

# THE LORD'S SUPPER

by Ray C. Stedman

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The Apostle Paul deals at some length with the institution of the Lord's Supper in the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians, to which we have now come.

In an earlier message in this series, I quoted someone who said, "The main thing is to see that the main thing remains the main thing." When you hear that, of course, the question you want to ask is, "What is the main thing that must remain the main thing?" The answer in the Christian life is that clearly, all through the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament alike, the "main thing" is what the person and work of Jesus Christ really mean to you.

I do not mean what you say he means to you when you are talking about your faith, or what you sing about when you sing the hymns of the church in a service like this. I mean what Jesus really means to you when the hour comes for you to make a decision for right against wrong, or for good against evil, and what he means to you when you are under pressure and tempted to explode with anger, or succumb to lust, or whatever.

It is very fitting that Paul ends this long section where he has been dealing with the troubles going on at Corinth by holding up a mirror, in effect, before these people and allowing them to see how they were behaving at the Table of the Lord. Nothing is more revealing than to see what your attitude is when you come to this central act of Christian worship, and this is what Paul is doing .

In this section, beginning with Verse 17, he is showing them that they are approaching the Lord's Table with a totally wrong spirit. There were two things, he says, that were wrong:

First, they were dividing up into very destructive divisions, cliques, within the church. Verse 17:

**But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, [Actually that should be translated: "I believe it, in part"] for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. {1 Cor 11:17-19 RSV}**

When Paul speaks of the church "coming together," or "assembling as a church," he is not primarily talking about a morning service such as we have here. He has in view the *agape*, the feast of love and of sharing they held that grew out of that atmosphere in the early church (described in the book of Acts), where no one counted anything as belonging to himself alone but shared with one another the resources and riches that God had provided so that no one was left out. This rapidly grew into a common meal which they all shared together. We would call it a pot luck supper. (I do not like that term because I do not believe in *luck* and I am sensitive to the word *pot*!) I prefer the title "multiple choice dinners." We have multiple choice dinners here from time to time, especially during the summer. They are wonderful occasions where everyone brings something, and then we put it on a table and we all share together. This is what the early church was doing too.)

It was a perfectly proper and beautiful thing to do, but unfortunately, here in Corinth it was being spoiled by cliques, by divisions among them. The cliques and divisions that Paul mentions earlier in this letter had ruined the gathering of the church together, so that he could say, as he does here, "It is not for the better that you come together, but for the worse. You are actually injuring one another and destroying the character of the church by the way you are conducting yourselves at these love feasts which terminate in the celebration of the Lord's Table together."

Now, in Verses 18 and 19, Paul reminds them that it is not wrong to have differences in a church: "There must indeed be factions [really the word is *heresies* ], among you." He is not surprised at that. Everybody does not have the same point of view; everybody does not have the same background; everybody has not had the same training and upbringing, and so there are bound to be points of view that are different, and that is normal, Paul says. In fact, it is healthy, he says, for it allows those who are approved, who are mature, to become manifest.

About a year ago I was speaking to a group of youth leaders in the state of Missouri. We had an open question and answer session, and one of the things they asked me about was our Body Life service. I had told them that we encourage people to share freely, that anyone who wants to can stand up and speak on any subject. Now some of them were rather threatened by that, and someone asked me, "Are you not afraid that somebody will say something that is false, and heresies will spread in the church?" I told him that we do not see it that way. Then I quoted this verse, "There must indeed be heresies among you." "We like heresies," I said. "We encourage them to be expressed because they are great teaching opportunities. How are you going to know who in your congregation is able to handle heresies unless they have some heresies to work on?"

That is what the apostle is recognizing here. There is nothing wrong with differences of opinion. They ought to be freely aired, because that gives the opportunity for those who are instructed in the things of God and the Word of God, and who understand the mind of God through the teaching of the Word, to answer these and help people with these struggles. Paul says he understands that, but unfortunately in Corinth it had gone much further. No one had answered these heresies; no one had controlled these utterances, so they had broken into harmful divisions in their love feasts that were creating chaos within the church.

Now Paul goes on to describe the disorderly practices that came from this, Verse 20:

**When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in" Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this" No, I will not. {1 Cor 11:20-22 RSV}**

Clearly he describes here the harm and the danger that was coming from these divisions among them. What he says, in effect, is, "When you get together for your love feasts you cannot call that the Lord's Supper even though it terminates in the familiar ritual that we now call the Lord's Table. The Lord's Supper is an expression of the unity of the church, and what you are doing is a far cry from that. You are acting selfishly with one another."

