

The Lord's Supper in Biblical Perspective: An Unexpected Blessing from the Lord's Supper

I Corinthians 11:17-34

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Now we come to the Lord's Table. Our Lord has established for our well being a wonderful passage of Scripture which is the definitive passage. The Table of the Lord is for the Lord's people to feast upon. I find myself drawn to the Lord's Supper. In some settings the importance of the Lord's Supper is attempted to be affirmed by its regularity in the sense of its weekly administration and our tradition of the testimony of Christ, the body of Christ. The Lord's Supper is done often throughout the year but we don't do it weekly and yet our importance we attach to it is not so much by the number of times that it is done directly, although it is done a number of times, but it is because all is focused around the Lord's Supper during that service. It's intentionality so that what we do is focused on bringing us to the Lord's Supper. The early church celebrated the Lord's Supper in a very unique way. They would have something that the book of Jude refers to as 'Agape Feast' that is the feast of love. Agape is one of those six Greek words for love and it's the one that the church of Jesus Christ really fastened itself on to. This is an excellent word that means sacrificial love. So it is the one that became known in the lifestyle of the church. It is the one that was used by the Apostle Paul when he said "But now abide faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." So it is one of absolutely focus in the life of the church.

Here is the way they would do it. They would come together to worship and at the conclusion of worship they would have their Agape Feast. We called them covered dish suppers or minions call them potluck suppers. We Presbyterians call them pot providence suppers. So they would come together as people would bring things and they would sit at the table to share their food with each other. Then when it was over they would reset the table and come as a congregation to the table and the Lord's Supper would be administered. That is how they would spend the time together in that manner.

At the church at Corinth they got into some trouble because the church of Corinth was highly dominated by worldly thinking and worldly living. It was unbelievable what Paul had to deal with in his 18 months of ministry there and what his team dealt with before and after he was there. One of the problems was those in the church that had more means than others they would use the Agape Feast as a

time where they could make a statement about their economic and social standing. When the church was supposed to come together for the Lord's Supper they would actually begin to divide up after the worship service and the people who had a lot would flaunt what they had and wouldn't share it with anyone. Those that didn't have much had very little or nothing at all would only watch them. In fact some of them would have their own beverages to the point of drunkenness in such a service. Can you imagine having to deal with that?

When people tell me they want to get back to the New Testament church I always says "Which one do you want to go back to Corinth or Colossi where they had the problem of worshipping angels?" We are in a great position now. I'm not saying we aren't in need of a Gospel awakening and revival but we're in a great position. The Word of God was still unfolding and all of these Biblical doctrines that you and I take for granted and we understand was still being grasped and given to them where we now have the full Word of God so that we can interpret the circumstances of life and know how to live in a God centered way. We have the full Word of God.

One of the things that Paul did when he corrected the Corinthians was give us a very definitive passage about the Lord's Supper. It will not be exhaustive but I would just like to draw out a few more things that I haven't covered since I've been here. This is my 19th sermon on I Corinthians 11. We still haven't gotten to the bottom of it yet. So let's look at this definitive text in I Corinthians 11 in which Paul is both reprimanding the church at Corinth and instituting the Lord's Supper as it ought to be shared and celebrated. I Corinthians 11:17-22 says

17 But in the following instructions I do not commend you, (In other words, I'm here to tell you that you're doing a lot of things wrong in terms of the Lord's Supper) because when you come together (assemble as the church – the Ekklesia) it is not for the better but for the worse. 18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, 19 for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. 20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22 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.

It would be a little hard to sing "Softly and Tenderly" after this.

He is saying that there is a place for division in the church and that is when parts of the church begin to leave the truth and then those who are holding fast to the truth. That will be a division and Paul is saying that this isn't a division to holding to the truth. This is a division that is taking place due to selfishness, self

promotion, self absorption and self gratification. That's why it's there. So the church is dividing up unnecessarily and Paul says "I'm certainly not going to commend you for that. I'm going to call you to repentance on that. Now having confronted the sin, calling them to repentance he now tells them what to move to in the Lord's Supper. Let's continue in the passage. I Corinthians 11:23-26 says

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, 24 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." 25 In the same way also he took 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." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

He is saying that's the purpose of the Lord's Supper. It's not for the worst for that's what you have made it but it's actually for the better. That is what I have given it to you for and when it's done this way it becomes something for the better. Then Paul goes back to remind them that the he will not only discipline the church for its proper celebration of the Lord's Supper but the Lord Himself will discipline the church. Let's continue. I Corinthians 11:27-34 says

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 31 But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. 33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— 34 if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Paul is in the midst of ordering the worship services of those churches. He is actually going to do some other things in I Corinthians 12, 13 and 14 in these regards but here is addressing particularly the Lord's Supper and he reminds that this is what the Lord's Supper is therefore how do you approach it in a worthy manner. That doesn't mean we're worthy of what the Lord has done for us but it means that because of what the Lord has done for us we approach it in a manner that properly states our reverence and our devotion to the Lord.

