

# So That We May Not Be Condemned

## 1 Corinthians 11:26-34

We live in a world that often encourages you to make an idol of your health.

I will not go into all of the nuances of that statement.

But I believe it to be true.

God is not against health. And if you are considering more than physical health, there is no one who is more “pro-health” than God.

But today’s text makes absolutely clear that temporal health is less important to God than bringing his people into a right relationship with himself.

God values spiritual health more than temporal physical health.

In fact, God is often willing to use the disruption of physical health as a tool to bring his children back into fellowship with himself.

Read I Corinthians 11:26-34.

**1 Corinthians 11:26** <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The act of partaking of Communion is a symbolic statement.

When you eat and drink, you proclaim.

You proclaim that true life comes only through fellowship with death of Jesus Christ.

But if you eat and drink carelessly, or thoughtlessly, or with no intention of your own dying with Christ, then, instead of exalting Christ, you belittle his name.

Communion is a sacrament.

That means that it is an otherwise normal action that God has set apart as holy.

Regular eating of meals is important. But the eating of Communion is more than simply eating bread and wine. God makes the eating and drinking of Communion special.

God has also set apart the Lord’s Day as holy. One day in seven. Up until Christ’s resurrection it was the seventh day. But ever since the resurrection, in honor of the Resurrection and the New Creation it inaugurates, God has set apart the first day of the week. To the eyes of the world, this day is no different from the others. But to the eyes of God’s people, we recognize that this day is holy. It is different. It is sacred and should be treated as such.

The sacrament of Communion is like this. If we are to partake of Communion rightly, we must recognize that how we eat and drink deeply matters to God. What other symbolic action is

there in Scripture to which God has attached such warnings? Not even to baptism, the other Covenant sign, does God attach such warnings.

God cares about every choice you make. The righteous will seek to live every moment of their lives by faith. All of life is to be a response of thankfulness and love to God. But to no other action does he attach such explicit warnings.

29     For anyone who eats and drinks  
          without discerning the body  
                  eats and drinks judgment on himself.  
30     That is why many of you are  
          weak  
          and  
          ill,  
          and  
          some  
          have died.

Partaking of Communion is supposed to be a means of grace, a means of nourishing our souls so that we can have our faith encouraged and we can live out our lives in fellowship with and obedience to Jesus Christ.

But if you do not partake of the bread and wine in the right manner, with the right attitude and with the appropriate reflection, you will eat and drink judgment on yourself. And Paul does not speak metaphorically. Some are weak, some are ill, and some have died. This comes across as shocking, and almost wrong, to our “everyone is for health” ears.

But the motivation of God is not one of hate. He is driven by true love. While this sort of judgment may be extremely painful, its purpose is not ultimately to destroy, but to restore.

I have had the privilege of walking many youth through this passage as they are preparing to become what we call Communing Members.

With our Covenant Children, we make a distinction in our membership between Communing and Non-Communing members. With adult converts, adult members, we do not make this distinction. When you become a member, you become a communing member.

But it is different with our covenant children. They are members of the Church from before their birth. When God calls a person to himself, he promises not only to be their God, but also the God of their children. Covenant children have the right to call upon God as Father as soon as they can speak the words. Parents have a responsibility to teach their children to embrace the love of God already poured out upon them.

As a child grows, he or she will quickly become aware that obedience to God does not come naturally. It is a parent's duty to explain to their children the reality of what it means to be dead in sin. But parents should accept that this will look differently in a 3 year old than it will look in a 15 year old, or even a 25 year old. Our grasp of the evil of sin and its ravaging effects increases throughout our lives.

With an increasing awareness of sin, we must call our children to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. We do not assume that they are naturally converted. As they recognize their sin, we point them to Jesus and encourage them to look to him for forgiveness and for new life. The hope is that from a very early age they would believe in Jesus Christ for their own salvation.

It has been the experience of many of our children that they do not even remember the first moment that they believed in Jesus Christ.

But as is true for all of us, the genuineness of our faith is tested throughout our lives. Faith has a beginning point. But true faith is an enduring faith. It continues on and bears fruit. Remember the parable of the sower. The seed of the Word of God sprang up in some hearts, only to be later choked out by the cares of this world.

