

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 27th February 2005

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not! For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night 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, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions. (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

Introduction

In this passage the apostle Paul gives instructions for the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was being abused by the believers in Corinth, and they were using it as an occasion for some of them to eat and drink to excess rather than as an occasion for remembering the Lord's death. The apostle rebukes the believers for the way they are abusing the Supper, and gives teaching as to what the real point of it is. Although the abuses of the Lord's Supper that were present in the church in Corinth may not be present today, the principles that the apostle lays down have permanent relevance.

The passage divides naturally into four sections:

1. A rebuke to the believers in Corinth for abusing the Lord's Supper, verses. 17 - 22
2. What the Lord's Supper is all about, verses. 23 – 26
3. A warning to those who abuse the Supper, verses. 27 - 32
4. Conclusion, verses. 33 – 34

1. A rebuke to the believers in Corinth for abusing the Lord's Supper

In the first half of this chapter the apostle dealt with the issue of head covering, and he commended the Corinthians for keeping to the teachings he had previously laid down. On the matter of the Lord's Supper, however, he gives no such commendation. He says that their meetings do more harm than good. He charges them with a number of faults:

1) There are divisions among them as they gather

Firstly, he says in verse 18 that when they come together there are divisions among them. He concedes that there are bound to be some differences of opinion among believers. This is something which he has already addressed in this letter, for example in the matter of food which has previously been offered to idols. He says that there have to be these differences, so that those who have God's approval may become manifest. But what he is rebuking, is not honestly held differences in conviction, maintained in a spirit of love and humility. What he is talking about is an ugly spirit of divisiveness. He mentioned this before in chapter 1. There was a party spirit in the church. One said "I follow Paul", another "I follow Apollos", another "I follow Cephas" (in other words, Peter), and

the last “I follow Christ.” They were taking pride in belonging to one group or another, in the same way that people today take pride in supporting one football team or another, or belonging to one race as against another. For this sort of party spirit to have existed in the church was appalling, and totally contrary to the Gospel. For it to be present when they came together for the Lord’s Supper was inexcusable.

2) They treated the Lord’s Supper as just an opportunity to eat and drink

Secondly, the apostle says in verse 20 that they treated the Lord’s Supper as simply an opportunity to eat and drink. He says “When you come together it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat, for each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else.” It is not the *Lord’s* Supper that they were eating but their own meal. All that they were interested in was satisfying their own bodily appetites. They were not thinking about *why* they were eating and drinking. They were not thinking about the Lord and his death. All that they were interested in was having a “good time”.

3) Some showed lack of love for the poorer church members

Paul says in the second half of verse 20, “One remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don’t you have home 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 praise you for this? Certainly not!”

It would appear that when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, each person would bring his own food. But rather than sharing out the food that he had brought, each person would tuck into its own picnic. The richer members of the church would bring large and sumptuous meals and insensitively eat these meals in front of those who had very little to eat. So they would humiliate those who did not have very much. Perhaps the richer believers were deliberately trying to “show off” their wealth by producing an ostentatious display for others to admire. What should have been a time of fellowship and rejoicing thus became a trial for those who were poorer. It is not surprising, then, that the apostle said that he could not commend them for the way that they observed the Lord’s Supper.

In our day we do not perhaps have the exact equivalent of the abuse that went on in Corinth. However, we need to watch out about, for example, dressing in

expensive clothes in such a way as to make those who cannot afford such clothes feel embarrassed and shown up. Those who have boyfriends or girlfriends need to be careful that they do not “show off” their relationships in such a way as is painful for those who are single and finding it hard to be so. Meetings of the church should be a time of joy when the family of God gathers together to remember the Lord. We should not, either deliberately or by our insensitivity, turn them into times of trial for brothers and sisters.

2. The Point of the Lord's Supper

Paul then goes on to say in verses 23 to 26 what the point of the Lord's Supper is. In a nutshell the Lord's Supper is all about the Lord, Jesus Christ. Now notice that the apostle repeatedly uses the word “Lord” to describe Jesus here. This is significant, because the Greek word, “kurios” that is translated “Lord” is the same word that those who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek used to translate the Hebrew word that is most commonly used for God in the Old Testament, namely, “Jahweh” or “Jehovah”. This is why many of our English translations translate “Jahweh” as “LORD” with block capitals. So when Paul describes Jesus as Lord, he knew that his Jewish readers would have clearly understood him to be saying that Jesus is Jehovah, that he is God.