So here is what you do. First of all you examine yourself. Secondly, you examine yourself in terms of your relationship with the Lord. Thirdly, you examine yourself in relationship with one another. Fourthly, you examine yourself in your desire to

now rise from this table and serve the Lord. So he lays this out for them and then says not only should you discipline yourself and not only will I discipline you but the Lord has already started disciplining you. Some of you are sick and you know that little bout of Corinthian flu that you have that didn't just come. The Lord sent that to get your attention, not to bring judgment that the world has but to bring the hand of loving discipline to gain your attention so you come back to dealing with issues. In fact, some of you have already checked out. You have died, like an Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit. I think they were believers but their testimony had brought disrepute and the Lord said "Okay I'm taking you."

So very clearly the Lord deals with the Lord's Supper very seriously. Why? It is not so that we are fearful of it. Certainly we are careful of it but because He has designed it for a specific purpose, He has designed it not for our self denigration of it but He has designed it for the better but you have turned it into something that is worse as Paul rebuked the Corinthians.

Now what would it mean to do it rightly and what is the better? There are many things the Lord's Supper blesses us with. We have announced it and you have come prepared for it. You have come now to feast upon it because we are in need of its blessings and we are in need of its direct focus. So what would be some of those blessings that our discipline to come in love, devotion and carefulness with one another to gather together at the Table be? I want to give you five of them that you can think your way through.

The first one is this. When you come to the Lord's Supper the Lord has given us a visual statement of the Gospel. What does the bread and what does the wine or the fruit of the vine, represent? It represents the body and blood of the Lord. Why is He doing that or in other words, where is He taking us? He is taking us to the cross. The Apostle Paul at the beginning of I Corinthians said "I didn't come to baptize, I came to preach the Gospel, for the Word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but life to those who believe." So what is his shorthand statement for the Gospel? He calls it the Word of the cross. Paul, did you believe in the incarnation, the virgin birth in the manger? Absolutely. Paul, don't you believe in the resurrection? Absolutely. Paul, don't you believe in the second coming of Jesus? Absolutely. Paul, don't you believe that Jesus is now interceding for us? Absolutely. Paul, why is it of all the dynamics of the life and ministry of Jesus recorded in the Gospel that you focus on the cross? He says it's because that is where the Gospel is secured.

There the atoning death of Christ declares the love of God who alone can satisfy the holiness of God to save sinners for the glory of God. It is right there at the cross. Go search any religion that has it. They don't have it. Every religion has a plan for you to maybe work your way to heaven. Christianity says there is a God who has loved you and given His Son who went to a cross, coming from the heavens, the dwelling place of God's throne, upon the earth to be humiliated to suffer death, even death on a cross.

There on the cross here in the midst of us hell was poured out on Him. There the love of God met the holiness of God to save sinners for the glory of God. That is why Paul said “I determine to know nothing among you but Christ and Him crucified.” Was He born of a virgin? Absolutely. Was He raised? Praise the Lord, yes but there at that cross – at the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the Light that cross where my burdens rolled away – it is there that we are saved. It is not a model death or a martyr’s death but an atoning death. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. There is your hope, not your church, not your resolve, not that I’m better than someone else, but there is our only hope as sinners. Jesus died for me. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling. Isn’t it marvelous that the Lord’s Supper visually reminds us of that? It visually declares our benefits.

The cross also says something else. The cross not only tells you the love of God that met the holiness of God but it tells us how sinful we are. Look what it took to save us and the one time in history men and women had God where they could put their hands on Him and they crucified Him. That’s how sinful our hearts are. You might be thinking “Pastor that’s not my heart.” If it’s not then it’s because Jesus gave you a new heart. We were born with a Christ crucified heart but when you’re saved you’re born again. You get a new record and you get a new heart because of what Christ has done on the cross for you and for me.

The second blessing of taking the time at the Lord’s Supper is it’s a God ordained means for your spiritual growth. Paul says “God has designed this through His Son Jesus for your benefit, for your better. Don’t make it something for the worse.” It is actually designed for your better. There is a wonderful statement for us because obviously the Table is not for sinless people. Why would God design something for me for my better, my growth, as a means for me to grow if I’m already sinless, if I’m already perfect? Obviously the Table isn’t for perfect people but it’s for saved sinners who want to grow in grace. As you come to it focused upon the Lord then the Lord says “I’m going to use this in your life as a means for you to experience, not facade cosmetic growth, but true spiritual growth from the inside out.”

When you and I put that fruit of the vine to our lips what will it taste like? I’m one of these people who drink grape juice everyday and there’s a very definite taste. Fermented or non-fermented, the fruit of the vine is always bittersweet. It has a bitter taste and a sweet taste. So is our salvation. We mourn with bitterness over the sins and sinfulness of our sin. Oh but the sweetness that God’s grace is greater than all of our sin! It’s not the tastiness of unleavened bread but it’s the tastiness of the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ that gives us hope, joy and nourishment.