So, as we must also do with ourselves, we train our children to examine themselves. As they are able to understand self-reflection, we teach them to examine their own hearts to see if there really is a living faith within them. It is entirely appropriate for them to at times question whether they are truly saved. As a child grows into adulthood, they experience new temptations and struggles that they did not even know existed when they were younger. They experience doubts where before there were none. Faith is something that should be living and growing within you throughout the course of your life. It is not just a one-time decision.

This is why the Sacrament of Communion requires very specific self-reflection.

"Let us examine ourselves"

"Let us judge ourselves"

The text gives us three very specific ways in which we are to examine ourselves.

1. We are to examine our relationship with God.
  2. We are to examine our relationship with sin.
  3. We are to examine our relationship with other believers.
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1. We must examine our relationship with God.
    - a. "discerning the body of the Lord"
      - i. reflect rightly upon the death of Christ
      - ii. reflect rightly upon the Church as the body of Christ. (Point three)

To not "discern the body" is to "profane the body and blood of the Lord".

In order to discern the body, you must first be able to understand the symbols involved in Communion.

And, you must be able to in some degree evaluate your own “faith” in the realities portrayed in the symbols.

In last week’s sermon, I summarized Communion as a reflection upon the death of Christ. I refer you to that sermon and to the statements in our Confession of Faith to help you with the symbols. Most of you are very familiar with the symbols.

I want to focus more on the necessity of evaluating our own “faith” in the realities. Put very bluntly, every time you partake of Communion you should ask yourself honestly, “Do I still believe all this?”

I think many of us are even afraid to ask that question. We assume we are believing. We are not really tuned into the ebbing and flowing of our own faith.

This past week I was talking with Mary Simpson about grapes. We both have grape vines. She is going to have pull up her grapes and start over. Some sort of bug got onto her vines. And then dropped eggs into the ground. Now those bugs are a continual problem.

Mary asked me, “How are your grapes doing?” I said, “Fine.” She said, “Have you checked them for bugs?” I said, “No.” She went and checked them for me and my grapes do not have the bugs. Thankfully.

But the point is, I really had no idea whether I had a problem brewing or not. I was not inspecting my grapes to know. Examining grapes is one thing. But failing to take inventory of the condition of your own faith in Jesus Christ is quite another.

If you keep short accounts as to your relationship with God, there is much that can be done to make corrections and fix problems. Those problems become harder to fix if left unattended for long periods of time.

The assaults on your faith are as varied as life itself.

But the parable of the sower lays out three helpful categories.

- The deceitfulness of Satan’s lies. (The enemy comes in and snatches away the seed, meaning that we are no longer confident that the promises of God are true. Doubts.)
- The cares of life. (Disappointments, fears, worries – I no longer can afford to take the time to pursue God. My love of God has grown cold.)
- The pleasures of this world. (Our old nature simply loves sin. And we become convinced, like Eve that we will be happy if we ignore God and his commands.)

Brothers and sisters, whether you realize it or not, every day of your life you are in a battle against losing your faith. And God has provided the Sacrament of Communion to be a regular means by which you examine your heart to discern your “faith” in the death of Jesus Christ.

We must examine ourselves as to our relationship with God.

2. We must also examine our relationship with sin.
  - a. We must “judge” ourselves.

This is very much connected with the first point. But while the first point focuses more on our faith towards God, this point focus more inwardly on our own imperfections and sins.

Sin is deceitful. Our Old Nature is deceitful. We can find the speck in the eye of those around us while ignoring the plank in our own eye. This is just the way it is.

And so, it takes very purposeful “judging ourselves” to recognize our sin.

How do we do this?

It begins with a sincere prayer: Lord, please show me my sin.

And don’t just show me that I am a sinner generally, show me specific sin.

We must ask the Holy Spirit to shine a light on the dark regions of our own heart and life.

We must also regularly read the Bible. The Bible works like a mirror. As we read it we can also see and understand ourselves better. All of Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, correcting, and training in righteousness.

It is also recommended that before taking Communion you might focus on portions of Scripture that reveal the righteousness of God explicitly.

The Ten Commandments.

- The Larger Catechism has some extremely detailed reflection on the Ten Commandments.