Paul goes on to describe this. Some were bringing a lot of food and gathering in their own little family group to eat it, while others who had hardly anything, or nothing at all, were left hungry. One would have a crust of bread, perhaps, to chew on, and over here would be a family group eating Kentucky Fried Chicken, or steak and lobster, perhaps, while others were completely left out. Paul says, "That an absolute parody of what the church ought to be. Instead of caring for one another, you are excluding one another, and even worse, some of you are eating and drinking so much that, unfortunately, you are actually coming to the Lord's Table intoxicated."

That is hard for us to conceive of, but that is what was happening. (Incidentally, that answers the question that many have asked as to whether the wine that the early Christians drank was alcoholic. I remember Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse being asked on one occasion, "Don't you believe that the wine the early Christians drank was really grape juice?" In his brusque way he said, "Well, they got drunk on it at Corinth." This certainly is the answer to that question.) But even worse, in the eyes of the apostle, some of them seemed to shrug off any rebuke along this line. They were indifferent; they exhibited a careless defiance of the need to minister to one another.

When Paul asks, "Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" he is not saying it is wrong to have church suppers, multiple choice dinners together. That is a good thing. What he means is, "If all you are coming together for is to eat and drink, you can do that at home. If that is all it means, if you are not going to manifest

a concern and care for those who are without among you and be concerned to meet the needs of those who are hungry, then you might just as well stay home and eat and drink there. When you come together you ought to be concerned about the needs and the hungers of all." Thus, fragmented, selfish, uncaring, indifferent to human needs, the church was hurting the cause of Christ rather than helping it.

By sharp contrast, the apostle now goes on to draw the picture what he had taught them about the Lord's Table, Verse 23:

**For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that 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 also the cup, 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. {1 Cor 11:23-26 RSV}**

There is an amazing claim on Paul's part here in Verse 23, where he says, "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you." By these words the apostle clearly means that the One who told him what went on in the Upper Room on that dark betrayal night was Jesus himself.

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul says he did not learn what he knew of Christ and Christianity from any man. No apostle taught it to him. He had never read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. They were not even written when this letter was written; they came later. And Paul had never been told what went on in the Upper Room by any of the other disciples either. In fact, he uses here the same language he uses later, in Chapter 15, where he says that he delivered unto them the gospel which he also received from the Lord, which in Galatians he says clearly he did not receive from any other man. Therefore, we have here what amounts to the earliest description of the Lord's Table when it was instituted in the Upper Room coming from none other than the lips of Jesus himself.

What the apostle passes on to them, and passes on to us, is our Lord's emphasis upon two remarkable symbols, the bread and the cup. Deliberately, after the Passover feast, Jesus took the bread, and when he had broken it, in order to make it available to all the eleven disciples (Judas having gone out), he said to them. "This is my body." Now unfortunately some have taken that to mean that he was teaching that the bread becomes his body, but I think it is very clear, as you look at the story of the Upper Room, that he meant it in a symbolic sense. If it was literal, then there were two bodies of Christ present in the Upper Room, one in which he lived and by which he held the bread, and the bread itself. But clearly our Lord means this as a symbol. "This represents my body which is for you."

Not "broken for you," as the Authorized Version has it. That is not a very accurate rendering. It is not broken for us. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that not a bone of his body would be broken. Rather it is intended for us to live on; that is the symbolism. Thus when we gather and take the bread of the Lord's Table, break it and pass it among ourselves, we are reminding ourselves that Jesus is our life: He is the One by whom we live. As Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me," {Gal 2:20 KJV}.

This is what the bread symbolizes -- that he is to be our power by which we obey the demands of God, the Word of God, to love one another, to forgive one another, to be tender and merciful, kind and courteous to one another, to not return evil for evil but to pray for those who persecute us and mistrust us and misuse us. His life in us enables us to be what God asks us to be. We live by means of Christ. Jesus said it himself in John 6, "so he that eats me, even he shall live by means of me," {cf, John 6:57}.

One of our teenagers wrote a song the other day, and these verses are part of it:

You brought me back to yourself.  
I had tried to go my own way,  
Thinking I didn't need your love.

But you showed me the light of day.

I need you to keep me strong.  
I need you to keep me from falling,  
I want to keep growing closer to you.  
I want always to hear you calling.

That captures very accurately what the bread symbolizes to us.

