

Sermon on 1 Corinthians 11:23-34
Wait For One Another

Evening Worship Service
Hillsdale OPC, Hillsdale, MI
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Text - 1 Corinthians 11:23-34

Theme - Christ's Apostle guides a troubled church to a proper observance of the Lord's Supper. He does this through...

- A. A right understanding of the Supper (23-26)
- B. A worthy participation in the Supper (27-34)
 - 1. A self-examined participation (27-28; 30-32)
 - 2. A Christ-discerning participation (29)
 - 3. A communally-aware participation (33-34)

As I was growing up one of the rules of our household was that we always had to wait for one another at mealtime. No one was allowed to lift a fork until everyone was seated and thanks had been given. Why? Waiting for one another was a way to show our unity as a family, and to teach us love, honor, and concern for each other. I learned the discipline – *and pleasure* – of waiting for others in the context of my Christian home, not from American society. Our self-absorbed and individualistic culture doesn't necessarily lend itself to waiting for others, and neither did the culture of the ancient city of Corinth.

Corinth was city with a deep roots in a Greek pagan past – and a more recent status as a Roman colony – and Corinthian Christians struggled with bringing the faith to bear on this heritage. For example, the Greek love for wisdom and knowledge tended to produce a puffed up and arrogant personality. The strict Roman social structure could easily lend itself to divisions in the church between the wealthy and the poor. Both of these traits had made inroads into the Corinthian mindset – and as a result, at the heart of their struggles to overcome their pagan past was the issue of the proper worship of God – and specifically, a proper observance of the Lord's Supper. Their practice of the Lord's Supper showed their old pagan heritage had been exceedingly difficult to put to death. Instead of a communion together showing their union with Christ and each other, the mindset they brought to their observation of the Lord's Supper more closely resembled that associated with a pagan temple feast than the Table of the Lord.

Looking back on this situation, it is easy to view the Corinthian situation with disgust. But the church today still needs to be guided in the proper observance of the Table of the Lord. *Do we really understand what the Lord's Supper means? Have we really grasped what it means to participate worthily in the Supper, and what it means to "wait for one another" as Paul says in verse 34?* Our passage today gives us the direction we need. It

shows us how *Christ's Apostle guides a troubled church to a proper observance of the Lord's Supper*. This guidance comes through teaching them concerning first of all, *a right understanding of the Supper* (23-26) and secondly, *a worthy participation in the Supper* (27-34). Please look together at verses 23-26, which contain the well-known “words of institution” of the Lord's Supper, and learn from the Lord's Apostle a right understanding of the Supper.

A. A right understanding of the Supper (23-26)

In these verses Paul seeks to guide the Corinthian church into a proper observation of the Lord's Supper by reminding them of *a right understanding of the Supper*. Paul had praised them earlier in the chapter (11:2) for keeping *some* of the traditions he had passed on to them, but here was one tradition *they had not kept*, and for which *they could not be praised*. *The Corinthians had been trifling with the Lord's holy things, and this is why Paul's rebuke of their Lord's Supper observance was so sharp in verses 17-22*. It all goes back to their Greek pagan heritage. In pagan worship, the eating of a meal together in the temple of a god was an accepted part of the shared life of the worshippers and their commitment to their god. At these meals the gods were honored, and the people renewed their bonds of commitment to each other. The Corinthians who converted to Christ would have been used to such temple meals, and apparently some of them returned to this practice after their conversions, claiming that they had “knowledge” that such idols were not really gods at all. Paul winds up forbidding such attendance in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, calling it “fellowship with demons” and encouraging them to consider the impact such a practice might have on other believers – other believers who still associated temple meals with their old lifestyle of idolatry. He sums up the attitude he seeks to cultivate in them by saying to them in 1 Corinthians 10:24, “*Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well being.*”

Unfortunately, when it came to the Lord's Supper, the Corinthians were doing the very thing Paul warned them against: they were each seeking their own, and not the other's well-being. Paul wants them to see the connection between an inward "heart-idolatry" and their outward behavior. Their mindset was still stained with the residue of an idolatrous past. In his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, Paul refers to covetousness as idolatry – and it was this self-seeking, covetous mindset that made the Corinthians' observance of the Lord's Supper look more like an idol's feast. Covetousness and idolatry go hand-in-hand – they both center around Me! Paul scolds them in verse 21 for a mindset which was seeking its own well-being over that of others in the church, a mindset that brought on completely self-indulgent behavior: "*For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry, and another is drunk*" (11:21). The believers seem to have been influenced by strict Roman social customs which essentially separated guests to a supper into an "A-list" and a "B-list." Apparently wealthy members of the church ate a meal in association with the Lord's Supper to which the poorer members were either excluded, or made to feel ashamed in some manner. This idolatrous so-called eating of the Supper was a self-seeking eating – it was completely at odds with the idea of the Lord's Supper as a holy communion with the Lord and with all of His people. No wonder Paul says to them in 11:20: "*When you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.*"

