

Prayers

To God

Ask the Lord to give you patience. In a fast moving world we may find it hard to exercise this virtue, but much is won by being patient, and the Lord can speak quickly to one who is waiting for the moment ...

For myself

Theme - 'standing tall'

Pray for the courage to face some of those things you have been putting off for too long. The Lord will lead you to the answers to your problems.

For others

Lord God Almighty, bless our fallen world; bless it with Your love. Where the poor have not been fed, bless us with a conscience to share our food; where there are children who have not been cared for, bless us with a renewal of this work; where love has not been shown in our fellowship, bless us with a desire to live by the light of Your love and grace. Change us we pray; thanks be to God! AMEN

Meditation

Do not bear your pain alone

Let Christ the healer lead you on

And bring you to His peace and light again

Do not foster un-forgiveness

Let Him who loved the ones who killed Him

Show you how forgiveness works to free the soul

Do not be quick to blame

Let the One who would not cast a stone

Reveal to you the only power that conquers all

Do not be dragged down by sin

Let the Holy Spirit stir your senses now

To spot the traps that Satan sets around you

Do not forget your Saviour

Give Him total freedom in your soul

To challenge, heal, then mould and change you

Yes ... to turn salvation into real, exciting life!

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

¹⁷ In giving you these next instructions, however, I cannot praise you, because your meetings do more harm than good! ¹⁸ To begin with, I hear that when you gather together as a church, there are divisions among you. Now I believe this part of what you say, ¹⁹ for there are bound to be factions among you so that the truth might stand out! ²⁰ So when you gather together, you have no intention of eating the 'Lord's Supper', ²¹ for when the time comes, each of you eats your own meal! Moreover, one goes hungry and another gets drunk! ²² What! Do you not have homes in which to eat and drink? Why do you have such little regard for the church of God that you are willing to humiliate the poor? What then shall I say? Do I approve? Certainly not!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which He was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said,

'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me.'

²⁵ In the same way, He also took the cup, after the meal, saying,

'This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in memory of me.'

²⁶ For whenever you eat the bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until He comes.

²⁷ For this reason, those who eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord inappropriately sin against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ So, examine yourselves, and then eat of the bread and drink of the cup in this same manner, ²⁹ for those who eat and drink pass judgement on themselves if they do this without discerning the body. ³⁰ This is reason why many of you are weak and ill, and a significant number of you have died. ³¹ Now if we have discerned this ourselves, then we might not come under judgment; ³² and when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that judgement will not be passed on us together with the world.

³³ So then, fellow believers, when you come together to eat, wait expectantly for one another. ³⁴ If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you meet together it will not lead to condemnation. I will give instructions about the other things when I come.

Review

This is an extraordinary passage! Most of us know part of it very well, because it is read at most communion services; I am of course referring to verses 23 to 26, known universally as the 'words of institution'. They are spoken by church leaders immediately prior to the breaking of bread and sharing of wine at the 'Lord's Supper' (also referred to as 'communion', or 'eucharist', or 'mass').

What kind of meal was the Lord's Supper in Paul's day?

It will not have escaped your notice, however, that Paul says these words (11:23-26) not merely to give Christians of later generations some liturgical words. This is all part of a substantial passage about the Lord's Supper with its own distinct message, beginning at verse 17 and continuing to the end of the chapter (11:34). Reading the whole passage, Paul is obviously concerned. The 'Lord's Supper' at the church in Corinth had become more like what we might call a 'bring and share' meal, and it was complicated by the fact that the rich and the poor had become so divided, the meal was not shared by everyone; those who had little were left in need. Christian fellowship at Corinth had therefore been corrupted and the evidence of this was now bad practice and bad feelings at the Lord's table.

