

May 24/25, 2003

Memorial Day Weekend

Examine Yourself

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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I'm sure you are well aware of the fact that this is Memorial weekend, and at the core, the essence, of Memorial Day is the whole idea of remembering. Have you ever stopped to think about how many of our holidays are centered around the theme of remembering? They are about remembering something. You have Memorial Day... you have the Fourth of July... I don't know what Labor Day means. You have Thanksgiving ... Christmas... Easter... Lincoln's birthday. We have all these holidays where we are supposed to stop and remember. Apparently somebody thinks there is great value in not forgetting. As a matter of fact, we could imply that when we remember we live differently than when we forget.

I think that is true, because I think that's a theme the Bible teaches in both the Old and the New Testament. There is great importance in remembering. Probably the most obvious example of that would be the Lord's Supper or Communion, where Jesus Himself said, "I want you to do this. I want you to do it regularly, because I want you to remember." What's implied is that if we remember, we're going to live differently than if we forget.

I think all of us understand that this Memorial weekend, for the overwhelming majority of people, is simply a holiday weekend. The number of people that will actually remember will be a tiny, tiny percentage. I think the same is true for Communion. It is very possible that we go through the motions, the ritual, but we don't really spend time remembering. And I think that becomes evident in how we live. As a matter of fact, more specifically Paul says if we really remember, then it dramatically affects how we treat people. It should show up in how we treat one another in the body of Christ. It should show up in how I view the unsaved around me out in the marketplace and in my neighborhood. If I really remember, it should affect my relationships.

To better understand this, I invite you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 11. Corinthians is a topical book where Paul is dealing with a number of different topics. He moves into a new discussion on the topic in 1 Corinthians 11 starting in verse 17. It's a discussion he will take through several chapters, but the first part of this relates specifically to the Lord's Supper or Communion. In verse 17 he says:

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. (NASB)

Now that's an interesting opening statement. I think we all understand that when the church gathers together as the church we ought to come away from that gathering for the better. We ought to walk away encouraged and uplifted—in some way we walk away better than when we came. Yet Paul says in the case of the Corinthians it was the opposite. When the church gathered together they went away worse rather than better, and that was a problem.

Verses 18-19:

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. (NASB)

Paul says when the church gathers together there are factions or divisions; there's conflict. There are different cliques or different groups, and they are in conflict with one another. So,

rather than coming together as a family, they are coming together and experiencing these divisions and factions. But then he makes an interesting statement. He says to some degree that's a good thing. It exposes those who are not really walking the walk and it makes evident those who truly are living out their Christian faith, and that's a good thing.

You know, I've been thinking about this a lot over the last several months. This is one of many texts which basically make this point: when we live our lives in isolation it is very easy to pretend to be something we are not. As a matter of fact, in isolation we can fool all the people all the time. It's only when we move into a context of relationship, community, or team that suddenly we're exposed for what we really are. You take someone who may in isolation appear to have it all together and put them on a high-functioning team that experiences a high level of relationship and community, and all of a sudden they're exposed.

In isolation you may not know anything about me. You may not know that I'm selfish. You may not know that I'm arrogant. You may not know that I'm prideful. You may not know that I'm insecure. You may not know any of those things, because in isolation it's very easy to hide that. But as soon as I step into an environment of relationship (which can be a marriage or a team in the marketplace or somewhere in the church) all of a sudden it becomes evident that I'm arrogant, selfish, insecure. All of that stuff starts to emerge in the context of relationship.

When I say "isolation" I don't mean that it's a hermit living up in the woods somewhere. You can be in the midst of people and live in isolation. It really has to do with your willingness to let people in—your willingness to live in a context of relationship. Now, I happen to be an introvert, and we have our ways of keeping people out. We have our ways of isolating ourselves. But you have to understand, even though God made me that way, I cannot use that as an excuse not to live in community or not to live in a relationship. I have to let people in. I have to live in authentic relationships, because it exposes me and it helps me understand who I am and what needs to happen in order for me to grow and to be like Christ.

Now extroverts—they have their ways of doing the same thing; it's just different. Extroverts are in the midst of people and they're the life of the party and they talk to everybody. But it's very possible to use that to keep people out. They can use that to control the environment to keep people from getting in. Extroverts may be in the midst of dozens of people and still be isolated, just like an introvert.

