

## The Real Scoop on the Lord's Supper

### 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

January 6, 2008

A few years ago a young woman I'll call Trisha approached me and said, "I just want you to know that I can't participate in Communion or the Lord's Supper." When I asked why not, she said, "Well, I've been a follower of Jesus for six years now, but I know I'm still not worthy yet." For the past nearly twenty years as a pastor, I've heard that statement often: "I'm not worthy." And when I ask, "Where did you get the idea that you're not worthy?" they always point to this passage. "The Bible says that I'm supposed to eat and drink the Lord's Supper *worthily* and if I don't I'll come under judgment. I'm clearly not worthy – at least not yet - so it's best for me to stay away from participating."

But is that what the Bible – in particular the passage you just heard read – really teaches? I believe a wrong view of this passage has been used to cripple people in their spiritual lives. And, just as bad, this passage, wrongly understood, has failed to challenge us to grow up and be the church that God wants us to be. So this morning I want to move through this passage one verse at a time and ask, "What does the Bible really teach about Communion? What is the real scoop about the Lord's Supper? And what difference should that make in my life?"

In your bulletin you'll find an insert with this passage on it. I want you to pull it out and follow along. You'll notice, first of all, that this passage is a unit – that is, it's one argument, one line of thought, from verse 17 through verse 34. In other words, you can't understand verse 27 without placing it in the entire context. Secondly, you'll also notice that the flow of thought is broken into four paragraphs. So let's walk through this very slowly, carefully and prayerfully – because understanding this passage will have a huge impact on your relationship with Jesus Christ and with your relationship with other people in this church.

Let's begin by pausing for prayer and asking for the direction of the Holy Spirit. (*Prayer for Guidance of the Holy Spirit*).

First, a little background to this passage: the church of Corinth (that's where we get the first letter to the Corinthians) was a church with wonderful spiritual resources. Paul begins this letter by affirming that they were wifed and smart and spiritually enriched. Unfortunately, they also tended to be immature and arrogant and elitist (we're better than other Christians). They had all these gifts and knowledge, but they kept disagreeing with one another and fighting each other. So they were intellectually advanced but relationally and emotionally regressed and stuck.

This lack of relational maturity came out as they celebrated Communion. So Paul begins in verse 17 by saying, "I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good." Wow, that's what we call an in-your-face slam. Can you imagine that? The good people of Church Corinth were faithfully and dutifully gathering for worship and they

were enjoying one another's company, eating meals together, celebrating the Lord's Supper together, and yet Paul had the nerve to say, "You know what, why don't you just all stay home because all of your Christian busyness and religious efforts are just doing damage to the cause of Christ."

At one point Jesus basically said the same thing: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are from me. They worship me in vain..." (Matthew 15:8-9). You see, God doesn't just want our activity; God wants our hearts. Sometimes we need to pause and ask ourselves, "In what sense does this describe me? In what sense do I honor God with my lips – I know the right words and I show up at the right places and I do my good Christian stuff – but my heart is actually far from the Living God? In what sense has more heart become cold, detached, distant from God? Where do I need a new fire of love for Him and for His will in my life?"

So why did Paul say "your meetings do more harm than good?" Look at verse 18 – "In the first place, I hear that when you come together, there are divisions among you." Keep this verse in mind because Paul isn't elaborating a complex theory of the Lord's Supper; he's dealing with a church fight and people between people who were relationally immature. They were gifted but they couldn't get along with other people. Now someone might object, "Is that a problem? So what if I can't get along with others? I still have my personal relationship with Jesus? Why should that affect how I worship and celebrate Communion?" To which Paul would say, "It makes all the difference in the world. You can't be spiritually mature and emotionally and relationally stuck." As a matter of fact, notice what Paul says in verse 20 – "When you come together, it's not the Lord's Supper that you eat." In other words, "I don't care what you think you're doing, I don't care if you're going through the right motions' it's not the Lord's Supper."

