

Us and Them

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Sunday, June 6, 2021

Last Sunday, Pastor Jerry talked about our Statement of Faith. Our Statement of Faith is simply a list of our church's core beliefs. For example, last week Pastor Jerry pointed us to Article 9 of our statement and looked at what our church believes about the return of Christ. In Article 7, we have this statement about what we believe about the ordinances of the church:

The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.

About every two months, we take time in both services to celebrate Communion. Today, we're going to look at one of the key passages of Scripture that teach about the Lord's Supper. To be clear, I'm using the terms *Communion* and *Lord's Supper* interchangeably. They refer to the same thing: the regular practice of the church, remembering the sacrificial death of Jesus, through a shared act of eating and drinking, in obedience to the Lord's command. We refer to Communion as an *ordinance* because, as we will see, Jesus commanded us to regularly share in this meal of remembrance together.

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 11, and as you are turning there, let me set up this passage with some context. The verses we're looking at are part of a larger discussion about church worship in Paul's letter. We should also note that the reason Paul was writing about Communion was not so that they could put together their own Statement of Faith. Paul wrote these things because their practice of the Lord's Supper was revealing some unhealthy habits that had formed in their church.

This past week the school year came to a close. And with the end of the term, final grades will soon be out. I remember the end of the fall term of 1997 as a college student. I was home for the winter break when my grades arrived. I expected bad news, but I didn't expect to find an F. I had failed one of my core classes. I don't know if you've ever received a failing grade, but it's one of the worst feelings as a student. Long story short, that F was a catalyst for a change of major and a path to ministry. But that's a longer story for another time.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he gave them a failing grade with respect to their Sunday gatherings. Follow along with me as I read from 1 Corinthians 11 beginning in verse 17:

“In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!” (vv. 17-22).

Imagine being told that your church is so unhealthy that whenever you share Communion together it actually does more *harm* than good. What was so bad about the way they celebrated the Lord’s Supper that Paul would describe their worship service as *harmful*? In this passage Paul makes his argument in three moves: first, Paul gives a word of rebuke, second, he issues a call to remembrance, and third, he offers an invitation to repent. Let’s look at each of these together.

First, Paul issues a **word of rebuke**. Church in first-century Corinth looked a bit different than it does today. We’re blessed with a facility with lots of space for ministry. But in those days, the church gathered in people’s homes. Wealthier members who had a place big enough to host larger groups opened up their homes for Sunday worship.

There’s also good reason to believe that in those days the church incorporated Sunday dinner into their celebration of the Lord’s Supper. But over time, an unhealthy practice developed. In verse 18 Paul states that growing division in the church was being reported. Whenever the Corinthians celebrated Communion, the poorer members of the church were excluded from the first-class dining enjoyed by the homeowner and his wealthier friends. A meal that was meant to remind the gathered church about their unity in Christ instead revealed division and spiritual abuse.

When a local church manifests an *us-and-them* attitude, it shows a lack of gospel understanding. One example of such an attitude in the history of the American church has been the sin of racism. And while not every church has experienced racial injustice to the same degree, just as not every member of the church in Corinth was causing division, we see that God held his church as a whole accountable for their disunity.

But there are also countless other ways that an us-and-them attitude can creep into a church. An *us* group might see themselves as the preservers of godly tradition, always resisting those who want to change things. The *us* group might see themselves as long-

term investors in their church, concluding that as the primary shareholders, they have a greater voice in decision making. And yet another *us* group might consider themselves to be the voice of modernization, always battling with those who are stuck in their stubborn ways.

Others might find themselves increasingly upset with *those* people who can't keep their politics out of the church. *They* always equate the cause of Christ with their brand of conservatism or liberal ideology. Yet, there are also some who can't understand why *those* people won't stand up for what is right and vote the way a true Christian should.

We can think of other examples. And yet, let's beware that the minute we start to identify *those people* who are wrong according to our perspective, we may very well have fallen into the trap of that same *us-and-them* attitude. So what's the solution?