The bottom line is that when we move into the context of relationships we find out who we really are. It becomes obvious. That's what Paul is saying. When these people came together to experience a level of community, it suddenly became evident who was walking the walk and who wasn't. And he says that's a good thing. He goes on in verse 20 and describes specifically what was happening:

Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. (NASB)

Paul here is talking about the fact that in the first century the church celebrated what they called the love feast. And as a part of that love feast, they then moved into the celebration of the Lord's Supper. So it wasn't done in a formal, traditional sense like we do it, but it was much more informal. They would gather in a home and have this meal together, and it was supposed to be a time of relationship. It was a time of community where they would come

together as family and, in the process of that, they would then move into the elements of the Lord's Supper.

But Paul is telling them, "You're really not coming together for the Lord's Supper." In other words, it's kind of like taking Memorial Day off from work, but you really give no thought to what Memorial Day is about. That's what he says they were doing. He is saying, "You're coming together and you're saying it is for the Lord's Supper, but you don't understand it at all. You're completely missing the point."

What was happening was in Corinth there was extreme wealth and there was extreme poverty. When the church would gather, those who had wealth were used to the value system of the culture that told them: you are more important because you're wealthy, so you should be treated as if you're more important. So they brought that value system into the church. Therefore, the wealthy were meeting together in one group and they had all of this expensive food and wine. Basically Paul says they were eating and drinking and being merry; they were full and some of them were drunk. It was a mess. But the poor had nothing. They had no scraps; they had no food. It was basically a time of exalting the rich and shaming the poor. That's what was going on, and Paul says that was everything the Lord's Supper is against. He responds in verse 22:

What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." (NASB)

When he says, "Do you despise the church?" it means to put down, to render as if it is of no value.

One of the things that defines the church is a completely different value system. But these people were bringing the value system of the culture that says: based on your wealth or your performance, based on who you are, you are to be treated special because you're much more valuable than these poor people. By bringing that value system into the church, they were basically taking the value system of the Kingdom and saying it was of no effect. They were putting it down and putting it away, causing this problem.

Paul says, "You come together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, yet what you are doing couldn't be more opposite of what the Lord's Supper is about." So he says to them, "What shall I say to you?"—which would be the equivalent of our English phrase, "I don't even know what to say." It's a statement of shock. He is saying, "You people...you're shocking! Your behavior is so bad that I don't even know what to say to you."

The problem was that when they came together to celebrate the Lord's Supper they did not really remember. And it had become evident in how they were treating one another. So the next step is for Paul to go back to the basics of the Lord's Supper, which is the basics of the gospel, and say, "This is what we're about as the people of God." Verse 23:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread. (NASB)

Just two quick things here. One is that Paul reminds them that Jesus was the one who instituted this and commanded it and said, "You need to do this to remember." Second of all, isn't it interesting that Paul identifies the night that Jesus did this as the night in which He was betrayed? Now, why did he choose that as the identifying mark? Why didn't he say the night that they met in the upper room? Why didn't he say the night that they celebrated Passover

together? Why didn't he say the night He was arrested? Why didn't he say the night before He was crucified? Why did he choose to identify that night as the night in which He was betrayed?

I think it was because the attitude that was in Judas' heart that led to the betrayal is the polar opposite of everything Communion is about. And I think subtly he is saying, "You people in Corinth have the heart of Judas. You are betraying everything that ultimately the gospel is about." That's what he's going to explain here:

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." In the same way He took the cup also, 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.

(vs. 23b-26, NASB)

I want to start by explaining what we believe about the elements of Communion. Different denominations and traditions believe different things, and I just want to help us understand where we land on this.

There are some that teach the bread and the cup literally *are* the body and the blood of Jesus. That's called consubstantiation. There are those who believe that the bread and the wine *become* the body and blood of Jesus. That's called transubstantiation. And there are those that don't believe either of those, but they do believe there is a certain spiritual blessing that is passed on when you partake physically of the elements.

Now, we would not agree with any of those three for a variety of reasons. Those that say this is literally the body and blood of Jesus hang that argument on the word "is." This *is*—that's what Jesus said: "This is My body; this is My blood." Well, it is true that in many places in the New Testament that Greek word for "is" is translated as literal: "this *is*" whatever they're talking about. But it is equally true that throughout the New Testament that word "is" also is used in a symbolic way. "This is" can mean it symbolically represents whatever they're talking about. So that point is a wash. The word "is" means both symbolic and literal, so you can't make a case out of that one way or the other.