In verse 23 then, Paul points them back to the teaching of the Lord Jesus Himself in order to reorient the offenders with the proper mindset required for those who would worthily partake of the supper. What Paul received from the Lord Himself he then faithfully handed down to the Corinthians, and by extension, to the whole Church. What Paul received was this: that first and foremost this is the Table of the Lord – and the Lord who instituted the Supper as a sacrament in the Church has the first and last word about its proper

observance. If God's people are to rightly understand this mystery of the Lord's Supper – we must first have a revealed word from heaven to explain its significance to us. Otherwise it just becomes another big party, another big pagan sacrificial meal. But no, as the officially appointed Apostle of Jesus Christ – Paul first of all drives home the point that not only is Jesus Christ the Lord of His own table – but he also makes it clear that Jesus' great work on behalf of sinners is the whole point of the Lord's Supper. Jesus Himself must explain the significance of the feast in which bread and wine tell the story of His suffering in the place of condemned and ruined sinners. The whole reason Jesus allowed Himself to be betrayed was that His body could be broken for all who trust in His name. This is the key to *a right understanding of the Supper* – that Jesus' body was broken for sinners. This was exactly the medicine needed to cure the self-centeredness of the Corinthians: they needed to get rid of the mindset of idolatry and put on the mindset of Christ. Just like the Philippian church, the Corinthians struggled with failing to look out for the interests of fellow believers. Paul's solution in Philippians 2 was to say, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus..." And then He goes on to speak of the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus' whole mindset was oriented toward others – not to aggrandize Himself but to do the will of His Father by dying on the cross for the sake of poor, weak sinners. This means that as we approach the Table of the Lord, a right understanding of the broken body of Christ for us leads in overcoming a self-centered observance of the Supper. To flesh out this principle, many congregations take a special offering for the poor in connection with their observation of the Lord's Supper. Just as Jesus' body was broken for sinners on the cross, so our coming to the Table of the Lord ought to be marked by a Christ-centered concern for the poor and weak brothers and sisters around us. We could sum it up by saying we come to the Table of the Lord, according to the word of the Lord, while putting on the mindset of the Lord.

In verses 24 and 25 Paul plunges into the heart of the Lord's words of institution, and he shows the significance of the bread and the cup as sacraments which represent, seal, and apply to believers the work of Jesus on the cross. Both bread and wine remain truly bread and wine, but in the Lord's supper they take on a special, sacramental significance. On the night in which He was betrayed Jesus broke the bread, gave thanks, and said, "*Take, eat, this is My body which is broken for you...*" Surely at this point His disciples would have remembered the words of Jesus recorded in John 6:51: "*I am the living bread which came down from heaven If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.*" As the Manna sustained the Wilderness generation of Old Covenant Israelites, so the eating of Jesus' flesh brings life through His substitutionary death for sinners! What will sustain these New Covenant disciples as they sojourn towards heaven after their Savior departs for heaven? The broken body of Jesus sacramentally eaten by those who profess faith in Him?

In the same way he took the cup after dinner and referred to the cup of wine as "*the new covenant in My blood.*" The cup of the Lord is a silent word preached in picture form – and it too has a sacramental meaning which can only be understood with reference to the Old Covenant. The notion of a "new" covenant of course implies the existence of an "old" covenant, which Jesus fulfills in every sense. Under the Old Covenant, the blood of a perfect sacrificial animal needed to be shed in order to make atonement for the people's sins. For some of those sacrifices, and especially the Passover meal, the one bringing the sacrifice would sit down with his family to a meal and eat the animal that was sacrificed on their behalf. The death of this "sacramental" animal became the source of Life for the Israelite, in both the physical and the spiritual sense, reminding Him that broken fellowship with the Lord would only be restored through the shedding of blood. But now Jesus Christ is the

Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, whose bloody sacrifice inaugurates the new covenantal redemptive era. Christ on the cross is like the sacrificial lamb which was slaughtered to bear the sins of the ones bringing the sacrifice. In fact Christ comes as the True Israelite who offers Himself fully to God – and so He becomes both Sacrifice and Sacrificer, the Offerer and the One Offered. Those who belong to Him in this new covenant are now invited to sacramentally eat His body and drink His blood, indicating their participation in Him by faith – indicating that their Life comes from Him! And so the Lord's Supper becomes the New Covenant sacrificial meal at which those who are invited to the Table remember His atoning sacrifice for them. *No, the Lord's Supper is not the sacrifice of the Lord all over again.* Rather, it is like the sacrificial meal shared by Old Testament worshippers when they ate together of the lamb that was slain to take away their sins! This new covenant eating and drinking of the Lord's Body and blood is to be done in remembrance of the Lord. But this "remembering" is not simply the recalling of the historical facts of Christ's death – although it is that. Rather it is the remembrance of both corporate and personal faith – the believing and trusting memory of faith, trust, and rest in the work of the Lamb who was slain by individual believers and the church as a whole. It is exactly this kind of faith and communion when He said in John 6:56: "*He who eats My flesh, and drinks My blood, abides in Me, and I in him.*"

Verse 26 then refers to this communion in the body and blood of Jesus – as a proclamation of the Lord's death until He returns. Every time we enjoy the Lord's supper together we engage in a vivid yet silent preaching of the gospel in picture form until the Lord Jesus returns in power and glory. So we don't just look backwards to what Christ has already done for us – we look forward to what he will do for us when He comes – that great day when our salvation will be fully realized, and when we will sit down at the wedding

feast of the Lamb and enjoy Him and each other for eternity. *This* is the right understanding of the Lord's Supper, and just as *sound doctrine* always provides the foundation for *right living*, so also a *right understanding* of the Supper must precede a *worthy participation* in the Supper. And so in verses 27-34 we'll learn about what constitutes a worthy participation in the Lord's Supper.

B. A worthy participation in the Supper (27-34)

In this last section of the passage Paul helps the Corinthians see what it means to participate worthily in the Lord's Supper. In verses 17-22 he has rebuked them for their "unworthy" partaking of the Supper – a partaking he refers to as "*a coming together not for the better but for the worse*" – and even more pointedly, in verse 20 he says that their coming together to eat the supper is no true observation of the Supper. In verse 27, in light of the right understanding of the Supper he has just taught them (in vss. 23-26), Paul lays it on them just how serious of a sin they have been committing. He says that those who partake in such an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. Its no coincidence that in chapter 10 Paul has already warned them to flee from idolatry, and hinted that they were close to becoming like the generation of Israelites whose bodies were scattered in the wilderness! In other words, to partake unworthily is to flirt with apostasy! To partake in a careless and covetous manner is to place yourself dangerously close to those whom the book of Hebrew refers to as crucifying the son of God afresh – and thereby becoming unable to be renewed again to repentance. Because their sin was so deep and dangerous, Paul here shows them three vital components of a worthy partaking in the Lord's Supper. A worthy participation must be *a self-examined participation*, *a Christ-discerning participation*, and *a covenantally aware participation*.

So what do we mean by *a self-examined participation*? In verse 28 Paul says, "*Let a*

man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup." This self-examination is so necessary because eating the sacramental bread and drinking the sacramental cup indicate the profession of a vital, personal relationship with the Lord. The Lord's Supper is the Church's sacred meal to proclaim the death of the Savior. But the Corinthians had been approaching the Lord's table with the same mindset of covetousness and idolatry as one would approach a pagan feast to celebrate an idol – they had been trifling with the Lord's holy things! In verse 29 Paul calls this unexamined and unworthy eating of the Supper an eating and drinking of judgment to oneself – which in fact had already happened because verse 30 says that many of the Corinthians had become weak, sick, and had died because of this very sin.

So the important question becomes, "What does it mean to examine yourself?" To examine yourself is to test your own heart as to the genuineness and sincerity of your knowledge to discern the Lord's Body, of your faith to feed upon Christ, and of your repentance, love and new obedience. To examine yourself is to determine by internal self-reflection that you possess the right attitude towards the Lord's Supper and your brothers and sisters in the church. This need for self-examination assumes that a person is of sufficient years and ability to understand the meaning of the Supper and to assess his own inward state accurately. This is why we require young children to wait to make a profession of faith first, before they partake of the Supper. It doesn't mean we don't think our little brothers and sisters in the Lord do not have true faith in the Lord – rather is so that they will not be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. It also is the reason why no one outside of the visible church should partake of communion until they profess their faith in Christ and obedience to Him. It means particularly that we should look into our own hearts to see if we are guilty of any of the sins listed in verses 17-22. If we are taking communion while

ignoring the needs of our brothers, or while in open conflict with them, or while stubbornly and unrepentantly indulging in any sin, then we are in desperate danger of eating and drinking judgment to ourselves. If this is the case in your life, then you need to repent of these sins and be reconciled to God and your brethren.

