

Taking Communion Properly

A Study of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Characteristic of Completeness: Worship

Big Idea: Communion is about remembrance and resemblance.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 118:22-23; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 26:26-28, 53; Acts 4:11-12;

Romans 8:1 Revelation 21:3-7

Introduction:

1. My family didn't go to church when I was growing up. I didn't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and I didn't start going to church until I was in college. In fact, I was the first in my family to trust Christ as my Savior, so I don't really have a religious heritage that was passed down to me.

When I started going to church, everything was new to me, including something called communion—you know, it's when they pass out the crackers and juice and talk about the body and the blood and other stuff related to Christ being crucified. At first, I learned about communion by observing. Here's what I observed:

- a. First, they did it the first Sunday of every month. I didn't really know why, but that's what they did.
- b. And, I learned that there are various code words they used. Sometimes they called it, "communion." Sometimes they called it, "The Lord's Supper." Sometimes they called it, "coming to the table," or "the breaking of bread," or "the giving of thanks," or "the cup of blessing," or "the Eucharist." They usually called it communion. I didn't really know why.
- c. And people got real serious and real quiet during communion. Now this made some sense to me because communion seemed to be tied to Christ's crucifixion, and remembering somebody's suffering and death is pretty serious business.
- d. But over time I picked up another clue as to why people were so serious during communion. I remember reading or hearing about the need to examine ourselves during communion, based on some unsettling verses in ► 1 Corinthians 11 that said,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:27 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. 28 But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. 30 For this reason many among you

are weak and sick, and a number sleep.

Now, certain words here got my attention and concerned me—words like, ► “unworthy,” and ► “guilty,” and ► “judgment,” and ► “weak,” and ► “sick.” I added the word, ► “sleep” to the list of words that concerned me when a preacher explained that this was a nice way of saying that some people actually died because they were messing up communion.

- e. I thought to myself, “It would be good to find out about ► taking communion properly. It would be good to, once and for all, find out what’s up with communion so I can make sure I get it right. What does it all mean? And when, where, why, and how do we do it, according to the Bible?”
2. These are some of the issues I’d like to address this morning. We’re going to observe communion today, and it’s been awhile since I explained communion fully, so I’m interrupting our study of Matthew reflect on communion. Communion is really a part of worship, so our ► Characteristic of Completeness in Christ for the week is worship. And the biblical text we’re going to study is ► 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

The apostle Paul was inspired by God to write this passage to the believers in the Corinthian church because they were messing up communion big time. In Verses 17-22 Paul explains how the Corinthians are messing things up. Then in Verses 23-34, he explains how they can straighten things out. ► Let’s take Paul’s argument in the order in which he presents it by looking first at how the Corinthians are messing up. I want to show you how the Corinthians have two basic problems in taking communion: ► wrong relationships and wrong motives. Let me show you as we work our way through the text.

- a. In ► Verse 17 Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:17 But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.

This means that Paul is not real happy about what’s going on at the Corinthian communion because somehow it’s doing more harm than good.

- b. In ► Verse 18 Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:18 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.

Here’s the first clue about wrong relationships. There are divisions among them. There’s ► disunity. Paul’s primary concern is about some kind of disunity that is evident when they get together as a church body.

c. In ► Verse 19 Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:19 For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

This appears to be an ironic digression. I think Paul is saying that those who are causing or contributing to the divisions are inadvertently but surely creating another kind of division or faction that they need to be concerned about. It's a division between themselves—they who are *not* approved by God in their divisive ways—and others, who are in contrast approved for their attempt to preserve unity.

d. In ► Verse 20 Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:20 Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper,

This is the first clue about wrong motives. There is ► hypocrisy. They were saying that they were getting together as a church for the purpose of observing the Lord's Supper, but that was not their real motive. Their words did not match their hearts.

This is the only place in the Bible where communion is called the Lord's Supper. In fact, the Bible really doesn't really give us just one clear name to call this ordinance. So, it's okay to call it communion or the Lord's Supper or whatever. I suspect the term, "communion" is used because the King James Version of 1 Corinthians 10:16 says this ordinance is our "communion," that is, our sharing, our participation, our identification with the body and blood of Christ. I think Paul uses the term, "the Lord's Supper" here in our text to emphasize to the Corinthians that communion is the Lord's, not theirs. You see, they came with ► selfish motives, not godly motives. And, their selfishness spills over into the next verse.

e. In ► Verse 21 Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:21 for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.