Paul says that he passed on to the believers in Corinth what he had received from the Lord, from Jesus. That on the night he was betrayed he 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.” So the whole point of eating the bread is not to satisfy our bodily appetite. We can do that at any time with any meal we have at home. The point of eating the bread when we are meet together is so that we might remember the body of the Lord Jesus Christ that was broken for us on the Cross. We are told to eat the bread to help us to remember that our salvation was made possible only because Jesus died for us on the Cross.

Now notice, we eat the bread not to re-enact the sacrifice of Christ, or to add to it, but rather to remember the sacrifice that has already been accomplished for us. The great mistake of the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper, which they call the Mass, is that it fails properly to appreciate the completeness of the sacrifice of Christ, and so they think that, when the bread and the wine are offered on what they call the altar, the sacrifice is made all over again. But the Bible tells us very clearly that the death of Christ was all that was necessary for the forgiveness of his people. When he died on the Cross, Jesus said “It is

finished.” The transaction was done. The price had been paid. There was nothing left that needed to be paid for the sins of his people.

So in the Lord’s Supper we remember, and by faith receive afresh into our lives, what Christ has already done by his death on the Cross. We do not re-enact it.

It is the same with the cup. The whole point of drinking the cup is to remember what Christ has done for us by shedding his blood for us. Paul says, “In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the New Covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” The cup represents the New Covenant which God promised in the Old Testament, particularly in Jeremiah chapter 31, that he would establish through Christ. Under this New Covenant, God’s people would have the power to obey him, because his law would be written on their hearts. The basis for this New Covenant was forgiveness. God would no longer hold the sins of his people against them. He would remember their sins no more. How could God do this without compromising his justice? Because the Lord Jesus Christ was going to come and shed his blood on the Cross, and that blood would pay the price for sins of all his people. So by drinking of the cup we are remembering the great price that was paid to set us free from the guilt of our sin, and also its power.

So, says the apostle in verse 26, “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” Right the way through the rest of time, up to when Jesus comes again, his people will keep on celebrating the Lord’s Supper, and the point will be this: to remember what Christ has done for them in dying on the Cross for them.

So when we come together to share the Lord’s Supper, Christ must be central, and particularly the Cross must be central. We must not do anything which will take away the centrality of the Cross. And we need constantly to remember the Lord in this way. Some Christians make the mistake of thinking to themselves, “I know all about the Cross. That is elementary Christian teaching. I want to go on now to more “advanced” subjects in the Christian life.” But by giving us the command to celebrate constantly the Lord’s Supper, and by telling us that the whole point of the Lord’s Supper is to remember the death of Christ, God has made sure that, if we meet with his people, and if his people celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the way they should, we shall never forget the Cross of Christ.

3. A warning not eat or drink in an “unworthy” way

Paul then goes on to warn the believers in Corinth against eating or drinking in an “unworthy” way. He warns us very solemnly in verses 27 to 30:

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

These words have led some believers who have sensitive consciences to think that if they have sinned during the week before they come to share in the Lord’s Supper they cannot receive it, because they are “unworthy”. However, if we remember what we have just seen about what the apostle says the abuse of the Lord’s Supper in Corinth was, it will help us to understand what he means when he speaks about eating in an “unworthy” manner. The apostle has just been rebuking the believers for leaving the Lord out of the Lord’s Supper. They came to the meetings with a divisive spirit, which was effectively a denial of the Cross of Christ. They treated it as just any other meal. Some of them also showed contempt for other believers by insensitively eating a lavish meal in front of those who had nothing. So to eat in an “unworthy” manner is not to eat having sinned during the week. If that was the case we would all of us would have to not eat, as all of us will have sinned during the week before coming to the Lord’s Supper. To eat in an unworthy manner is to eat in such a way as is not worthy of what Christ has done, and does not properly remember him. It is to eat in such a way as one might eat a meal at home or at a party, without any real thought for Christ and the Cross.