So then you have to really look at the context itself. One of the things we would have to note is that Jesus was *physically* before the disciples when He made that comment. Because He was there physically in His flesh and blood, they were not cannibalizing Him. They were not physically eating Him or drinking His blood. Therefore, it seems obvious that it was symbolic language. "This is" would mean "this represents My body; this represents My blood." You have to also realize that Jesus was taking the elements of the Jewish Passover that had been celebrated for over a thousand years, and He was filling those elements with new meaning.

Now the reality is, for over a thousand years the elements of the Passover were symbolic of what the Jewish people had been through in their slavery and deliverance. You cannot find a Hebrew scholar on the face of the planet that would tell you the Hebrews ever believed anything in that Passover was literal. It was all symbolic. Therefore, Jesus is taking those symbolic elements and simply re-defining them according to the New Covenant. You also have to realize these are orthodox Jews who have been taught from the time they were children that they were never to consume anything that had the blood in it. Therefore, for Jesus to say, "This is My blood," and ask them to drink this cup of blood would have absolutely sent them through the roof. It would have contradicted everything they had ever been taught. Therefore,

at the very least, there would have been a lengthy discussion about why everything they had been taught was now changing and now they should partake of this new ritual.

Finally, let's look at the idea that somehow if you partake of the elements you have some sort of an infusion of a spiritual blessing. The reason we don't hold to that is simply because there is nowhere the text teaches that. If you go to the simple language of the text, Jesus says, "Do this"—not because you receive some special spiritual blessing. But, "Do this in remembrance of Me." His language is very plain there. He is saying, "Do this to remember My body and My blood." So that is the point: the elements are symbolic. And the essence of Communion is that *we remember*.

So now we get to the point: What does that mean? What do we remember? The word "remember" here is an interesting Greek word. It doesn't mean that you mentally recite the facts. As a matter of fact, there's a different Greek word that means that. This is a Greek word that means you relive the story. You emotionally enter into it. You feel it; you touch it; you taste it.

Every once in awhile, something reminds me that a few years ago I had open heart surgery, and I think about the facts. But it's very different when I go into the hospital and I visit someone, especially if it's a heart patient. All of a sudden I smell it; I taste it; I touch it. All of a sudden I'm there in that bed again and I remember in a whole different way. I remember it emotionally.

That's what this word means. It means we enter into it to the point where we feel it, we touch it, we taste it. We're there again. The question is: What are we remembering? Obviously we didn't stand at the foot of the cross and literally see Jesus die. I think what it's talking about is remembering that moment when we fully understood the gospel and we cried out to God and acknowledged our need for a Savior. I think we are to go back and enter back into that moment, which was really a moment of brokenness. It was a moment when I finally realized there is nothing I can do to make myself acceptable to God. I go back to that moment where I realized that my life, my sin, is so offensive to God that I am condemned to hell forever. And there's nothing I can do to make myself good enough. There's no religious ritual. There's not enough good works. I came to the end of myself and recognized my need for a Savior. And it was in that brokenness and humility that I reached out and trusted Jesus as my Savior.

It's very important to realize the essence of salvation is not whether or not I can recite the historical facts of the gospel. That does not save anybody. What saves us is acknowledging our need for a Savior, which is a state of brokenness. It says, "I cannot do this." But what's included in that is the realization that on the basis of that, I am rejecting the value system of the world that says my significance, my value, my worth comes from my performance. I realize that I am dying to that, because I cannot perform. I am realizing now that my significance, my value, my worth comes from God as a gift of grace. Therefore, I live out a completely new value system.

Therefore, the church is a gathering of broken people. Now it becomes obvious why what was happening in Corinth was so offensive. Paul said in Galatians that based on the truth of the gospel, there is no longer Jew or Gentile. There's no longer rich or poor. There's no longer male or female. We are just a gathering of broken people who are all sinners saved by grace. That's what we are supposed to remember when we gather together to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Verses 27-33:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing, he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. (NASB)

If we work that paragraph backwards, basically what we are being told is: If we remember, and in remembering we discipline ourselves to live a life of brokenness, then God doesn't have to discipline us. But if we don't discipline ourselves Paul says God will do it for us. Not because He's mad at us. But because He wants to correct us and get us back on track.