All this is easy for us to spot within the text, and we quickly absolve ourselves of any similar guilt because our own communion services are very different! When we celebrate the 'Lord's Supper' today we share much reduced proportions which would never meet the needs of the poor (see 11:21,22). Most Christians today see communion as of symbolic and spiritual significance, focussed on what Paul says here in verses 23-26, supplemented by the records of the Last Supper in Matthew (26:17-30), Mark (14:12-26) and Luke (22:7-38), and in John's description of Jesus washing the disciple's feet (John 13-17). But have we lost something important about the meaning of this meal by making sure that small portions mean it cannot feed the poor?

Who is worthy to come to the Lord's table?

This is not all. Preachers sometimes turn our attention to Paul's stern advice (11:27-32) following the 'words of institution'. He describes the sin of taking part in the Lord's Supper in an 'inappropriate' manner (11:27), urging those taking part to 'examine yourselves' (11:28) and to 'discern the body' (11:29). This is given extra emphasis when Paul says that ignorance of this can lead to illness and death (11:30)! How extraordinary! These verses have troubled many, especially the sick, who could wonder what they have done wrong at communion to deserve their sickness, and they wonder whether they are worthy to attend communion! Most churches challenge everyone to examine themselves before receiving the bread and wine, but this runs the risk of some concluding they are not 'good enough'. Even if a Christian leader announces Christ's forgiveness for all who come in faith, some still struggle with a sense of unworthiness. We will return to this passage later.

The words of Institution

Verses 23-26, however, lie at the heart of this passage, and Paul is very serious in presenting them. For him, they are a direct instruction of the Lord Jesus; part of the personal revelation he received, perhaps after his 'Damascus Road' experience and certainly before the beginning of his ministry (Gal 1:12). He was called to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 15:12) the Gospel of salvation found in 'Christ crucified' (1:23, 2:2 etc). But he also baptised people (Col 2:12, Romans 6 etc.) and shared fellowship with the faithful at the 'Lord's Supper' (11:23-26). Both these 'sacraments', as we now call them, are strongly connected with the Gospel, and in particular the death and resurrection of Jesus. Undoubtedly, it lies at the heart of our faith.

Here, Paul describes how Jesus knowingly sacrificed His life for everyone; allowing His 'body' to be 'broken' (11:23,24) so we may find salvation and peace with God (Rom 5:1f.). He describes this sacrifice as the offering of Jesus 'blood', shed 'for you', and urges that we remember Jesus' death with these words and in this meal 'until He comes' (11:26). Here is the mystery of God's grace by which we are saved, and before which we can only kneel or bow down in worship; by this and this alone we are made righteous before God!

The meaning of these words

Surely no less than a whole book can uncover the meaning of all this. This is the new 'Passover' meal, a new 'covenant' for God's people, replacing the old 'Passover' meal celebrating the redemptive acts of God in the salvation of those who are faithfully obedient to Him. They speak uncompromisingly of eating Jesus' body and drinking His blood, but in no stronger terms than did Jesus Himself (see John 6:52-71). We are not sure whether this language is metaphor, simile, literal truth, or powerful example, and to this day, the church of God is divided over this. Yet perhaps it is all true, and every way we look at this sacrament conveys God's truth, and this is the power of the sacrament. It means so much to all who receive it.

But there is a limit to what I can say here, and I must ask you to treat this great text like any other. Let it speak to you according to God's will for your life; for it will mean one thing most powerfully at one time, and then at another time it will say something else. Here are the mysteries of God's grace through which God's glorious love and power are revealed in everyday life, and as we receive the gift of this meal it will become a spiritual treasure store for our souls, not controlled by us, but controlled by God.

Warnings about discerning the body.

It is entirely right that Paul, having warned the Corinthians about proper respect for the Lord's Supper, should now add a warning, telling them to 'examine themselves' before sharing the meal. More than that, they should take part in the meal in 'the same manner' (11:28). The challenge therefore is to sustain the spirit of self examination throughout the sacrament, so when Paul adds, 'those who eat and drink pass judgement on themselves if they do this without discerning the body' (11:29), we should realise that 'do this' here refers to self examination. Paul's message throughout is that in self examination during communion, God's people should 'discern the body', that is, they should have a spirit of peace and love towards the rest of the 'body', which is the church. The peace we share before communion should be no formal 'sign', but the truth about our fellowship with the church as a whole, otherwise our receiving the sacrament is a sham.

