

*Christ and Community: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34*

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Sunday, February 9, 2014

From time to time I like to break away from the sermon series we're in to deal with some particular theme that has been on my mind and heart. This morning is going to be one of those sermons. Last week we finished Romans 10. Next Sunday we'll pick up at the beginning of Romans 11. For a while now I've been wanting to remind us of our need for Christian community and our responsibility to live out the Christian life with one another. I also knew that I would be attending a pastor's conference in Minneapolis, which I did this past week. And I wanted to be able to share some things from the teaching there. The theme of the conference was union with Christ, and there was some very encouraging teaching that we heard there.

These two things, union with Christ and Christian community, are integrally related. And that's what I'd like us to meditate on together this morning. So this will be a different kind of sermon, because we won't be examining one text in detail. Rather, I'll be pointing out several passages that relate to these themes of union with Christ and Christian community.

Here are the three headings I'll use, and hopefully you can see that these are, indeed, closely related themes. First, unity with Christ. Second, unity with one another. Third, our meal of unity (which is the Lord's Supper). So another way to think of this sermon is that it's an extended introduction to the Lord's Supper, which we'll celebrate together following the sermon. An important aspect of the Lord's Supper is that it's a meal we partake of *together*, as brothers and sisters in Christ. So that's where this sermon is leading. We're going to talk a bit about our unity with Christ. And what follows is our unity with one another. And one very tangible way that we get to practice our unity on a regular basis is by celebrating this meal together.

### **Unity with Christ**

To be united to Christ is one way of speaking about what it means to be a Christian. We learned in Romans 5 the sad news that everyone is born into this world united to Adam. That is our condition as members of the fallen human race. We are in Adam. We are united to him such that his sin in the garden counts against us as well. But that's just the bad news. The good news is that a second Adam came who succeeded where Adam failed. Jesus

Christ, the second Adam, never sinned. He is perfectly righteous. And those who are united to Him by faith will be counted righteous in Him.

Romans 6 speaks further of our union with Christ. We have the picture there of being baptized into Christ Jesus. We're going to be thinking about the Lord's Supper in a moment—how that meal is an identification with Christ and with one another. The Lord's Supper is an ongoing ordinance which we practice throughout the Christian life. Baptism is the ordinance that an individual participates in at the beginning of the Christian life. It is a vivid identification with Christ, in His death and resurrection. Going under the water is a picture of us dying with Christ. And coming up out of the water is a picture of us rising with Christ. We are raised to walk in newness of life. So one of the important implications of union with Christ is that we are new creatures. We have a new life in Christ. We are no longer who we once were. We are no longer in complete bondage to sin. Rather, we have Christ as our Master now, and we have a delight in Him that motivates us to follow His loving commands for us.

So we have in baptism a picture of our union with Christ. Another biblical picture of union with Christ is the marriage of a husband and wife. Paul writes about this in Ephesians 5. Husbands are to be sacrificial leaders like Christ is a sacrificial leader. And wives are to respect and support and follow their husband like the church respects and supports and follows Christ. In that context Paul quotes from Genesis 2:24, which says that “a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” Paul then comments on that passage by saying, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” So the union of husband and wife is a reflection of the spiritual reality of the church's union with Christ. He has made us His own. He has covenanted to love us and be faithful to us, not just for a lifetime (as in human marriage), but for eternity.

One more picture I'll call our attention to briefly is the well-known passage in John 15 where Jesus says to His disciples, *“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”* (John 15:4–5, ESV)

These are pointers to the great reality of union with Christ. He is the vine, and we receive our sustenance, our life, from Him. We can do nothing apart from Him. And that should be a warning

to anyone who is NOT in Christ. Your life will amount to nothing if you are not united to Christ by faith. Your labors will all be in vain, and your eternity will be one of anguish and punishment. Trust in Christ, who is merciful to receive to Himself sinful men and women such as ourselves. He forgives. He sustains. He is our life.

### **Unity with One Another**

What I want to talk about next is the community aspect of our union with Christ. When a person is drawn into a relationship with Jesus Christ, that person is drawn into a family. I hope you see this as a beautiful and wonderful thing.

The Christian life is not to be lived alone. God has designed for us to be in community with one another. He has designed for us to have fellowship with each other. And this is both for God's glory and for our good. Our God is a Triune God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have enjoyed the fellowship of one another for all eternity, and so it's only fitting that God would command us to gather together in local bodies of believers and enjoy fellowship with one another.

This is also glorifying to God because He gathers us from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, from different places, and He brings us together in this place to show how powerful the Gospel is. From the world's perspective, we might appear to have very little in common. And so the question arises, Why do you guys love each other the way that you do? Why does it seem like you're family? Why do you spend so much time together and help each other out? And the answer is: because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the reason we're together. Jesus died to forgive our sins, and God has called us to Himself and forgiven us, we are new creatures in Christ, we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we are truly family in a way that's even deeper and longer-lasting than blood relatives. Thus, God is glorified in our fellowship.