The Sermon on the Mount.

The Fruit of the Spirit passage in Galatians.

As you meditate on these portions of Scripture, continue asking God to show you yourself.

And, when you recognize some specific sin, deal with it honestly.

Sometimes, it is as simple as saying to yourself, “That was wrong. I know it was wrong. Please forgive me for that wrong because of the blood of Jesus. And I turn from it and I commit myself to no longer doing that sin.”

But some sins are more persistent. Getting free of them is not so easy. True believers may be caught in the miry bog of sin. But the process is the same. Judge the sin. Cast yourself upon Jesus Christ. Cry out to him for increased mercy to overcome the sin. And commit yourself to obedience, recognizing that in Christ you have now been made a slave of righteousness, and are no longer a slave of sin.

You may even enlist the help of other believers to help you in your struggle against sin. But, you take your sin seriously. You are not flippant with your sin. You do not think God simply is unconcerned with your sin. You deal with it honestly, and with humble and persistent faith.

Communion is for the sinner.

Through union with Jesus Christ, we accept the full atonement for our sin. God's anger is removed.

And through union with Jesus Christ, we also accept that he will carry us to our own death to sin.

So, we must examine our relationship with sin.

3. We examine our relationship with other believers.
  - a. The double entendre of "discerning the body"

The New Covenant is not technically a Covenant made between the God of the Universe and you as an individual. The New Covenant is a Covenant that you have with God, together with all other believers, mediated by Jesus Christ.

You are not "alone" in Christ. You are in Christ, together corporately with every other member of the Church. The body of Christ is the Church. This corporate aspect of "discerning the body of Christ" as the Church flows out of "discerning the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ." We reflect upon his death, but then we understand that his death was intended for all of his bride.

If you read the entirety of chapter 11, you see very clearly how the unity of the body of Christ is a correct application to the Sacrament of Communion. This is why to partake of Communion while harboring animosity towards other members of the congregation is not acceptable.

Two sermons ago, I entitled the sermon, "When you come together it is not for the better." Again, I recommend that sermon to you.

When coming to the Table we must ask God to search our hearts, as to whether we have slandered our brothers and sisters. We must ask ourselves whether we sincerely love our brothers and sisters.

Self-reflection. Self-examination. Judging yourself. These are critical to a worthy partaking of Communion.

But when we hear the word, worthy, we often think "deserving."

Paul does not mean worthy in the sense of Jesus being worthy to merit eternal life through his perfect obedience. No Christian is ever worthy in that sense.

We are not even worthy in the sense of being "perfect" at the moment of taking Communion.

What Paul means is that we are partaking of the Sacrament in the way that it was intended.

You are not using the Sacrament as a means of manipulating God.

You are not using the Sacrament as a cover up for your sin.

You are not using the Sacrament, thinking that you can ignore your sin, and experience all of the bliss of heaven.

**1 Corinthians 11:29** <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

You may think that as you partake of the Sacrament that you are invoking God's blessing upon you, but you are doing just the opposite.

If you are unwilling to "judge" yourself, Jesus will do it for you, only it will be more painful.

Now, this is where it gets tricky.

Paul is making a distinction between "judgment" and "condemnation."

If we fail to see this, we will miss the whole point.

I entitled this sermon, "So that we may not be condemned..."

**1 Corinthians 11:32** <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined<sup>1</sup> so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Condemnation is God's final judgment of a person to an eternal and righteous wrath.

Romans 8 is clear that no true member of Christ is under God's condemnation.

This is good news.

But not being under God's condemnation does not mean that God does not regularly "evaluate" you in your thoughts, words and deeds. He most certainly does.

And, God cares so deeply about you, that he will use all sorts of painful means to free you out of your slavery to sin.

**1 Corinthians 11:30** <sup>30</sup> That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

Almost every time I point out this verse to a young person, you can see them pause and do a "double-take", as if they are thinking, "Does that really mean what I think it means?"

Now, I am always very cautious to help them understand that not all weakness, and sickness and death are due to God's judgment over not partaking of Communion in a worthy manner.

But there is no other legitimate way to take this passage than that in some cases, weakness, and sickness and early death are the result of partaking of Communion in an unworthy manner.