Following that, our Lord took the cup. The wine of the cup symbolizes his blood which he said is the blood of the New Covenant, the new arrangement for living that God has made, by which the old life is ended. That is what blood always means: Blood is the end of a life, and the old life in which we were dependent upon ourselves, and lived for ourselves, and wanted only to be the center of attention is over. That is what the cup means. We agree to that; we are no longer to live for ourselves. That is why, written across the front of this auditorium, it says. "You are not your own. You are bought with a price." You do not have final rights to your life, and the price is the blood of Jesus. Therefore, when we take that cup and drink it, we are publicly proclaiming that we agree with that sentence of death upon our old life, and believe that the Christian life is a continual experience of life coming out of death. That is what it says.

Power with God only comes when we die to the wisdom and the power of man. We give up one in order that the other may be manifest within us. "God cannot be glorified," we are saying, "as long as we insist on being glorified." Thus we are surrendering our right to take credit for things, surrendering our right to have people praise us and affirm us, etc., in order that God, who is working in us, may have that glory and that praise. That is what the cup means. It is a beautiful picture of what Jesus said of himself, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone," {cf, John 12:24 KJV}. I do not think anything is more descriptive of the emptiness of life than that phrase "abides alone" -- lonely, restless, bored, miserable, unhappy. That is the life that tries to live for itself and its own needs and its own rights, but the Christian life is one in which that is freely and voluntarily surrendered. And if the corn of wheat falls into the ground and dies, Jesus says, it will bring forth much fruit, and by the participation in the cup this is what we are declaring. Thus, every celebration of the Table tells us the old, old story all over again: We are consenting to follow our Lord, to go to death as he went to death that we might rise again in the new life of the spirit. And this, as Paul tells us, is to go on through the whole age, from the first coming until he comes again. This is a constantly repeated feast by which we, in symbol, tell over and over the heart of our Christian faith, that the old life dies in order that the new life might live.

In the last paragraph of this section, Paul makes very clear how seriously God himself regards the Lord's Table, Verse 27:

**Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. {1 Cor 11:27-28 RSV}**

These are sobering words; they indicate that God guards the Table from unworthy partaking. Now, what that means, of course, is what Paul has just been rebuking these Christians at Corinth about. They were partaking in an unworthy manner because they were careless, selfish, and indifferent to the needs of others. They were coming to the Lord's Table in a kind of an empty ritual, just going through it in a mechanical, ceremonial way. That, Paul says, is a dangerous practice, because it is acting as though the death and the life of Jesus mean nothing to us, and he warns against that. We become sharers of the guilt of those who put the Lord to death when we participate without our heart-interest and our heart-concern involved in the Lord's Table. Therefore, according to the apostle, a proper participation involves a careful self-examination. That is why he says let someone examine himself or herself earnestly and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

The word *examine* means "to prove," or literally, "to qualify" oneself. In Chapter 10 Paul said he buffeted his body and pummeled it in order that, having preached to others, he himself would not be "disqualified," set aside, {cf, 1 Cor 9:27}. Now that is the negative of this term and, therefore, someone who examines himself is qualifying himself to eat the Table of the Lord. How do you do that? Well, it does not mean to try to live an

absolutely flawless, perfect life, because no one can do that. Even with all the help that the Spirit of God gives us, there are failures and weaknesses, times of frustration and outright, sometimes deliberate, evil come into our existence.

What does it mean when it says to examine yourself? It means, of course, to handle your sin honestly. Do not try to cover it over; do not try to persuade yourself that it is not there. Admit it; call it what God calls it and repent, that is, change your mind about wanting it in your life. Bring it to God and let him cleanse you.

David writes in the 51st Psalm, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise," {Psa 51:17 KJV}.

When you look at the things that are wrong and say, "Lord, I'm sorry. Those things are wrong. I must not act that way any more," then you have qualified to participate in the Table of the Lord. That is what he says. You have proved yourself in the right way, and so, Paul adds, "so let him eat."

Some people want to refuse to eat. They pass by the elements. That is basically a cop-out, thinking that God is only going to bring some subsequent judgment if you eat. But God pays no attention to those surface things. He reads the hearts, and what he is after is a heart that does not lie to itself, that is honest about its misdeeds and is willing to put away a wrong spirit. As Paul says to the Ephesians, "let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you," {Eph 4:31 KJV}. Attitudes of lust and of selfishness and misdeeds of dishonesty and lying and all these things are what we face when we come to the Table of the Lord. We acknowledge them and thank God for his cleansing grace and then partake, forgiven by the grace of God.