What I want to spend more time talking about now is how this is a benefit to us. God is so good to command us to hang together in a local body of believers. We need this. I hope you can see that you need this. Every one of us needs this. Anyone who thinks they don't need the fellowship and accountability of a local church is both arrogant and foolish. We are so prone to wander, and therefore we need people in our lives who know us well and love us deeply and are willing to say the difficult things to us when needed. We need the structure of a church where there are elders who shepherd the flock and members who are willing to

walk through the difficult steps of church discipline when that's necessary.

There are to be no lone-ranger Christians. The Bible doesn't have a category for that. There are so many people who claim to be Christians, and yet don't see any need to be committed to a body of believers. They feel that they can wander from church to church or just worship God individually, and they don't seem to realize what they're missing of how God has commanded us to live out the Christian life.

We need the local church. We need to gather together in times of corporate worship and time in the Word. And we need to know each other well enough to really care for each other and hold one another accountable in the fight of faith.

Let me read for you several of the "one another" commands of the New Testament. We're commanded to be involved in each other's lives, and not just in a superficial way.

Be at peace with one another. (Mark 9:50)

Love one another. (John 13:34)

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (Romans 12:10)

Live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:16)

Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)

Care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:25)

Through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13)

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32)

Encourage one another and build one another up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another. (James 5:16)

Love one another earnestly from a pure heart. (1 Peter 1:22)

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. (1 Peter 4:9)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11)

Are you getting the point? As believers we are not merely called to living out a life of faith personally and individually. We are called to live out a life of faith together with one another. We are to love one another, encourage one another, confess our sins to one another and pray for one another. Another way that this is glorifying to God and edifying to us is that it combats pride and fosters humility. Each one of us needs to acknowledge that we cannot make it on our own. None of us is strong enough spiritually to go off on our own and fight the fight of faith. That is a recipe for disaster. The world, the flesh and the devil will wage war against us, and we need the fellowship of other believers in order to withstand those attacks.

Let me say to you that some of you are exhibiting great pride in your refusal to open up and share your life with other believers. You may show up at church on Sunday mornings, you may know a lot of stuff about the Bible and theology, but if you are not willing to confess your sins and share your struggles and admit your failures and ask others to pray for you, then you are effectively saying, “I’m strong enough on my own. I don’t need you guys.”

You might respond to that and say, It’s not pride, it’s fear. I’m afraid of what others will think of me if I tell them what I’m really struggling with. If I tell them that I feel like a failure as a parent, or that my marriage is in shambles, or that I’m addicted to pornography, or that I’m tempted with same-sex attraction, or that I don’t read my Bible or pray, or that I’ve been deceptive—what will they think of me then, if I confess the deep dark secrets of my life? Maybe it’s a mixture of pride and fear that is holding you back from real Christian community. We have to have the humility and the courage to overcome the fear of what others will think, and we need to venture out into that vulnerable but freeing life of being honest and open. And I would say to us as well that when folks do confess these kinds of things, it’s an opportunity to speak the truth *in love*. It’s not a time to be condemning and judgmental. Nor is it a time to act like you know it all and have your life all put together and so you can give just the right advice.

No, it's a time to humbly come alongside your brother or sister in prayer and encouragement as a fellow struggler. Not that we all have the identical struggles, but we are all strugglers. You can follow up by giving the person a call during the week, or asking them at your next meeting, How are things going in that area of your life? I've been praying for you. Are you fighting against those temptations? Are you repenting and looking to Christ? Have you sought forgiveness from those you have hurt?

This is real church life. You may find it pretty comfortable to observe church life from the sidelines. But it's just that. If you're coming to a worship service once a week, but not really connected to the lives of other believers, then you are on the sidelines. You're not really a part of what the church is meant to be.

A very practical encouragement to you as an application point here is to get involved in a small group or Bible study where you are going to have regular opportunities to be together with other believers in this church family, where you will have the chance to share what's going on in your life and where you'll be able to pray for and encourage others. This church has many great options for doing this. There are small groups that meet in various places throughout the region and at various times throughout the week. There are also men's gatherings and women's gatherings. And these are all very important ministries of this church. The elders would like to see everyone here involved in a group like this. So, please, take this seriously. It's wonderful to see each other on Sundays. But we need more time, in smaller settings, to fully live out what God has called us to be for one another.

