

## PREFACE

**Read John 17:11, 20-23.**

One of the most important things on the mind of Christ Jesus, in the closing hours before His arrest and crucifixion, was that His disciples—the initial remaining eleven as well as “those also who believe in Me through their word” (i.e., us)—that His disciples would have a unity, a oneness that would, in and of itself, both declare the deity of Christ as God’s Son, and the love God has for all believers in His Son.

That is, our unity—our love for and devotion to, our grace and longsuffering with each other—is a witness to the unsaved world that what we are and have from Christ is real, and substantial. Not just the Corinthian church, but far too many churches today have forgotten this prayer of Jesus. They have forgotten that their Savior wants them to be *one*. To love each other, to support each other, *share* with each other, and pray for each other—and, in the context of our passage, *eat* with each other.

**Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-34.**

The theme of the last two paragraphs of this chapter is “judgment.” Lifting out just the operative words, note,

v27: guilty of

v28: examine himself

v29: judgment to himself, judge the body rightly

v31: if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged

v32: when we are judged, we are disciplined, so that we will not be condemned

v34: come together for judgment

**v27-28**

*Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of [sinning against<sup>nivs, csb</sup>] 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.*

In many respects we are swimming upstream as we endeavor to digest this passage. The reason for this is that, as we know well, this passage is recited in most congregations every time the ordinance of Communion is observed. So we are familiar with the text, but just about every time we hear or read it, it is lifted out of its context. So most of us approach this passage with a perspective on it that has been drummed into us for years. We must then be diligent to understand the text as intended by Paul.

*...in an unworthy manner ... But a man must examine himself*

Let me illustrate from my own practice. Every Sunday morning, early, in my prayer closet as I prepare to approach the throne, I review my behavior of the past week. If I can recall any transgression I failed to confess, and for which the Lord's forgiveness was not pleaded, I address it then. I search for anything in my life that might obstruct or diminish my worship and my teaching later that morning.

On Communion Sundays, with this very verse ringing in my ears, I approach this task with increased diligence and sobriety. I beseech the Lord to throw open every door, every closet, every cabinet in my life and bring to my mind anything I have overlooked that must be confessed before I partake of the bread and the cup. I tremble at the thought that I might participate in this ordinance with some unconfessed or unresolved sin in my life.

Now, even before I read any learned discussion of this paragraph, and v27 in particular, based on study of the previous two paragraphs I was beginning to wonder if perhaps this pre-Communion process so many of us go through is not quite what Paul had in mind. Much of this confusion stems from the original King James translation of the Greek *anaxios* as "worthily," which seems to apply to the *person* doing the eating. You will note that all of our modern translations—even the NKJV—translate this, "in an unworthy manner," which points to *the manner in which it is being eaten*.

There is the difference. We *all* have sin in our lives, and it would be a remarkable person indeed who could remember and confess every fleeting transgression against the righteousness and holiness of our God. I dare say that every one of us approaches Communion with *some* unremembered and thus unconfessed sin lingering in our life. Don't misunderstand what I am saying; it is never wrong to conduct a mental, Spirit-guided inventory of our behavior and thoughts, and to confess any wrong that the Spirit brings to our mind. But is that what Paul is saying here? Gordon Fee writes, "This word ["worthily"] became a dire threat for generations of English-speaking Christians."

This is especially true in the more pietistic sectors of the Protestant tradition. People are "unworthy" if they have any sin in their lives, or have committed sins during the past week. This in turn resulted in reading v28 personally and introspectively, so that the purpose of one's self-examination was to become worthy of the Table, lest one come under judgment. The tragedy of such an interpretation for countless thousands, both in terms of a foreboding of the Table and guilt for perhaps having partaken unworthily, is incalculable—and seems to have missed Paul's point almost altogether.

What, then, was the “unworthy manner” by which many in the Corinthian congregation were partaking of the bread and wine?

### Read 1 Corinthians 11:18-22.

In this verse Paul does not suggest that some in the church were taking the bread and the cup while there was unconfessed sin in their life, but that they were corrupting the very purpose of the rite by their self-absorbed behavior, and callous disposition toward others in the body. In this they were

*guilty of [sinning against<sup>niv, csb</sup>] the body and the blood of the Lord.*

There is a sense in which this behavior was, as the NIVs and CSB insert into the text, “sinning against” the body and blood of the Lord. But here Paul sets up the judicial, legal language that follows. “Liability” is the idea here. To profane the meal as they have been, places them under the same liability as those responsible for Christ’s death. Thus to be “guilty of the body and the blood” means to be liable for His death (Fee). When we so abuse this holy rite, we are as bad as those who tossed dice for the Savior’s clothes at the foot of the cross. We are as bad as those who drove the nails.