That is why Paul goes on to add, in Verse 29,

**For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. {1 Cor 11:29 RSV}**

What does "discerning the body" mean? It means two things: First, it means understanding the meaning of the symbols. The Body of Christ is involved, his death on the cross for us, his life made available to us. But then it means also our concern and care for others who are members with us in this Body. We are members one of another, and we recognize those ties.

In the next two verses the apostle indicates that God guards this with using physical judgment. Verse 30:

**That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world. {1 Cor 11:30-32 RSV}**

God knows that pain often makes us stop and think. Have you found that to be true? Many of us have suddenly become aware that we have been drifting away from our closeness with Christ because we have been laid aside for the time being, maybe with nothing more than a bad cold, but it gives us a chance to think and to review our lives. That is God's hand. That is what was happening at Corinth. Some were weak, some were sickly, because God was enabling them to take a look. It was a red flag of warning saying, "Watch out now. You are going too fast. You are being tripped up by the world around you. You are reflecting some of their attitudes and their reactions and adopting some of their ways. Watch out. Slow down. Think it through."

And, as Paul says, some of them had even died, that is, they had rejected God's tender, loving warnings; they had persisted in their evil to the point where they were "disqualified," as he says in Chapter 10 {cf, 1 Cor 9:27}. God had to say to some of them, "Look, I can't trust you any more down there. Come on home where I can keep an eye on you." This still happens today. God is no different. Some among us, perhaps, are weak and sickly because we need time to think through what is happening in our lives.

Now not all sickness comes from the disciplinary hand of God. Sometimes it can be a ministry that God

deliberately gives us in order to open up a door that nothing else would open. So do not think that every time you are sick it may be the judging hand of God, but it is always a time to ask yourself, "Is God trying to slow me down? In his loving concern for me does he see me drifting into something dangerous that I ought to stop and rethink -- my relationships with others, my attitudes about life, habits that I am forming? Are these wrong or right?" The apostle tells us, if we truly judged ourselves, God would not have to judge us.

Therefore, when something like this happens, take a good look, a careful look, is what he is saying. Be honest with yourself. You can avoid this chastening of God by honest dealing with yourself because God will always give you a chance to change. But, if those are passed by, then God must judge you further in order to make it clear what is happening to you. Then do not see it as something terrible and evil that God has sent into your life to punish you. Oh, no. Hebrews tells us, "whom the Lord loves he chastens," {cf, Heb 12:6 KJV}. A loving Father is simply putting up some barriers and saying, "Look, you are getting into trouble. Now stop and take a look." It is his love that has brought that into your life.

The apostle clearly implies by this that if you, as a professed Christian, can go on week after week and month after month doing something -- living in a relationship or holding an attitude that you know is wrong -- and nothing ever happens to you in the way of judgment, then it is very likely you are not a Christian at all. You may well be headed for that final condemnation which the whole world will ultimately face. But Paul says when judgment comes it is the loving hand of your heavenly Father stopping you and telling you, "Look, you are mine. I will not have you involved in that condemnation with the world. You need to straighten up some things in your life, and this is your opportunity to do so."

The last two verses simply indicate how God is concerned that this be done in such a way as to bring out the acts of love and courtesy one for another. Verse 33:

**So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another -- if any one is hungry, let him eat at home -- lest you come together to be condemned. About the other things I will give directions when I come. {1 Cor 11:33-34 RSV}**

God's purpose in any form of judgment of his children is that they might begin to act differently, begin to be more thoughtful and courteous toward one another, especially their immediate families. That is where this has to begin to show -- not with your friends, but with your family. And when he says, "wait for one another" he does not necessarily mean at the Lord's Table, though that is a good thing to do. What he means is, "Be aware of the needs and the problems of others and do something to meet them, to help in that area, so that, when you come together, your meetings are not a curse but a blessing, that your coming together is a delight to everyone who comes, because your attitudes and your reactions with one another are right, and love prevails within the assembly."

This is what the apostle has been aiming at all along. Paul says, "That is the central thing. There are some other little things that I will set to right when I come, but those can wait. The important thing is that you begin to act out of the central meaning of the Christian life. The old selfish ways are ended. the new life which thinks of others is to be expressed. The blood and the bread are indications of that."

"... now go forth into the world. And we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are your leaders in the Lord and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work, and be at peace among yourselves," {cf, 1 Th 5:12-13}. Amen.

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