Now, to fully appreciate what Paul is saying here, we need to understand the communion custom of that day. Communion was taken in connection with a full-course meal. The idea was that everybody would eat the meal together and enjoy one another's company. Then communion would be observed.

Nothing wrong with that custom. But this good custom had evolved into a ►

prejudiced, gluttonous, self-indulgent party for the rich. Apparently, the wealthier members of the church turned it into a bring-your-own-feast and bring-your-own-wine banquet that distinguished the “haves” and the “have nots.” The wealthier members—the “haves”—sat in one place with plenty, while the “have nots” sat in another place with nothing. So when communion rolled around, one at the poor table was hungry and another at the rich table was gluttoned and drunk.

f. In ► Verse 22 Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:22 What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? [That is to say, if you want to have a private party, do it at home!] Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? [That is to say, your greed shames the poor and despises the church!] What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.

3. Paul is worked up about the situation in Corinth because they were messing up communion big time with wrong relationships and wrong motives.

Now, ► let’s turn to Paul’s direction on how to straighten things out. According to Paul, the right way to take communion is with two important perspectives in mind. We need to think about two things when we take communion. The ► cross is a handy visual aid to remind ourselves of the two things because there is one vertical perspective and one horizontal perspective.

I. Paul describes the first thing we need to think about in Verses 23-26 of our text. It’s the vertical perspective because it relates to God. The key word associated with this perspective is ► remembrance. When we take communion we are supposed to remember something about God.

What are we supposed to remember about God? Some of you are probably thinking that we are supposed to remember the death of Jesus. That’s correct. But it’s incomplete. Communion goes deeper than that. Communion commemorates ► the grace of God to us. Communion helps us remember how God has given us wonderful things of which we are unworthy, indescribable gifts that we didn’t earn, fantastic favor that is unmerited. That’s grace—God giving us great things we don’t deserve.

A. Paul gives us a glimpse of various facets of God’s grace, beginning in ► Verse 23. He says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:23 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;

Paul is saying that the Lord Jesus Himself is the source of communion. The Lord instituted it at the Last Supper. It is the Lord who commands us to observe it; it's not just a man-made religious tradition.

And I want you to notice in particular *when* Jesus instituted communion. It was “in the night in which He was betrayed.” Well, when was that? It was the time of the Jewish Passover. In fact, Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples at the Last Supper. I want you to notice the connection between the Passover meal and communion. It's a connection which points to a wonderful truth: God's grace to us in Jesus is demonstrated throughout ► history. Jesus is the hinge of history. Everything B.C. points ahead to Jesus. Everything A.D. looks back on Jesus. And when we personalize this truth, it enlarges our view of the grace of God. You see, this means that God has had you in mind forever. You. Forever. And God's grace to you has been planned forever. The crucifixion of Jesus was not God's last ditch effort to save a world that had somehow eluded His control. The crucifixion is not God's Hail-Mary pass that He hopes somebody will catch in the end zone. God had this grace in mind from eternity past. A history of grace. For you. Forever. Let me give you a glimpse.

The Passover meal commemorated a time many hundreds of years before when God saved the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. In order to get the Egyptians to let the Israelites go, God sent an angel to destroy the first-born of every family in Egypt. Before He did, He instructed the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb and to take the blood of the lamb and smear it on their doorposts so that the destroying angel would pass over them and they would be saved. The people were covered—they were saved—by the blood of the lamb. The Passover points ahead to Jesus Christ, the ultimate Lamb of God who saves us by His blood.

As part of the traditional Jewish Passover meal, participants would sing together the *Hallel* which includes Psalms 113-118. So, on the night before Jesus was crucified, the disciples would have perhaps sung these words written many hundreds of years before Christ in ► Psalm 118:22-23:

^{NAU} Psalm 118:22 The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner stone. 23 This is the Lord's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes.

The disciples probably didn't realize it, but the corner stone of Psalm 118 is a prophetic picture of Jesus as the Corner Stone who was to be rejected and crucified. After the crucifixion, the apostle Peter points this out in ► Acts 4:11-12 by saying of Jesus,

^{NAU} Acts 4:11 “He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS**, *but* **WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone**. 12 And there is salvation in no one else . . .”

So you see, the grace of God shown to you in Jesus Christ has been on God's mind

forever, throughout history. That's one aspect of God's grace to remember in taking communion.

B. Another aspect of God's grace comes in ► Verse 24 where Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:24 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."