So the irony is that instead of approaching the meal with sober gratitude for the salvation we have because of Christ’s sacrifice, we are so profaning the meal that we have made ourselves judicially equal to those who put Him to death.

*But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*

There is indeed a call for self-examination as preamble to the Communion meal, but it has more to do with one’s attitude toward fellow believers at the meal than how current we are on our confessions for sin. We do not test ourselves to determine our worthiness to attend the table; every one of us can easily answer that without any self-appraisal at all: not one of us is worthy in and of himself to be there. The meal itself proclaims the gospel—v26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” Part of living out the good news of salvation in Christ is how we treat our fellow believers. So we “examine” ourselves to determine if we are ready to come under obedience to the gospel the meal proclaims. To fail to do this, as Paul will state, invites God’s judgment upon us.

*For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.*

I must confess that for the last roughly sixty-two years (I walked the aisle in our Baptist Temple at the age of seven) I have not understood what Paul meant by his use of “body” (*soma*), in the phrase “judge the body rightly,” in this verse. I guessed I just chalked it up to some vague imagery, part of the overall Communion mystery.

Sometimes the addition of words to the original text by scholars and editors can be invaluable in understanding what is being said. At other times they can be *obstacles* to that understanding. Either way, in most cases they steer us in a direction of interpretation preferred by those scholars or editors. And if we, as lay believers, are not privy to the underlying Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic, we can wrongly assume those added words *are* in the original text.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 11:27.**

In v27 Paul, the original author, explicitly modifies “bread... and cup” and “body and the blood” with “of the Lord.” Based on that text—as well as their interpretation of the immediate context—several of our common translations add “the Lord’s body” (KJVs) or “the body of the Lord/Christ” (NIVs). In this instance Paul did not write any explicit reference the “the Lord,” but just wrote “body.” Those translations that insert “Lord” or “Christ” still lack clarity; do they refer to Jesus’ physical body, or the bread *representing* that body?

I subscribe to the convincing argument that the overall context insists that we understand “body” in v29 as the church, which is the “body of Christ.” Paul has spent this entire passage, from v17 to the end of the chapter, correcting an abuse of the church during its observance of the Lord’s Supper. When Paul means the “bread... and cup” and “body and the blood” of the Lord, he explicitly states it, as in v27. Here he just says “body” (*soma*). The best evidence for this interpretation, however, is found in Chapter Ten. In the middle of his discussion of idolatry, and the eating of food sacrificed to idols, he injects a brief aside about the Lord’s Supper, where he, again, explicitly states identification of the cup and bread with Christ, but then more obviously (than in 11:29) associates “one body” with the church.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.**

“We who are many are one body.”

That being the case, what does Paul mean by “he...eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly”?

**judge**<sup>nasb</sup>, **discerning**<sup>kjvs,niv2011,esv</sup>, **recognizing**<sup>niv</sup> = *diakrino* = from <G1223> (dia) and <G2919> (krino); **to separate thoroughly** i.e. (literal and reflexive) to withdraw from, or (by implication) oppose; figurative to discriminate (by implication decide), or (reflexive) hesitate :- contend, make (to) differ (-ence), discern, doubt, judge, be partial, stagger, waver; “to distinguish as distinct and different” (Fee).

*Fee*: The Lord’s Supper is not just any meal; it is *the* meal, in which at a common table with *one* loaf and a *common* cup they proclaimed that through the death of Christ they were *one* body, the body of Christ; and therefore they are not just any group of sociologically diverse people who could keep those differences intact at this table. Here they must “discern/recognize as distinct” the one body of Christ, of which they all are parts and in which they all are gifts to one another. For the “well-to-do” to fail to discern the body in this way, especially by abusing those of lesser sociological status, is to incur God’s judgment.

Every time we approach the table of the Lord we are to recall in a deep and profound way the sacrifice Jesus made for our salvation—and our access to His table. We are also to examine ourselves, to discern and understand that the body—the church—is unique in this fallen world. It is not a social club, but a family in which, even with our personal differences, we are all one. And we are to treat each other as such. No one in the church, save for its Head, is better than anyone else. And at no other time is that so important as when we gather around the table for the Lord’s Supper.