

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **Seven Aspects of The Lord's Table**

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10 and 11

Code: 90-370

Thinking a little bit about history in these weeks as we move to the fortieth in February, I'm reminded that when I first came to Grace Church as a young man, in my late twenties, I had come across something else in the Bible that struck me. I had been reading a rather interesting book that I found written by a missionary, a very obscure missionary and it was a self-published book. Self-published books are normally pretty dangerous reading. But this was a self-published book and I will never forget the book because it had a very bland cover and because the printing job was done so inadequately that there were sections upside down and out of place all through the book. So it was somewhat of a jigsaw puzzle to just figure out how to read it.

But in the process of going through that book, I came across a section on discipline in the church, dealing with sin in the church. And I read it. And I had been already aware of Matthew chapter 18 where our Lord's first instruction to the church, first instruction in the Bible to the church is that if someone is in sin, you go to him and you confront the sin. And if the person doesn't repent, you go back and take two or three witnesses to confirm the response. And if they still don't repent, you tell it to the church. And if they still don't repent, you treat them like an outsider, an outcast. You put them out of the church. The Apostle Paul follows that up by saying you can't let them stay in the church because sin is like leaven and a little bit of leaven, leavens everything. The Apostle Paul later points out the fact that if there's someone in the fellowship who is teaching falsely, admonish him two or three times. And after that, put him out.

I had never known of a church that did that. I had never heard of a church that did that. In the past, in ancient history...yes. I never heard of any church. I began to ask questions when I came to this church about this issue of telling the church about sinning people. And I was told every time I asked the question...you can't do that...you can't do that, you'll empty the church. People won't tolerate that. They'll flee. You can't...you can't be looking at people's lives and making judgments about their sin and then confronting them about that sin and in some cases making it public, they will run. They will flee. You'll empty the place.

I remember having that conversation with an older pastor, much older pastor. And I said, "But, the Bible instructs us to do that and it's not ambiguous, it's not confusing. It's not hard to interpret. What do I do about what the Bible says?"

Well, it seemed clear to me and so from the earliest days coming to Grace Church, I began to move in the direction of trying to teach the church that we needed to do this. We needed to do this.

Just recently one of the graduates of our seminary, a wonderful young pastor back on the east coast, followed faithfully the instruction of Scripture and disciplined a woman in the church for adultery with the full support of her children, adult children. Well somehow what the church did in following the pattern of Scripture with compassion and kindness and not saying more than should be said publicly, nonetheless, infuriated the woman and the man she was living with who was not her husband and he called the FOX news channel. And then it got on what was called The Drudge Report. And then it went from there to the far ends of the earth. And I was given a message that this young pastor was looking for a little spiritual assistance in trying to cope with this.

So I gave him a call because I know him and love him. In fact, I'll never forget preaching in his church, never. Beautiful, beautiful church on the east coast and it was such a joy to preach there. Preached actually at the dedication of his auditorium and what is memorable about it is he was so happy to have me there, it was such a great event, the place was full. It was just wonderful. And in the middle of my sermon, some guy stood up and started railing against me at full volume. He was absolutely horrified. This was to be the high point of his church experience. He didn't bring me into town to be openly vilified by this goof ball who stood...but anyway, he's a wonderful pastor, it's a wonderful church. And the Lord has tried and tested him, so He must have something wonderful for him in the future.

But what was so interesting to me was, in the articles that came out of this, and there were articles written in newspapers, I think it hit even some of the New York newspapers...in order to get a perspective on it, the reporter asked one of the long storied professors at Dallas Seminary about this, to which he replied, in essence, "Well, we don't do that." And I thought to myself, "Nothing's changed."

The truth is, that didn't empty our church. Obedience to the Word of God always brings the blessing of God, doesn't it? And a pursuit of holiness, we sing it, are we willing to live it? You just sang it with all your heart, I watched you. You sang it. And you sang, "Purify me," didn't you? Refiner's fire. I have told so many pastors through the years, you can't preach against sin and do nothing about it or preaching becomes entertainment cut off from life and reality.