The third blessing is it’s an avenue and a call to true fellowship. In other words, you not only examine yourself and your relationship with the Lord but this is

something that was said three different times, 'when you come together.' The Lord's Supper isn't something that is to be administered privately. Even if you were shut in and hadn't been able to come to the Lord's Supper and one of our pastors were to bring you the Lord's Supper, he wouldn't come by himself. He would bring three, four or five people with him and you would have a worship service. You would all come together because it is that which the Lord has given us to celebrate not as a private thing, not as a pick me up experience or a happy hour experience or an opportunity for a small group but this is the church called by the elders together around the Table to declare the majesty and glory of the Lord and to call us to continued fellowship.

I love the church because it has rich people and poor people, new Christians and old Christians, black ones and white ones, etc. Just today I was thinking about the Lord's Supper because after the first service I was talking to nine people and only one of them had the same citizenship papers as I do. I thought, "This is it!" A people who are not a people have become the people of God and we are one in Christ. We have one Lord, one faith, one baptism. I praise God for not only what He has done for my country that I live in but I praise God that He's bringing a Kingdom from all the nations of the world and the church can manifest it as unity comes out of diversity and the Table calls us together.

The fourth blessing is it's an opportunity to recalibrate. I don't care how much we know we're saved by grace the constant tendency is to think God loves me because I'm doing good or God will love me more if I do good. If we're growing in grace you and I will know the love of God more deeply but I don't make God love me more. How can God love me anymore? He so loved me He gave His Son. So this gives me a chance to recalibrate to find my all in Christ, not in what I do for Him. I want to do much for Him. The Gospel calls me to obedience and to a changed life but it's not my life that's my life. It is Christ's life in me and the Lord's Supper reminds me that I've come back to Christ and my hope of what Christ did for me on the cross. It recalibrates my life.

Then what did he say? How long will we do the Lord's Supper? We will do it until He comes again so it reminds me that He's coming. I hope none of you spent any time on Harold Camping's books, articles or anything. The man has been wrong three times. I preached one sermon back in 1988 the first time he did this and I referred to it in 1990 so I'm not bothering with it this time. Jesus is very clear that no man knows the hour of His coming and I think it's the height of arrogance to set the time. It's not disobedience but I think it's the height of arrogance. I say that with all desires for the Lord to be a work in Mr. Camping's life on this and have so written asking for that. Jesus in His perfect humanity said, "No man knows the hour. I don't." If He doesn't I'm certainly not going to be arrogant enough to think that I in my imperfections humanity will know the hour but I do know He is coming.

I see the cataclysmic events and the convulsions all around me. I know He's coming. I see the Gospel going to all the nations. I know He's coming. I see His elect being gather so that He loses not one. I know He's coming. He is coming soon, maybe morning, maybe noon, maybe evening but will be soon and the Lord's Supper reminds me that the Savior who gave this, who feasts with us by the Holy Spirit is coming again for His people and we will be caught up together with Him and deposited in a new heavens and a new earth forever.

I want to share with you one more thought. I love the Lord's Supper for all of these reasons and more but there's another reason I love the Lord's Supper. In fact I find myself looking ahead thinking, "When will be the next time we'll have the Lord's Supper again?" Theologically there's a reason, all of these blessings are reasons but there's another reason. It calls us to slow down – remember, examine, reflect. I plead with you as a pastor, slow down. It's not how many things you do in life. It's the right things for the right reasons for life. I understand there's a place for multi-tasking but just slow down. Slow your children down. All of us need to slow down. I love the Lord's Supper because if I come to it in a worthy manner I've got to slow down and reflect.

One of my favorite times is when I get up in the morning and I go the back, make a cup of coffee, sit down with my Bible and I just have those minutes when nothing is impacting me but I can think. Then if God allows and I properly plan my life I love the gloaming. Do you know what gloaming is? The gloaming is that marvelous time at night at the end of a day where the sun is down but the light is still shining. You can feel the warmth. It is still there but not the glare. You have the light but not its darkness. The sun has traced its way through the sky all day and now at the end of it you're there. You have its benefits and you have these glorious moments where everything has slowed down. There might even be a gentle breeze that's there. I love those moments. I don't have enough of them but that's my responsibility.

That's the way I feel about the Lord's Supper. Jesus the Son of God traced His life across the sky of history. He has saved us from our sins and even though He has ascended the light of His glorious work still shines. It refreshes us. It bathes us. Just stop and enjoy Him because there's a new day yet coming and we anticipate it. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in this Your Word and this Your Table. Lord, as we come to it minister to Your people, I pray. I ask O Jesus that You will be exalted even as we sung "Be exalted O Lord, be exalted, not only in the heavens but upon the earth" and as we come to this Table be exalted in this church and be exalted in our lives, I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.

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