You keep working the paragraph backwards and you end up at the beginning, where he says we should then partake of the elements in a worthy fashion. He says whoever partakes "in an unworthy manner is guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord." So we are left then with a discussion: What does it mean to be unworthy? What does it mean to partake of the elements in an unworthy fashion?

Oftentimes when we think of this, what we think of is our performance. We think, *Okay, I didn't commit adultery; I didn't cheat anybody; I didn't do this ...or this...or this.* Based on our performance we can think we are okay and that we're worthy. You can see already we're getting ourselves in trouble here. I don't think that's what Paul is talking about. I think he's saying that to be unworthy is to be guilty of spiritual arrogance. In other words, it is to forget the basis of our salvation. The farther we get away from that conversion experience, the greater the danger of spiritual arrogance—where we start to think, *I am who I am because I've performed or because I am so good.*

What happens is we start to look at others in the body and we start to point fingers at them and judge them. Rather than being consumed with our own sin and the grace that's been extended to us, we start to spend more time worrying about everyone else's sin. And we find ourselves sitting in the seat of spiritual arrogance.

I think spiritual arrogance shows itself in a number of ways. It's when I begin to think that I am clean before God on the basis of my performance this week. It's when I am more concerned about everybody else's sin instead of my own. It's when I begin to think that somehow I am better than my fellow sinners saved by grace.

I believe spiritual arrogance is evidenced by grumbling or a complaining spirit or negativity, because none of those reflect an attitude of brokenness. They reflect an attitude of arrogance that says, "I deserve better." And the fact of the matter is, you don't deserve what you have.

I realized this years ago. In just processing through my theology, I realized that for me to be critical or to grumble and complain and be negative is totally inappropriate and offensive to God. Not because I believe in the power of positive thinking like Robert Schuller, but it's because I believe it is totally inconsistent with the message I proclaim. The message I proclaim is a message of brokenness that proclaims my sin was so offensive to God that I was condemned forever. I had no hope. Therefore, I reached out as a beggar, and God through

Jesus Christ has saved me. He has poured His grace upon me. As if that isn't enough, He has called me to have a significant role in building His Kingdom—just like *you* have a significant role in building the Kingdom. If I really believe that and if I really understand that, I have more than I could ever possibly deserve. And if I believe that, then to grumble and complain and have a critical spirit and be negative is completely inappropriate and offensive to God. It is counter to everything I say I believe.

Now I understand life has frustrations. I understand there are things in life that frustrate me. There are things in life that make me angry. There are things in the church that I'd like to change. It doesn't mean you stick your head in the sand and don't live in the real world. But in the process of negotiating and trying to live in the midst of that, I do so with a thankful heart. I do that with a spirit of thanksgiving and joy and celebration, because I realize I still have more than I could ever possibly deserve. And the only appropriate response to that is to celebrate—to have a heart of thanksgiving. When I become negative and complaining and I become a grumbler, I find myself in a seat of spiritual arrogance. What I am saying by my attitude is that I deserve better or I deserve more. I am saying that I don't believe I have more than I deserve.

Paul ends this section by basically saying when you come together to observe the Lord's Supper then live like it. Then treat people like it. If I come and I really remember and enter back into that moment of brokenness, I realize I should be living a lifestyle of brokenness. That is the value system of the Kingdom and it dramatically affects how I view my fellow believers. I don't sit in judgment of them, but rather I see all of us as fellow travelers on this journey, because we're all sinners saved by grace. It dramatically affects how I look at the people around me, in my neighborhood and in the marketplace. I'm not better than them. I don't have this great spiritual wisdom that separates me from them. The difference between them and me is that I've reached out and accepted this magnificent gift of grace that they need. That's what it means to remember.

If you have trusted Jesus as your Savior, when you participate in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, what you are saying is: "There was a moment of brokenness where I realized I am a sinner condemned to hell and I desperately need a Savior." When the Communion elements are passed it is a time to remember that brokenness and examine yourself. Do you live a lifestyle of brokenness? Or do you find yourself seated in that position of spiritual arrogance, where you look down your spiritual nose at others who are struggling and cast judgment, as if somehow they are more of a sinner than you? Do you find yourself with a spirit of grumbling? A negative spirit? A critical spirit? None of those reflect an attitude of brokenness. They reflect an attitude of arrogance.

That's what it means to *remember*. And that is how we are to examine ourselves as we observe the Lord's Supper together.