Writing to the church in Philippi, the Apostle Paul would later say,

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:1-4, ESV).

The antidote for an *us-and-them* attitude is to look to Christ. That's why in verse 23 Paul moves from a word of rebuke to **a call to remembrance**. Traditionally, this next paragraph has been called *the words of institution*, often read as part of a Communion service. As we consider these words in their context, we will see why Paul wanted the Corinthians to remember that whenever they shared the Lord's Supper, they were to proclaim the Lord's death. Let's look at verses 23-26.

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (vv. 23-26).

The big question is why did Paul need to remind them about what Jesus instituted at the Last Supper? I don't think they were confused about the symbolism behind the meal, that the bread broken into pieces represented Jesus's body broken in death, or that cup

of wine represented the shed blood of Jesus that made atonement for sin. Paul's main concern is in verse 26. Perhaps you've wondered what it meant that whenever we celebrate Communion, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Whenever we come to the Lord's table, we remember not only the *fact* that Jesus died, but also we remind ourselves of *why* he died and what his death accomplished for us. We tend to reflect on what Christ has done for us *individually*. When I eat the bread and I drink from the cup, I bring to mind the good news that Jesus died for *me*, that he has saved *me* from my sins, and by his death and resurrection *I* am made alive in him forever. This is a glorious truth. But we must not miss that the gospel also has something to say to *us* corporately.

Paul reminds us of Christ's words that through his shed blood a new covenant has been ratified. Jesus was alluding to God's promise found in Jeremiah 31:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34, NIV).

When we take the Lord's Supper, we not only proclaim that Jesus died for us, we also declare that by his death he has created for himself a New Covenant people. Communion should remind us that we are one in Christ, the very thing that the church in Corinth neglected as they gathered together. That's why in verse 20 Paul said of them, "when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat."

Their church had emptied the Lord's Supper of its meaning by allowing division to disrupt their unity. So Paul's final move in this passage was to offer these believers **an invitation to repent**. I'll admit, Paul's warning comes off as strong and kind of scary. In verse 27 we read,

"So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone

ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions” (vv. 27-34)

As we prepare to come to the Lord’s table together, let’s think through Paul’s warning. What does it mean in verse 27 to eat and drink “in an unworthy manner”? Paul was telling them that they should beware of coming to the table if they have missed the point of the meal. Certainly, this *at least* meant that the Lord’s Supper was reserved for those who truly had come to faith in Christ. We call this *open communion*. All believers are welcome to share in the Lord’s Supper with us, regardless of which church you call home, yet the table is open only to believers. For someone to partake in this meal of remembrance that hasn’t come to faith in Christ, not only wouldn’t make sense, it wouldn’t be appropriate.

But missing the point of the meal would also include ignoring the fact we have been made one in Christ. Don’t come to the table proclaiming the Lord’s death but denying in practice that we’re all members of the New Covenant community. Don’t eat the bread and drink from the cup while continuing to harbor an us-and-them attitude.

That’s why Paul invited these men and women in verse 28 to examine their hearts before coming to the table. This morning, whether this is the first time you’ll share in the Lord’s Supper, or this is your ninety-ninth time, would you first pause and ask the Lord to help you examine your heart? Before you take that piece of bread and place it in your mouth, would you consider what Paul said in the previous chapter?

“Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17, NIV).

And when you ask the Lord to search your heart, before you bow your head and close your eyes, would you take a second to look around the room? Look at the faces of your fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord. Look around and see if you see any of *those people*, the ones that ruffle your feathers, *those people* you don’t see eye to eye with, the

ones you secretly wish didn't come to *your* church. Then, before you come to the table, confess your sin, repent, and trust in the Lord's forgiveness and grace.

Folks, we often say around here that our aim is to *become fully devoted followers of Jesus together*. By God's grace we will *become fully devoted followers*, and by God's grace we will become fully devoted followers of Jesus *together*.