly uses them to teach us what He wants us to learn, and I would like to believe that every time I come to teach, it's because I've heard from the Lord, and I'm delivering to you what He has given to me. I don't really want to try it any other way. And I think for me, at least, one of the benefits of being a pastor is it's so good to be able to sit down with the Bible and be able to hear what God has to say. And Paul was able to say to them, "Look, what I've told you about communion is what the Lord told me, what He delivered to us. This is not my own idea. This is not how I surmise things should be." The pulpit is for delivering God's Word. This is why you have this place. You don't need my opinion. You don't need my political persuasion - although, please vote. I was amazed to see two and a half weeks ago that 70% of evangelical Christians haven't even registered to vote. Well, then, we get what we ask for. So vote. Be sure to vote. But having said that, I will never tell you anything along those lines because this isn't a place for that. This is God's Word. That's what you need to hear. It'll last, it won't fail you, it'll accomplish what He sends it to do (Isaiah 55:11). But you have to be sure if you're standing in a pulpit that you've heard from God. And I love Paul's ability to say, "This is a rebuke!" This isn't easy to say to people that you care about, but he just said, "I received this from the Lord, and I delivered it to you. God told me, I tell you. I'm the middleman. Don't get mad at me if you don't like what you hear. I didn't write it." It's like getting mad at your postman because he delivers your tax bill. It's not his fault; he's just delivering the news. So, this is no place for opinion. This is the place for God's Word, and we should never turn away from that.

The Passover Feast which Jesus ate with His disciples on the night before He was betrayed and then that next morning crucified was always a feast of remembrance. Always. It was established as a memorial to celebrate the LORD's deliverance of His people from Egypt. And certainly the symbolism in the Passover meal spoke of all of the difficulties and the associations with all of the elements of the Passover Feast. If you've ever just looked at them, even to this day, spoke of the bitterness of being a slave in Egypt, spoke of the Lamb without spot and the blood that He shed, and placed on the doorposts of the homes, and the people within covered by that blood, being protected from the angel of death which had come to judge sinfulness (God's judgment had come). That was the meal that the disciples sat down with Jesus to eat. It was typical, it was well known to them. It might have just been a habit after some point.

But on this night, Jesus took those very symbols, and He gave them their most completed fulfillment by pointing to Himself. So now this bread became His body that was broken for them. "And as often as you do this," you read the words, "do this in remembrance of Me." There's a fitting together between action and recall. The memorial was now to be a memorial of remembrance to the sacrifice Jesus made at Calvary to deliver everyone trapped in the bondage and the bitterness of sin, being brought, if you will, out of Egypt; that He was the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). His blood placed not on the door of my life, just upon my life; not upon the place of my living, but my life so that His judgment might now pass over me because He's paid the price for my sin.

But it is all about remembrance. It's the one word you see repeated twice here in four verses. Communion is designed to re-

mind me of my sin and my blindness and the hopelessness of my life prior to the glorious work of Jesus and being washed and cleansed and saved.

After dinner, Jesus took the cup of redemption – the third cup in the Passover Feast – and He again turned it into its complete fulfillment by pointing to Himself. This now is the cup of a new covenant, agreement between God and man. And the agreement would be made in His blood. “As often as you drink it, do it in remembrance of Me.” It’s all about remembering His work. Blood no longer on the doorpost of the house but on the framework of your heart.

Communion is, I think, to be a very sobering time of reflection. It ought to be serious. It ought to be something that we approach with reverence because it is the one thing – along with baptism....I came out of the Catholic church, we had a lot of sacraments, but we only have two in the Bible, right? We have the sacrament of baptism for the believer who follows the Lord and the sacrament of communion that reminds us of His work: what it cost Jesus to save me, what His blood did in removing my sin, how desperate I was before I met Him. And it is that constant push; communion will constantly push you back to where you started when you realized you had no hope, when you realized you had no way out, when you finally realized who Jesus was. There’s no way that you can approach that with a lackadaisical, if you will, attitude. It is a time of tremendous remembrance. And you read “on the same night He was betrayed,” which is interesting because the setting was that, in the midst of a hateful and evil time where men were lying in wait to kill Him, Jesus went about doing good. He came in the midst of the evil to save. He does that still.

Notice, in verse 24, there’re only two words there I underlined, and it’s the words “for you.” For you. “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you.” Because ultimately Jesus, though He died for the sins of the world, died for you. Your sin, your failures, your needs. For you. It’s personal, isn’t it? Would He have died if it was just for you? I know, dumb question. People ask.....I believe He would have. He died for you. So you have to apply it to yourself.

When it comes up (the question), how often should we take communion, verse 26 says, “As often as you eat this bread,” not only are you to remember the salvation that He brought you, the position that you are in, the cost, but in so doing, “you are proclaiming His death, looking for His return.” Because the work’s not completely finished yet. He’s coming for you. He died for you, He saved you, He’s coming to get you. And either He’ll come for us collectively or He’ll come for you individually. But He’s coming for you.