The bread eaten at communion represents Christ's body. In turn, Christ's body represents the grace of God as seen through His ► sacrifice. We are to remember the sacrifice of His body. Jesus Christ, the Son of God died a slow, torturous, humiliating death.

And, two little words in Verse 24 make all the difference: ► "for you." He was crucified *for you*. That's the payment for sin Jesus paid *for you*. Every one of us has run up a sinful spiritual debt we cannot pay. Every one of us faces spiritual bankruptcy because we've turned our backs on God. Every one of us deserves to be the one crucified for the darkness in our own hearts. But Jesus steps into history and says, "I'll pay. I'll pay *for you*."

The remarkable grace in this sacrifice is that Jesus chose to do it. Much of the world looks at Jesus and says, "Poor guy. He was a helpless victim." Nothing could be further from the truth. When Jesus was apprehended by a cohort of Romans soldiers to be taken to His trial and crucifixion, Peter drew his sword to defend Jesus who he saw as a helpless, unarmed victim. Jesus corrected him as recorded in ► Matthew 26:53:

^{NAU} Matthew 26:53 "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

A full Roman legion had 6,100 foot soldiers and 726 horsemen (Robertson). I did the math and discovered that Jesus is saying that He could've called down over 80,000 angels to His aid at any moment to stop this whole crucifixion deal. But He didn't. He didn't because He wanted to pay *for you*. We are to remember that amazing grace.

C. Paul continues in ► Verse 25.

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:25 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."

The juice we drink at communion represents Christ's blood shed on the cross. In turn, Christ's blood represents ► forgiveness. Jesus speaks of "the new covenant in My blood." What new covenant? It's a deal foretold many hundreds of years before by the prophet Jeremiah. ► Jeremiah 31, beginning in Verse 31 says,

^{NAU} Jeremiah 31:31 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant . . . 34 . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

The blood of Jesus washes away our sin. It seals the deal for our forgiveness. And now, our only part in the deal is to accept it. To believe. To trust that Jesus Christ died and rose again to be our Savior.

We need to remember the grace of God as shown through forgiveness when we come to the Lord’s Supper.

D. Paul continues in ► Verse 26.

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.

The Bible doesn’t really specify how often we’re to take communion. We are to take it as often as we need to remember. At Moon Valley, we usually do it monthly because that seems often enough to remember, but not so often that it becomes rote. And we usually do it on the first Sunday of the month because it’s easy for us to remember when it’s coming.

And another aspect of God’s grace we need to remember is ► victory—a victory we remember by “proclaiming the Lord’s death until He comes.” For believers this life can be hard, but we have the assurance that in the end we win. Victory is ours because the Lord is coming back to take us to His heavenly home. A glimpse of our future as believers is provided in Revelation 21. Just listen.

NLT Revelation 21:3 I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. 4 He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.” 5 And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making all things new!” And then he said to me, “Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.” 6 And he also said, “It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give the springs of the water of life without charge! 7 All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.”

That’s amazing grace. We don’t deserve this, but God offers it to us as a gift—“springs of the water of life without charge.” That’s what we’re to remember in taking communion. The grace of God to us.

II. Now, Paul describes the ► second big thing we need to think about in Verses 27-34 of our text. It's the horizontal perspective because it relates to other people. The key word here is ► resemblance. And, the key question we must ask ourselves as we take communion is this: Do we increasingly resemble Jesus? Are we increasingly Christ-like toward others? And, in particular, does the grace of God shown *to us* ► show *through* us, particularly to others in the church? This is important because Paul is saying that if the Grace of God shown to you doesn't show through you, then you're taking communion improperly. Let's walk through Paul's argument.

A. In ► Verse 27, Paul says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:27 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.

1. Now, this immediately raises a couple of questions, the first of which is this: How does a person take communion in an unworthy manner? Well, we know that Paul thinks the Corinthians were taking communion in an unworthy manner. Remember they had ► wrong relationships with others in the church inasmuch as there was disunity and prejudice. And, remember they had wrong motives inasmuch as there was hypocrisy and selfishness.

I want you to notice that the problems in the Corinthian church are generally a reflection of the reality that the grace of God shown to them was not showing through them. They were ungracious toward one another. The relationships were wrong because they lacked grace. The rich were not embracing the poor as God's grace demands; they were shaming them by their disunity and prejudice. The motives were wrong because they lacked grace. The people were not selflessly serving the needy as God's grace demands; they were using religion as a hypocritical excuse to selfishly serve themselves.

Paul is saying that a community saved by grace ought to be a community that lives by grace. And an ordinance that proclaims God's grace should not be an occasion that shames God's grace.