It is right for us to ask of the Lord, "Is this sickness coming upon me because you are trying to get my attention and bring me to repentance for my sin?" This sort of questioning is consistent with James' instructions in James 5.

**James 5:14-16** <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.<sup>1</sup>

You see, God is far more concerned about your spiritual health, than he is about your temporal physical health. And he is willing to sacrifice your temporal happiness to get you back into fellowship with himself.

One of my concerns as a pastor during this Coronavirus is that the voice of the Church has been muted in this regard. Maybe we have muted ourselves.

But, I want us to proclaim the message to a dying world, "You must turn to Jesus. He is your only hope against the coming wrath of God. Physical life is important. But God is far more concerned about the welfare of your soul."

We must call a dying world to Jesus Christ.

And those of us who are already believing in Jesus Christ must remind ourselves that Jesus is more concerned that we deal with our sin than he is concerned that we have health in this life.

Now, as you read verse 30, it is easy to see how weakness and sickness can bring us to repentance. But it is difficult to understand how an early death can keep you from condemnation. I have reflected on this much but only have speculation. For now, we must simply accept that it can.

Many of the lessons in today's sermon are hard pills to swallow.

C.S. Lewis is right in saying, "We do not serve a tame God."

But he is also correct in saying, "He is a good God."

The sacrament of Communion portrays before your eyes the most wonderful, the most pure, the most powerful, the most awe-inspiring, most glorious love ever bestowed upon unworthy people.

No man will ever agree to their own death unless they first accept the goodness, the wisdom, and the love of God towards him.

If you look at these verses and all you see is a God who loves to inflict pain on people, you will only grow bitter towards him. But if you are grounded in the depth of the love of God towards you, over time, you will be thankful for the seasons of pain.

Think of the child who has broken his arm. What must happen if he is ever to effectively use that arm again? It must be reset. What do the parents and the doctor tell the child?

This is going to hurt. But, it is for your good. And we love you very much.

This is the perspective of our wonderful God.

He has set out to free you from your slavery to sin.

And he is willing to even inflict pain to give you that freedom.

He does not do this because his love for you is small.

He does it because his love for you is greater than you can possibly imagine.

He is moving you towards full and complete health.

The health of body and soul.

He is driving you to a place where you freely surrender your will to his.

He is working to fix the problem, the real problem.



Before I end, I want to address one more issue.

Once you understand how serious God takes the Sacrament, you might be afraid to come to the Table at all.

What do you do if you doubt whether your faith is real, or whether you hate your sin enough, or whether you really love the rest of the members of the church.

WLC 172 May one who doubts of his being in Christ, or of his due preparation, come to the Lord's supper?

A. One who doubts of his being in Christ, or of his due preparation to the sacrament of the Lord's supper, may have true interest in Christ, though he be not yet assured thereof;(1) and in God's account has it, if he be duly affected with the apprehension of the want (lack) of it,(2) and unfeignedly desires to be found in Christ,(3) and to depart from iniquity:(4) in which case (because promises are made, and this sacrament is appointed, for the relief even of weak and doubting Christians(5) ) he is to bewail his unbelief,(6) and labour to have his doubts resolved;(7) and, so doing, he may and ought to come to the Lord's supper, that he may be further strengthened.(8)

Communion is not for those who believe without doubt.

Communion is for those who believe with doubt.

Communion is the nourishment that strengthens the soul against doubt.

Communion is not for those who have completely mastered sin.

Communion is for those who hate that sin still at times wins.

Communion leads you to Christ where his hatred of sin may increasingly become yours.

Communion is not for those who perfectly love God.

Communion is for those who have a spark of love to God, but who need that spark fanned into flame.

Communion looks to God to bestow true thankfulness and true affection for God.

Communion is not for those who perfectly love the whole Church.

Communion is for those who know how little they truly love their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Communion looks to Jesus, and his love for his people, to be imparted into our hearts.

I do not know when will be the next time that we partake of Communion together. I hope it will be soon.

Until that time, I exhort you to reflect upon these words.

I want you to embrace your own unworthiness, and His worthiness.

And so, when we partake together, it will be for great blessing.

Amen.