I think He designed communion so that we might be humbled and grateful and realize the intense debt that we owe the Lord for our very lives, which is set in such contrast to the way these folks were showing up for this supper. There was no humility here, there was no gratefulness here, there was no....nobody’s falling on their face here. They were just knocking each other over to get to the buns, you know? Or the butter or I don’t know what it was they needed to get to. So far removed.

The purpose in having communion as an active part of church life is to constantly set before me my situation, His solution and then look forward to His return. It forces me to realize, time and again, that I’m saved by His work, not mine; my life is totally dependent upon His work since day one; and when He comes, I’m going with Him because of what He’s done. John Phillips wrote of communion, “We take it remembering God’s Person; He is God come in the flesh. And we remember His passion as we consider His death. And we remember His position because He’s coming again.” So communion, I think, is a serious time in the church’s life. It should be. It should never be habitual or, “Oh, I’d better go. It’s communion night.” Well.....

So this is what Paul says, and they’re pretty heavy verses, “Therefore,” (having said all of that) “whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” Therefore. Because the bread and the cup represent the blood and the body of Jesus, and because He has given us this sacrament (as the church), to approach the table of the Lord in an unworthy manner....the word “unworthy,” there in Greek, “anaxios,” is really “unworthily.” It’s an adverb. It speaks of sin or a guiltiness. The word “unworthy” is not really the word that is used here. It is not an adjective. You know, unworthy describes the action of someone partaking of communion. But if it is an adverb, it describes the manner in which one participates in it. So, when you take communion and you don’t take into account what you’re doing and what you’re faced with and what the Lord has given it to you for, it is the action of not recognizing those things that makes it an unworthy action but he does so unworthily, if you will. It doesn’t mean you’re unworthy. And you don’t lose your....even in the worst times of judgment, your relationship with God will remain the same because He’s already saved you. However you, as a godly person, could certainly take a wrong attitude about coming to the communion table and find yourself guilty of unworthily participating in the sacrament, if you will.

So Paul compares the purpose of communion from Jesus' lips to the behavior of those coming to the feast in Corinth. People were getting drunk, insensitive to the needs of others, selfishly driven to take care of themselves. And in so doing they missed the purpose of communion entirely. They act more like those who are not saved rather than those who were, and they find themselves guilty of what? Of the blood and the body of Jesus, sinful in their valuing of His sacrifice. This is supposed to be sacred. It's a memorial. Remember these things. A holy moment where I remember what Jesus did. I think about His beating, His rejection, the whipping post, the suffering that He went through for me and my sin so I might live. In one sense, look, we're all sinners so we're all guilty in that respect. The Lord needed to die for our sins. But it is an even greater sin if I know the Lord and yet I approach this remembrance that had been established way back in the Scriptures with a riotous frivolity that sets it aside. Then it's a sin to come to the table of the Lord that way. But there're a lot of ways to come unworthily to communion. Sometimes people have communion, and it's just a big ritual to them. It's almost like it doesn't matter. Their mind is somewhere else. They're on the phone looking for the Dodgers score while they're taking communion. Not exactly worthy. Or they have bitter hearts or they don't forgive those who have hurt them or they're selfish or maybe they're hateful, they're living in sin, or they're just unrepentant. If I trample the American flag underfoot, I do more than dishonor a piece of cloth; but rather dishonor all that it represents. If I come to the Lord's table unworthily, I do more than dishonor the elements; I dishonor His work, I dishonor His sacrifice, I dishonor Him. Because without Him, I could have no life. So Paul says, "You can certainly show up that way in an unworthy manner, become guilty" or take communion "unworthily," if you will.

Now here's the solution, verse 28, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup." Here's the way to avoid the problem: check your own heart at the door. Be careful as you come. Maybe make the changes that are necessary. Communion should be approached with an eye towards self-examination because it's more than a simple ritual; it is assigned by the Lord to the church as a holy occasion to keep us aware of, constantly, who we are, who He is and what we need and what He's done.

Now the next few verses make that even more serious when you take a look at God's perspective of how this church was gathering together to honor His Son and how it should have been done. Paul says, "Check your own heart. Before you have communion, be sure that you've gone through and put yourself in a position before the Lord where you're open to hear and to remember and to rejoice in what He's done." Paul says this, verse 29, "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." To approach communion without discerning these elements of communion – that they represent the Lord's body and His blood that was shed, His brokenness – is to place yourself at risk of facing the Lord's judgment simply for a lack of discernment, which is what was going on in this church. The word "judgment," by the way, is the Greek word "krima," and "krima" means chastening. And it is a far-less severe word than you find in verse 32, where you read the word "condemned" which has a portion of that word "katakrima" before it. It's an entirely different word. One is to be judged; the other is to be condemned. Chastening is always God's way of bringing His children to change their behavior to suit His will. He leans on you. It's like your father. My dad had a look that could get me to sit straight up. It worked especially when I was younger, when I was terrified of his anger. So chastening is always that approach God uses with His own kids to help us line up with His will. Condemnation is what the world faces for setting His Son aside; it's eternal. God may chasten His saints who devalue or fail to discern the sacrifice there at communion and trample them underfoot, so to speak, but you haven't lost your relationship with God; but you may incur His wrath. You may be taken to the back of the barn, you know? Dad may, "Yeah, let's have a little walk, boy." My dad's little walks were no fun at all. The chastening, however, can be severe.