So from those earliest years, we have endeavored to have a church that honors Christ, that is pure, realizing that sin in the congregation is devastating and deadly and it spreads like leaven. We have endeavored to confront that in our own lives. In those early years, I remember saying many, many times, "Look, you're not going to be able to get something out of somebody else's eye until you get what's in your eye out of your eye, right? You're not going to be useful to God as an agent of purification in the life of somebody else unless you are pure." And so, I have believed with all my

heart through all these years that the single greatest motivation impetus externally on the purity of the church is the reality of confrontation of sin among its people. You know, people who love righteousness and hate sin are looking for a place where people care about their righteousness.

Through the years I've become very much aware that there are people who come to this church and leave really fast. I know why people stay. I know why you stay. You love the Word of God, I know that. That's the defining reality of our church. You not only love the Word of God, you love the things that the Word of God affirms and requires. You embrace them, that's why you're here.

And so, in those early years, as I was thinking about how we would do this, I felt, "Well, the time to do this church discipline is at a communion service because that's where the church comes to grips with its purity. This is a very rare occasion compared to the amount of sin among us, because we're all sinful, on those rare occasions when someone rejects the confrontation of an individual and the confrontation of two or three and someone rejects all efforts to call them back to holiness and we're talking about professed believers, we bring it to the church. And we've done it virtually through all these 40 years. It didn't empty the church, it did the opposite. It made the church a real church, concerned with purity.

There was also in those early years of life at Grace Church that I began to think about the importance of the Lord's table...communion. In actuality, growing up, communion happened once in a while as a ten-minute tack on at the end of a church service. And it seemed to me that that was not the way it ought to be. I was also exposed to those who had the Lord's table every single time they gathered every Sunday. And I would have preferred that to a ten-minute addendum. But as I thought about it, I thought, "Well what if you had an entire service devoted to the Lord's table and you did it frequently at all different kinds of occasions, as we do here." Sometimes Sunday morning, sometimes Sunday night, sometimes at a special service on a Good Friday, what if you encouraged people to do it in Bible studies and even in homes with their families because it's so very, very important.

Our Lord said, after introducing this memorial feast, as it were, "Do this in remembrance of Me. Do this till I come. Take the bread and take the cup and show forth My death until I come. Do this." And the early church did daily...daily they came to the Lord's table. It was so very important to them. And in those early years as I have asked myself the question, "What is the importance of this and what is it intended to do for us?" I looked at 1 Corinthians chapters 10 and 11 and I want you to look at them with me for just a few moments.

A lot happens at the Lord's table. And you find the text of 1 Corinthians in verses...in chapters 10 and 11 contains the features that need to be understood when we come to the Lord's table. In fact, it was many, many years ago, again, that I wrote them down on a piece of paper, which set for me the focus of the Lord's table.

And I've always had this focus. Whenever we come to the Lord's table, I might preach a message on a certain emphasis, I don't know how many hundreds of communion messages I've preached through the years, and I would pick one or two or three of these seven features of the Lord's table and emphasize them.

But for tonight I thought just to look back at history and to kind of grasp them all, might be helpful. What really takes place at the Lord's table? What do we do when we come here?

Number one, we remember Christ's saving work on the cross. First Corinthians 11 verse 25, "In the same way, He took the cup as He had taken the bread after supper saying, 'This cup is the New Covenant in My blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of Me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He come.'"

So the first and perhaps the most familiar aspect of the Lord's table is that it is a remembering of the work of Christ on the cross. His sacrifice for sin and therefore our deliverance from sin...His payment for the penalty for sin and thus the forgiveness of our sins...His death for our life. It was the crushing of Satan and the divesting of hell for the souls of all who would ever believe. And perhaps that's the most familiar feature of the Lord's table, we remember the Lord's death, in the bread we remember that He gave His body, in the cup we remember that He shed His blood. We remember His saving work on the cross, that unique and supreme and marvelous work by which our salvation was purchased. And what is the response to that? Thanks, praise, humility.

But it's not just that that we focus on when we come to the Lord's table. There's a second and also important reality. First of all, we remember Christ's saving work on the cross. Secondly, we see the common partaking of Christ's presence. Go back to chapter 10, for a moment, and in verse 16, speaking of the Lord's table again, "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" It is here that we celebrate our common union with Christ. There's a real communion here. It is a real sharing in the blood of Christ and the sharing in the body of Christ. There's a...not in the sense of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in which, of course, they say the bread becomes the actual body of Christ and the wine becomes the blood of Christ, not in that sense, nor in a sort of modified view of consubstantiation which is the traditional Lutheran view that it becomes the spiritual body of Christ, whatever that is, and the spiritual blood of Christ. Not so. But there is in the sharing in the blood of Christ and in the sharing in the body of Christ a real communing with Christ.