Dire warnings

Paul is concerned. Some in the congregation at Corinth have died and he believes that there is a reason. His warning (11:30-32) directly links sickness and death to the bad behaviour of some at the Lord's table. It is a tough judgement. So if we do not treat the sacrament properly will we then suffer the same fates?

These are difficult verses, but we must be clear; it was not Paul's intent to set out a doctrine whereby people who are not 'spiritually right' when receiving communion will subsequently suffer and perhaps die, or that we might conclude this failure to be the reason for someone's death! Such a dire doctrine would need support

from elsewhere in Scripture, and this cannot be found. Instead, we must read this passage as a warning about judgement (see 11:31,32). The passage says clearly that we bear responsibility for own behaviour towards others within the assembly of the 'body of Christ'. We have a duty to treat others justly and with charity, and be at peace with them; and if we will not, then we come under judgement ourselves.

So Paul urges God's people to celebrate the 'Lord's Supper' in remembrance of the Lord, and in a true spirit of fellowship. We must certainly not come before the Lord with factions in the church or indeed social issues about eating meat, or any of the other issues Paul has urged the church to sort out before God. Jesus must be at the heart of communion, and the heart of church life, without exception!

Discipleship

Application

The meaning of the Lord's Supper for us

God's people should celebrate together the saving acts of God in a way that is both consistent with Jesus' own words and deeds, and with how other Christians have shared this through the ages. The mystery of sharing Jesus' body and blood will never be rationalised into human simplicity; it is the saving grace of God at work in the soul, no less; it cannot be refined. Despite the warnings in the latter part of this text, there is no need for anyone to fear before the grace of God, when they '*come together to eat, and wait expectantly for one another ...*' (11:33)

But we are warned that the 'Lord's Supper' is no private meal for spiritual renewal (11:18,29). The entire passage here speaks of it as a communal meal in which we must '*discern the body*' (11:29). Surely this means that we must have our eyes and ears attuned to the needs of all around us as we share the meal. Second, the Lord's Supper is perhaps not best shared as mere symbolism or with over elaborate ceremony. We are touching a mystery as we eat of Christ's 'body' and share His 'blood', and to either over simplify it or to add layers of human ritual to these truths of God's grace runs the danger of unhelpful distraction.

Examine ... discern ...

Undoubtedly, the latter verses of this passage talk to us about the discipline by which we approach the Lord's table for communion. It also warns that if Christian people ignore the means of grace provided for them they may suffer. Now suffering is a complex matter and it is a feature of human life whether we like it or not. But we must be careful. Paul's words sound scary but surely have spiritual logic. If we will not discern the truths of God's work and grace among us as done by Christ and remembered in this meal, then those who claim faith perhaps deny within themselves the very means of grace by which they are blessed of God. It is a tough point, but a proper warning; we must not play about with our faith.

Ideas for what to do

- *Find out what you can about the other main Christian denominations in your country, and how they celebrate the Lord's Supper. The internet can be a great source of information, but it can also lead us astray. Be discerning.*
- *Talk to others in your own church about what the Lord's Supper means to them.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach you about what it means to share the Lord's Supper today?*
2. *Do we accept each other as parts of the body of Christ today, or 'discern the body'?*
3. *How do people disrespect the sacrifice of Christ today? What can be done to stop this?*

Final Prayer

Bless me I pray, Lord God; and may I then be a blessing to others. Enable me to be consistent in my faith for the sake of those who depend on me, and help me to be focussed on You, the source of all good things. Thank You, Lord God, for the blessings You give me and all humanity through Jesus Christ our Lord. **AMEN**