Look at verse 30, "For this reason many" (not a few, many) "are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." This approach in Corinth had left many in the body sick and many in the body dead. But the description of a dead believer is sleep; never used of an unbeliever who has died. Asleep being a word God uses to describe believers who have died. But he uses the word "many" twice. This was not a good situation. After ten chapters of dealing with carnality and immaturity of the saints in Corinth, here for the first time we read of physical illnesses and the possibility of death attached to just not taking communion seriously. Now there's no way to soften that. I'd love to soften that. I don't like these verses. I'd rather go, "Ehh, you'll be all right." But this is how serious the Lord takes the practice of the church when we gather to remember what He has done for us, what we needed. He takes it very seriously.

Adam and Eve found the death sentence for eating of a forbidden fruit in the garden (Genesis 3). Nadab and Abihu were killed on the spot for lighting strange fire to draw attention from the LORD's good work to themselves (Leviticus 10). In Numbers 15, God commanded a man to be stoned to death for picking up sticks on the Sabbath. Hardly seems like a death penalty occurrence except the LORD said, "No work. I've got to teach you this valuable spiritual truth: your salvation is not your work, it's

Mine. And you need to find your Sabbath rest in Me.” Now thankfully the Lord takes individuals and uses them as examples, and fortunately not everyone goes through that, or I suspect there would be no service next Wednesday because we’d all be gone. Achan and his entire family were executed for taking, in war, what God had forbidden (Joshua 7). Uzzah was struck dead for touching a cart (2 Samuel 6). David’s sin in numbering the people led to the deaths of 70,000 people (1 Chronicles 21). Ananias and Sapphira fell dead in the doorway of the church for misrepresenting their offering to the Lord, their devotion to Him in the eyes of God’s people (Acts 5).

Now, note here that Paul does not say God will always deal with us in judgment in this manner. But it happened, and I don’t want to find out if He was just kidding or if this was just a one-time, one-off because I suspect that it was not.

So he says again, in verse 31, and again this is a church that’s not doing well. So Paul’s tough with them. “For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.” In other words, we know better. So if this is frightening, it should also be sobering to see that the holiness with which God has us approach the celebration of His Son should be something that we take seriously. I must tell you I don’t take many things very seriously. I kid around more than anyone I know. I joke about just about everything. I don’t like life to be too difficult or serious. And I’m reminded of that by my wife every day. (Laughing) But sometimes you just have to take things seriously, and this is one of those verses that I don’t like but I have to take seriously. And he uses the word “many” twice – loss of health, physical life; not eternal life. So in verse 28 the injunction here is to deal with your heart and your attitude before you come.

Finally, verse 33, “Therefore,” (one thought upon another) “my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.” What is “the rest”? More stuff? This wasn’t bad enough?! Going back away from communion to just the gathering of the people together and how it reflects; whatever the problem might be, deal with it because we’re a body. Communion can be a place of great blessing or a source of great judgment. It’s all about how you come to the table.

So expand that to the attitude that you have towards the church. I started with asking you what do you think about the church? When you walk in the door, what are you looking for? What do you hope to gain? What do you think the Lord would have you to do? I can’t believe it’s just to sit there and stare at me. You’ve got to have something. Right? There’s got to be someone you can minister to or go out of your way to meet someone that you don’t know or reach out with His love somewhere with someone that looks like they’re going through it. Don’t be the first one to get to your car. I’m amazed always when I go, “Let’s pray,” and I hear eighteen people get up and run for the car. And I used to do like this, “Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey”a couple of times I did that when I was young in ministry. I stopped and said, “Where’re you goin’?” That didn’t work at all. But I think about doing that. Look, there’s someone that needs you. They need your prayers, they need your love, they need the gifts that God has given you. This ought to be home. Family. And the worst the world gets, the better the church looks to me. I like going to church. It’s a great relief. It’s better than Costco. It’s better than the freeway. It’s better than a ballgame or a movie theater. It’s people you can count on, people you can trust. Walk in God’s love, God’s work. It’s amazing what God has done with a bunch of losers like us. Isn’t that true? Look up and down your row. You’ll see. (Laughing) I should take a picture and put it up here. You could see it. (Laughing) So think about it when you come and even more so when we’re at communion. But really they’re related together. It’s one. They’re brought together by Paul. It’s the fellowship and then the approach that we take to God’s goodness. Because they both are kind of the same.

Next week – and for the next several weeks – we’re going to be going through the use of the gifts of the Spirit in the church and especially vocal gifts because if you have a gift of helps, it’s going to be hard for you to stand up in the middle of church and say, “Oh, I’d like to help someone right now. That’s my gift.” Or, “I have an administration gift. Could I file something while everyone watches?” It’s usually the vocal gifts that cause the most problems. So I hope we can go through those in the weeks to come.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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