What do I liken it to? I liken it to prayer. I liken it to worship. I liken it to the experience of singing praises to Christ, knowing that He embodies the praises of His people. This is where we celebrate shared life with Christ.

Verse 17 adds a third dimension and it's related to that. It is here that we commune with each other as saints. Verse 17, "Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread." The Lord's table is the reminder of the cross where we all are leveled to the same place, needy sinners at the foot of the cross. This is what identifies again and symbolizes and celebrates our oneness in the body, our common eternal life. At the foot of the cross we are all equally in need of grace, we are all equally recipients of a salvation that is unearned and undeserved. So while we come to the Lord's table to remember His death for us, we also come to the Lord's table to commune in sweet fellowship with Him for He gathers with His people and inhabits their praise, especially when they are in obedience to Him, doing what He told them to do. And then thirdly, we are actually communing with each other. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, we are one body, one bread, we possess one Spirit. Here's where we celebrate our common eternal life, shared eternal life, oneness in the body of Christ. This is where we're reminded of the importance of our spiritual unity of loving one another, of experiencing true fellowship with one another, ministering to one another, serving one another, seeking peace with one another.

And then fourthly, I think there's a sense in which we come to the Lord's table to worship in the holiest of place. I think I can show you that in verse 20 and following where he says, "No, I say, this is Paul, that the things the Gentiles sacrifice...that sacrificed to demons and not to God...and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons, you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons, or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy. You would only do that if you thought you were stronger than He.

When we come to the Lord's table, we focus on the fact that our worship is singular. You know, in the Corinthian situation, they had come out of this paganism, they had come out of false religion, they all these feasts and festivals and worship experiences tied to false gods and the worship of false gods is the worship of demons and the Apostle Paul is saying to them, "You cannot come to the table of the Lord and then turn around and go to a pagan feast. You cannot worship at the table of the Lord and the table of demons. You have to come apart, you have to separate yourself."

There's no place for mixed loyalty, that's what this is saying to us. There is no place for hanging on to anything that is false, anything that is demonic, anything that is of the darkness. This is where you leave it all. Christ is Lord, His worship is singular, no place for mixed loyalties. And so there is here at the Lord's table, I think a fresh commitment to His Lordship. We worship Christ and Christ alone, He is all.

So as we come, we remember His work on the cross for our salvation. We commune with Him in a real sense as He inhabits our worship and our praise. We commune with each other in the one body, sharing the one bread in the common life. We worship in that singular way in the holiest place, we worship Christ alone and we renew our covenant, as it were, or our commitment to confess Him as

Lord and no other.

Number five, and this is certainly an important one, it is coming to this table that brings us to the place of purification. It was very thoughtful of Bill to lead us in that hymn, "Purify my heart." If you look down in chapter 11 as Paul continues to write about the Lord's table, 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 28 he says, "But a man must examine himself and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup." You come to this table to eat the bread and drink the cup, you better examine your heart.

Why? "For him who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he doesn't judge the body rightly." If you come to the Lord's table in a haphazard, frivolous, superficial way without an honest evaluation of your own spiritual condition, without the kind of self-examination that brings out confession and repentance and a desire for purification, you will eat and drink judgment to yourself. You'll bring down the chastening hand of God.

There's a reason why the Lord wants to do this regularly, so that we regularly remember the cross, so that we regularly commune with Him in the reality of the cross, so that we regularly celebrate our oneness, so that we regularly renew our commitment to Him as our singular object of worship, and so that we regularly examine our own hearts. I've said so often, recently in years, that the church has turned to try to be a place that entertains unbelievers. This has been the death of the Lord's table.

I mean, you can't have a serious communion service if you're trying to appeal to non-believers, because they're shut out of that. So the Lord's table is set aside and so is, sadly, the self-examination and the purification of the church. In fact, you had better not come to the Lord's table without a serious self-examination, verse 30 says, "For this reason, that is because you don't evaluate your condition properly, many among you are weak and sick and a number sleep." Wow. The chastening hand of God can make you weak and sick and the chastening hand of God could actually take your life. That is about as serious as it gets. This is a time when you evaluate your sinfulness, take an honest look at your heart and you confess and you repent.