We are perhaps handicapped by our understanding of the word “worthy”. When we use the word “worthy” we often think of the idea of having been good or deserving. So we say, “he is a worthy fellow, give him a reward.” A Christian with any sensitivity of conscience will say, “I am totally unworthy. I don’t deserve anything from the Lord except to go to Hell.” But Paul is not saying that we should have lived a worthy life, or that we should have clocked up enough merit by our behaviour to make us “worthy” of coming to the Lord’s Supper. What he is saying, rather, is that we should eat in such a way as is worthy of what the Lord has done, which gives due recognition to his work on the Cross and what flows from that.

This understanding is underlined by what the apostle says in verse 29. He says

there that the person who eats in an “unworthy” manner “eats or drinks without recognising the body of the Lord.” When we come together for the Lord’s Supper we should recognise, or discern, the body of Christ. In other words we should be aware of the body of Christ that was broken for us. That should be the thing which is uppermost in our minds. We should also recognise Christ’s spiritual body, the church. We should come in an attitude of love and respect for our fellow believers, not with a party spirit, and not looking for ways of getting “one over” our brothers and sisters.

So if you are a true Christian, and you look to Christ, and him alone, for your right standing with God, and you have an attitude of love towards your brothers and sisters, then when it is time for the Lord’s Supper come, and receive the elements again, even if you have had a bad week. It is those who are aware that they are sinners, and who feel really ashamed of their behaviour, who are most qualified to come to Christ. Remember what the Lord said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2.17). Remember, it was the tax collector, who felt so sinful, and who did not even dare to look up to heaven, but said “God have mercy on me, a sinner,” who went home from the temple justified before God, whereas the Pharisee, who came in a spirit of self-righteousness, and who congratulated himself on his spiritual successes, went home without God’s forgiveness. So if you are painfully aware of having sinned this does not disqualify you from receiving the Lord’s Supper. You are just the sort of person who should receive the Supper.

However, if you come to the Lord’s Supper without giving proper recognition to the Lord, and to what he has done, or with a bad attitude towards fellow believers, then do not eat, because, as the apostle says, if you do so you will eat and drink judgement on yourself. So he says that we should examine ourselves before we eat. We should ask ourselves, “Am I giving proper recognition to the Lord and what he has done on the Cross, as I come to this meal? Do I have a right attitude towards fellow-believers? Is there anyone I should forgive in my heart? Is there anyone whose forgiveness I should seek?” If you have doubts on this score you should not eat until you are in a right frame of mind towards Christ and his people.

The apostle warns us that to have a careless attitude towards the Lord’s Supper can have very serious consequences. He says that it is because the believers in Corinth have had a bad attitude that many are weak and sick, and a number

have fallen asleep, in other words they have died prematurely. If we do not stop ourselves from receiving the Lord's Supper when we have a bad attitude, the Lord himself will stop us by illness, or even with death. But, says the apostle "if we judged ourselves we would not come under judgement." We need to deal with ourselves so that God does not have to deal with us.

This judgement that God brings on his people is not because he hates us or condemns us, but because he loves us and is determined to make us like Christ. "When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world." But even though the discipline is for our good, we should not do anything to provoke it.

Conclusion

Paul concludes in verse 33, "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you eat it may not result in judgement." We must treat the Lord's Supper as an occasion to remember the Lord, not as an occasion to satisfy desires of the body.

What lessons can we take away from this for ourselves?

1. As a church we should celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly. There is some debate as to the frequency that Scripture calls for. It does seem that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper weekly, and it may be right for us as a church to look again at the frequency with which we celebrate the Lord's Supper.
2. We should make sure we are present when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. If you miss opportunities to share in the Lord's Supper, are you not treating it as something of no importance?
3. We should make sure that we are right with fellow believers before we come. In Matthew 5.23 – 24 it is recorded that Jesus said "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Getting right with our fellow-believer should have top priority in our lives.
4. We should make sure that we are coming to the Lord's Supper for the right

reason, to remember Christ. We should not come in order to impress others, or for any other ulterior motive.

5. Before participating we must examine ourselves. We should ask ourselves questions like:

– Am I truly a Christian? In my heart am I really repentant from sin and looking to Christ alone for my righteousness?

– Do I hold Christ to be central to the Supper?

– Do I have a right attitude towards other believers? Are there any grudges against others that I am nursing?

6. As we participate, we should consciously meditate upon the Lord and what he has done for us on the Cross.

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