Why did Paul say that? Let's look at verse 21 – "for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anyone else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk." Here's what was happening: in Greek society there was a certain meal called the *eranos* in which everyone brought a dish and they pooled it together. Yep, it was an old-fashioned pot-luck supper. The early church followed this practice except they called it the Love Feast. It was supposed to be great big bash of sharing and love and overflowing joy. It should have been a great celebration of their unity in Christ. You see, the church was and always is supposed to be a place where walls and barriers come down. It's supposed to be a place where people love each other across racial lines and ethnic lines and gender lines and socioeconomic lines. So in Christ there's no Chinese and Brazilian; there's no white-collar or blue-collar, there's no PhD's versus GED's; there's no difference between men and women: we're one in Christ. The New Testament makes a big deal out of this. You can't love God and not your love your brother or sister in Christ – even the most annoying, strangest, most unlikely brother or sister who constantly grates on your nerves.

Now, let me say that at Three Village Church we've had some marvelous Love Feasts. Some of you can remember Love Feasts from twenty to thirty years ago. I'm also thinking of the marvelous times of love we've had after our Super Sundays (and we have another one coming up in four weeks so get ready). Or the fun times of fellowship we

had after our Sunday evening services this past summer or during our Trunk-n-Treat bash. Brothers and sisters, we can do this! When we allow the Holy Spirit to work among us, when we care more about our neighbor's happiness and spiritual growth than our own, when we act like Jesus, amazing things will happen among us.

Sadly, the Love Feast in the church on Corinth had degenerated into cliques and divisions and power-plays and a bash of fending for myself and the kind of people I like. The church met in a home because they didn't own any property. Based on archeological digs we know that the average living/dining room was about 18x18 feet. So here's what happened at this church pot-luck supper/worship service: the really cool people (i.e. usually the wealthier, better educated, more refined church members) arrived first with their scrumptious, catered meals and \$50 bottles of wine. They were the in-crowd and they filled up the living room. Later on, the not-so-in-crowd would arrive with their stale chips and fake cheese dip. But by the time they arrived, the in-crowd, who had refused to wait for their brothers and sisters in Christ, had already devoured the really good stuff. Besides, the not-so-in-crowd couldn't fit in the living room anyway. That's why Paul said in verse 21 "One remains hungry, another gets drunk."

As is often the case in this letter to the Corinthians, the in-crowd didn't have a problem with this scenario. It wasn't a Love Feast that flowed from a sacrificial life together in Christ; it was a first-come first-serve, free for all of getting what you can. The Greek word for "each of you" in verse 21 emphasizes the individualistic nature of this meal and the Lord's Supper that followed it. "My gosh," you say, "how rude and selfish! That would never happen to me." Well, I'm not so sure. Every time I come to church or to the Lord's Table looking out for my interests first, I have done the same thing. Again, we can examine our lives and ask questions like, "What drives my level of satisfaction in worship? Am I more concerned about what I'm getting out of the service or am I more concerned for my neighbor's experience of God in worship? Do I keep praying, 'Bless me, bless me, God' or do I look around the sanctuary and pray, 'O, Father, bless him and bless her and bless them?'" But why can't it be both me and them? It can, but when push comes to shove whose needs come first in worship? "Well," we say, "that certainly is radical." To which Jesus would say, "Where did you get the idea that following me isn't radical? Do you think you can escape the way of the cross?"

So Paul is not impressed with their individualistic approach to community and to the Lord's Supper. Actually, he's furious. "Don't you have homes to drink in?" he fumes at them. "Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" You see, the in-crowd didn't see anything wrong with their approach to the Lord's Supper and to their life together. So what? That's the way we always do things. That's the way things work at school and work and sports teams. There is always an "in-crowd" and an "out-crowd." To which Paul says, "You are despising the church of God. You are humiliating other people – your brothers and sisters in Christ."

Now, in verse 23, Paul launches into the nature of Communion.