The lesson for us is this: In taking communion, we need to make sure that the grace of God shown to us ► shows through us. It means having ► right relationships characterized not by disunity and prejudice, but by unity and acceptance. It means having ► right motives characterized not by hypocrisy and selfishness, but by integrity and selflessness.

It doesn't mean we have to be perfect. Indeed a part of God's grace showing through us is acknowledging that we are unworthy recipients of God's grace and no better than anyone else. It does mean that it's wrong to celebrate God's grace when we show no evidence of it in our lives. It's wrong because

our own lack of grace proves that we don't think much of God's grace.

2. Another question that is raised concerning Verse 27 is this: If I were to take communion in an worthy manner, how would I be "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord"? Does that mean that I'd go straight to hell with no forgiveness? No, it doesn't. For the believer it cannot mean this because Romans 8:1 says,

^{NAU} Romans 8:1 There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

I think Paul is simply saying here that when we take communion in an unworthy manner we demonstrate the very sins and guilt that put Christ on the cross. At communion, God's grace is to be on display, not our garbage.

- B. Paul continues in ► Verse 28 by saying,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:28 But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Paul is calling us to examine ourselves as we come to communion. That means we are to evaluate ourselves. And that's why people sometimes get real serious. We are to ask ourselves some hard questions. Do I resemble Jesus? Am I Christ-like toward others? And, in particular, does the grace of God shown *to* me show *through* me, particularly to others in the church? Are my relationships right? Are my motives right?

If the answer to any of these question is "no," then I need to humbly confess this to God before taking communion. I need to get right with God. And I can do that because God is gracious. I can do that because Christ's blood washes away my sin.

- C. Paul continues in ► Verse 29 by saying,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:29 For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.

Paul is saying that if we do not humbly examine ourselves before God and confess our sins before taking communion, we are opening ourselves up to the discipline of God. Not condemnation, discipline—the discipline of a father toward his child.

- D. Paul continues in ► Verse 30 by saying,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:30 For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.

The discipline of the Lord upon the Corinthians included weakness, sickness, and in

some cases, death. “Sleep” is a euphemism for death here. If the grace shown to us does not show through us, we have reason to expect that our heavenly Father may take us to the woodshed for some correction. As believers, we don’t lose our salvation. We’re still going to be with the Lord. We just might get there a little sooner if we persist in handling God’s grace in an unworthy manner.

E. Paul continues in ► Verse 31-32 by saying,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:31 But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

We can avoid God’s discipline if we’ll just examine ourselves and get right with God before communion. And, even if we are disciplined, we have the assurance that we are not condemned along with those who don’t know Christ as their Savior.

F. Paul continues in ► Verse 33 by saying,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:33 So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

Paul is mentioning a very tangible way that the Corinthians can show God’s grace through them. They can wait for one another when it comes to the eating and drinking. They can do it together in one group at one designated time as a demonstration of the unity and right relationships of grace. We’re waiting right now.

G. Paul concludes in ► Verse 34 by saying,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:34 If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come.

Conclusion:

A. ► Paul has given us a lot to consider concerning communion. But, it really boils down to ► two things—two things you can recall by visualizing the two parts of the cross.

1. First, ► there is remembrance. Remembering God’s grace to us.
2. Second, ► there is resemblance. Examining God’s grace through us.

Put the two together, and the big idea of my message is simply ► this: Communion is about remembrance and resemblance. Vertical and horizontal. Remembering grace and resembling grace.

- B. Well, I've taken my turn to try to explain how to take communion properly, now it's your turn to do it.
1. We have a number of stations set up around the room where we have the bread and the juice.
 2. If you'd like to take communion, you simply walk up to one of the stations, eat a little piece of bread and drink a little cup of juice. There is no special prayer or posture or procedure. And, it doesn't really matter what order you take the elements.
 3. You can come up individually or as a couple or as a family. You can serve yourself or you can serve one another if you choose. We're focusing on remembrance and resemblance here, not procedures.
 4. The remainder of the service is dedicated to taking communion, so you have some time. In a moment, we're going to do some music. You are free to come up at any time during the rest of the service. So, let's take some time to reflect on the grace of God to us and through us. Remembrance and resemblance.
 5. If, in the course of your reflection, you find that you are simply not right with God or you're just not ready to take communion, it's okay to just sit. You need not take communion. There will be another time.
 6. I'm going to pray. Then, as you're ready, you come. Let's celebrate God's grace together.