But it's also a proclamation, as I read earlier, look at verse 26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." By this we proclaim the cross. That ought to be reason to do it even more often in the face of unbelievers, right? I can't think of anything more powerful for an unbeliever to slip in on than a communion service that's done biblically, where they see the reality of what the body of Christ really is, those who celebrate the cross of Christ, those who confront the sin in their own lives, those who in this symbolic act are happy to proclaim that Christ gave His body and His blood on the cross for us.

There's just one other thing to say in the little list that I wrote down many years ago, and it really is drawn out of Matthew chapter 26 and essentially I quoted it to you a little earlier. Matthew 26:29, "When Jesus was instituting this supper, this memorial, symbolic feast, He said, 'I say to you, I will not

drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's Kingdom."

What is this? This is to say that the Lord's table anticipates the Kingdom. One day we'll do it with Christ. It's not going to go away. I think we're going to have Lord's table experiences through all eternity. We're always going to be looking back and celebrating the cross.

You know, one of the most remarkable texts in the Old Testament, Ezekiel 40 to 48, has been a mystery to many, many people. It is set in the time of the Millennial Kingdom. And it institutes in the time of the Millennial Kingdom in Israel in Jerusalem the reinstating of Old Testament ceremonies and Old Testament sacrifices. And people have said, "Why in the future, in the glory of the Kingdom would you reinstitute those things on that side of the cross when all is consummated?" And the answer is, they will no longer be symbolic events pointing to something that hasn't happened. They will be symbolic events pointing to something that's already happened. When those kinds of sacrifices are reinstated, they will have full meaning because they will point back to the cross which will be fully known. Apparently since there will always be in the Kingdom and no doubt through eternity the opportunity to celebrate the table of the Lord in some eternal fashion, and since God is going to institute even Old Testament ceremonies in the future Millennial Kingdom, God finds delight and purpose and meaning in these symbolic ceremonies. For us, this points to the Kingdom, when one day we will do this with Christ.

So this is the symbol of our hope. We come to the Lord's table and we remember that we're going to do it with Him in His Kingdom after He comes to establish it. The richness of this table, it is a remembrance of Christ's saving work on the cross. It is a common partaking of His glorious presence as He inhabits our praise. It is a time of communion with other believers. It is worship in the purest and most singular and holy way. It is the time of purification of hearts. It is the time of proclamation of the glory of the gospel. And it is a time of anticipation of the Kingdom. This makes this a blessed, blessed event. And as I said, through the years it's been a desire of mine to focus on all of these features from time to time, emphasizing one or the other through the years, and I think God has greatly used the times that we have spent at the Lord's table, hundreds and hundreds of them through the years, to do all these things for us as a church. In some ways, there's no more sacred hour than this.

The Lord only instituted two ordinances, two symbols...baptism at the time of salvation, and the Lord's table continuously until He comes. For you then, at this particular point, all these truths having been brought to bear upon your heart, you need to respond by, first of all and foremost, doing a little inventory in your heart to make sure that you examine yourself and ask the Lord to purify your heart so you don't partake in an unworthy manner and bring down the chastening of God rather than His blessing. So let's pray to that end together.

Father, we thank You for the grace that is available to us. If we confess our sins, You are faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, it says in 1 John. You never withhold forgiveness from the one who asks. And so, Lord, examine our hearts, reveal to us if there's any sin there that needs to be confessed, set aside, those cherished sins that we've become comfortable with. May we happily and gladly release them and seek Your purification, Your refining fire to make us clean so that we might partake in a worthy way and bring down upon ourselves blessing and not judgment. We want this to be a true expression of our joy in the cross, a true communion with the living Christ who is in our midst, a true celebration of our unity in Him, a true and honest proclamation of His death. We want it to be a true anticipation of the hope one day in sharing in this table in the Kingdom with You, and so, Lord, we ask that You will purify us as we humble ourselves before You and partake in a way that honors You. May Christ be all glorious to us. May we see with fresh insight the majesty of His cross and the sacrifice that He offered for our salvation. Amen.

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