### **Our Meal of Unity**

The last thing I want to focus on is how the Lord's Supper is a regular opportunity for us to express our unity with one another. This is a meal that we partake of together.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

It's important to notice in this passage that Paul is severely rebuking the church at Corinth. There were some major problems in that fellowship, and some of those problems were especially apparent when they came together for a meal. Paul begins by saying, I do not commend you. When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. In other words, you have messed this up so badly that it would be better for you not to come together at all. In verse 18 he identifies the problem. There are divisions among you. And in verse 21 he describes the nature of the

divisions. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. The divisions he has in mind here, at least one of the divisions, is between the rich and the poor. The church would come together for a meal—they were calling it the Lord’s Supper, but Paul tells them in verse 20 that, in fact, it’s not the Lord’s Supper that you eat because of these sinful divisions—and when they came together the rich would have their nice meal prepared with plenty of food and plenty of wine. And those who were poor in the congregation hardly had anything, maybe nothing at all.

So we see this horrible situation in which brothers and sisters in Christ are coming together, but they are not acting like brothers and sisters in Christ. They’re acting just like the world. They’re taking the same class distinctions that are made in the world, and bringing them into the church fellowship and even to the holy ordinance of the Lord’s Supper.

In James 2 we read, “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” A similar thing was happening in the church at Corinth. The poor were over here with little or nothing to eat, while the rich were feasting and even getting drunk. What a disgrace!

We have to ask ourselves, is this happening in our church in any way? Maybe it’s not as blatant as what was going on in Corinth. But are there any subtle distinctions between groups of people based on financial status or color of skin or education? Are we being partial in any way? As the body of Christ we need to consciously fight against the prejudiced tendencies which are part of our sinful nature. We need to consciously determine to view all of our brothers and sisters in Christ as equals, as fellow believers, fellow heirs of the kingdom. What a beautiful thing this is when people from various backgrounds, various ethnicities, various life situations can be unified around the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

In Paul’s reprimand in 1 Corinthians 11 we see that church unity is a significant facet of the Lord’s Supper. The Corinthian church thought they were celebrating the Lord’s Supper, but they were deceiving themselves. The divisions among them fundamentally contradicted this important element of the meal—church unity.

The divisions in the Corinthian church which Paul describes were based on the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Verse 21, “One goes hungry, another gets drunk.” They weren’t having a pot-luck. They weren’t sharing. The rich brought with them a large meal with plenty of wine to drink, and the poor came in and stood by with a hungry stomach. Then the next verse tells them what to do, in the form of a rhetorical question: “What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?” As he does in more detail at the end of the passage, he’s instructing them to eat their main meal at home and then to come together for their celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The next statement shows how serious their sin was. “Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” They didn’t know it, but their behavior constituted a despising of God’s church. This shows us the seriousness of partiality within the body, and it also shows us the weightiness of this ordinance. It is not to be taken lightly. To eat and drink in an unworthy manner, harboring sinful divisiveness in your heart, is to despise the church of God.

We can each ask ourselves, Is there any way that I might be despising the church of God by the way I treat the Lord’s Supper? Apparently these folks were oblivious to what they were doing. They might have been so used to how things were done in the world, that they didn’t think anything of gorging themselves while the poor folks stood by and watched. They should have realized what they were doing. They should have recognized what a horrible testimony this was and how divisive it was. They were blinded by their sin, and therefore Paul had to deliver this harsh correction.

In verses 23-26 Paul records what Jesus said when He instituted the Lord’s Supper. Paul was writing before any of the four Gospels were written, so this is the first record of these statements that Jesus made on the night He was betrayed. Notice the word “for” at the beginning of verse 23. Paul is citing these words of Jesus as a basis for his rebuke. He cannot commend the Corinthians for their behavior, and this is why—because of what it signifies, because of the weighty truth that it conveys. Jesus said of the bread, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And He said of the cup, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me.”

In verse 26 Paul concludes this paragraph and ties together how Jesus’ words apply to the Corinthians and the issue of church unity. He writes, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” Paul is saying



to the Corinthians, Don't you see what this is about? Don't you see that the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of Jesus' death and an anticipation of His second coming? It's not about filling your stomach! It's about what Jesus has done and will do. The Lord's Supper is such a weighty thing. It is to remind us of the most important realities in the universe. And thus it is an indictment upon any sinful divisions that are present in the church. Jesus died for the church. He died to save His elect from every people group, from rich and poor, from educated and uneducated. And we are to come together in unity to share in this meal and proclaim His death until He comes.

In the previous chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul refers to the bread and the cup: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). When we celebrate the Lord's Supper together it ought to be a time of profound unity around the Gospel. A unity around the truth that Christ died for us, and He rose from the dead and He is coming again.

As we partake of this meal together today, I would encourage you to bask in the wonder of this family which God has called us to be part of. And I would also exhort you to examine yourself, as this text commands us to do, and part of that self-examining should be to ask yourself if there are any divisions between you and another brother or sister in this family. With whom do you need to be reconciled? I pray that God will reveal these things to us so that we can move toward one another in love and that the unity of this fellowship would continue to grow and be a blessing to all of us and a great testimony to the world around us of how we've been changed.