But we also need to maintain a balance with regard to our self-examination. When you examine yourselves, be careful that you do not look so inward that you lose sight of your standing in Christ – of who you have become by virtue of your union with Christ by faith. Jesus Christ and His work on your half alone is the basis of your confidence, and not the quality of your own self-examination. We need to heed the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne who once said, "For every one look at your sins, take ten looks at Christ!" Contemporary author David Powlison then said of M'Cheyne's quote, "Don't reverse that ratio!" The sincere believer comes with a sensitive conscience to sin, yes – but we need to remember that while we are great sinners, that Christ is an even greater Savior! To partake worthily does not mean to partake in sinless perfection – such a thing is not possible even for redeemed sinners who genuinely trust in Christ. The Lord's Table is for sinners who see their desperate need for a Savior, and who feast on His body and blood by faith to gain spiritual strength to live the Christian life.

Verse 29 brings out another aspect of what it means to participate worthily in the Lord's Supper. A worthy participation is a "*Christ-discerning*" participation. An unworthy partaker eats and drinks judgment to himself because he fails to "*discern the body of the Lord.*" To fail to discern the Lord's body means to fail to recognize by faith the spiritual presence of the Lord Jesus in the bread and the wine. It is this spiritual presence of Christ in the supper which makes it a true communing together with the Lord and with His people. To put it positively, to discern the Lord's body means to understand the sacramental presence

of the Lord in the common elements of bread and wine. It means that with the eye of faith you feed on Jesus Christ when you eat the bread and drink the cup, not in a physical sense, but by faith. And because of this Holy Spirit-given ability to discern with the eye of faith the presence of the Lord, we proclaim the closest possible unity between the Sacrificial Lamb and those who are invited to celebrate at His Table. By coming to the table in an unexamined state and failing to discern the sacramental presence of the Lord in the Supper, the Corinthians were in essence “taking the name of the Lord in vain,” and for this reason the Lord brought the temporal judgments upon them described in verse 30. But such judgments could have been avoided verse 31 says, if only they had “discerned,” themselves – meaning examined themselves. But verse 32 shows that even here, the judgments of the Lord towards His people are motivated by grace and mercy. Although unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper brought sickness and death to some of the Corinthians, this was the chastening of a loving heavenly parent to bring His wandering children back to fellowship with Himself and each other. When you contemplate these temporal judgments, it can be easy to fall into two extremes, both of which need to be avoided. The first is to think that these judgments fall on Christians who struggle with sin – and since I am struggling with a particular sin, then I should be worried that God is about to bring either sickness or death upon me because I keep failing to find victory over this particular sin. The Lord doesn't mean for you to take these warnings in that direction – this would only lead to despair when the message of Jesus Christ is one of salvation and hope for repentant sinners! But the second extreme is equally dangerous – the idea that in this modern age a loving God would never bring about temporal judgments on a Church that simply won't heed His word. Nevertheless, this chastening spoken of here is not the same as the condemnation that the world without faith in Christ will suffer. This means that if you think you have sinned by

failing to examine yourselves properly, don't despair, but rather repent of this sin and obey this command to examine yourselves and to discern the Lord's body. The Lord warns us not with the intent to destroy us but with a mind to pour out His grace on us in blessing.

The last two verses of the passage show that a worthy participation in the Supper is a "covenantally aware" participation. That is, we should be aware that the Lord's Table is a covenant family meal – and our communion is not just with the Lord, but also with each other. This is why Paul brings the Corinthians' focus back to how they had grown deficient in their observation of the Supper: "*Wait for one another*" he says to them in verse 33. In their case some were taking the supper ahead of others, and the poor were being put to shame. Paul even calls on the wealthier Corinthians in verse 34 not to come to the Supper hungry but rather to eat at home so further judgment doesn't come upon them. We might be tempted to think we are doing OK at this if in our churches we all merely partake of the elements at the same time. And while we should wait for each other in this sense, we often fail to "*wait for one another*" in other ways. Whenever we forget that we, though many, are one bread and one Body, partaking together of that one Bread who is Christ, we fail to wait for one another. This can be as crass as taking communion when you are sinning against a brother, or as subtle as viewing the Lord's Supper simply as private and individual act of piety – when it is also a covenant family meal of those bound together through our union with Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, the Lord continues today to guide His Church to a proper observance of the Lord's Supper through *a right understanding of the Supper of the Lord*, and *a worthy participation in that Supper*. May the Lord of the Table who invites us to feed

on His broken body and drink of the new covenant in His blood through faith, cause us to commune together with Him and each other as we learn to “*wait for one another!*” Amen.
