

Instructions on the Lord's Supper

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I am thankful to my friend Riley Nelson for the invitation to participate in this fine lectureship. I truly appreciate the church at Richmond Hill for providing opportunities such as the Southeast Georgia Lectureship for edifying the body of Christ in this area of God's creation. There is certainly much to be learned from Paul and an examination of the theme: "Lessons from Paul," would have to be a fruitful field for study.

It is with great humility and some trepidation that I enter into the project of teaching on the subject of "Instructions on the Lord's Supper." Many years ago I recall hearing of a noted and outstanding preacher in our brotherhood making a statement similar to this: "I've got me a sermon, I hope I am big enough to preach it." His subject matter on that occasion was "The Lord's Supper." I also recall one brother (no spiritual giant, in my opinion) making a statement that he did not appreciate the person "heading" the Lord's Table trying to tell him how to observe the Supper. I hope all of us here will be willing to enter into this study with a focus more similar to the first sentiment than to that second one.

In June of this year I preached a series of four sermons on the subject: "Nine Wonders of the Lord's Supper." I also used much of this same material in three cities in Indonesia in July of this year. My study was aided greatly by the book entitled simply, *The Lord's Supper*, by James M. Tolle. If this book is still in print and you can find a copy, I would recommend that you seize the opportunity to purchase a copy. We do not have time to preach four sermons here today, so I will do my best to fulfill the assignment given me and plead with you never to stop studying this vitally important topic in God's Word. My point of beginning, in order to draw attention to the gravity of this study, in those previous sermons, was 1 Corinthians 11:30. Think about it!

I have often considered the paradox of being blessed today by the fact that the church at Corinth was plagued with so many problems. Because of their carnality and immaturity (1 Cor. 3:1-3), problems arose among them. Then, because of Paul's loving concern for these saints, he sought to correct them through these inspired letters. By studying these letters, we are instructed in the right ways of the Lord. I am convinced that the instructions Paul sent this church regarding the Lord's Supper are important and much needed by the church today. Just as there was spiritual sickness (even spiritual death) among the saints at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:30) because of improper observance of the Lord's Supper, there is likewise the same today among us and from the same cause. Is this not powerful motivation to follow the inspired instructions from Paul? Paul instructs us that....

IT IS POSSIBLE TO COME TOGETHER "FOR THE WORSE" (1 Cor 11:17-22, 30)

The assembly of the saints is designed and intended to benefit Christians. These assemblies ought to be occasions of provoking or stirring one another up toward love and good works (Heb. 10:24). That certainly is a good purpose and useful in preparing us to live lives that bring glory to the Lord. However, we must hear the instruction of Paul and realize that it is possible that assembling with saints can be so perverted from the pattern of God's Word that we come away the worse rather than the better.

Many commentators considering these verses (17-22) point only to their divisive behavior during those "love feasts," of the first century. From the text we do see that some were overeating, and others were going hungry. It seems that those who had food were gathering together in small cliques and thus, some were completely neglected. Their major problem goes back to the problem Paul discusses in chapter one (i.e., a lack of unity). However, it seems to me that these Corinthians are condemned here by Paul on the basis of an additional inexcusable and

dangerous behavior. They were **mixing together** this common meal with the Lord's Supper, thereby losing the real purpose and significance of the memorial feast. Guy N. Woods points out the three abuses which Paul condemns,

The abuse in Corinthian worship consisted of (1) participating in a common meal in connection with the Lord's Supper; (2) selfishness in eating before others; (3) a failure properly to understand the nature and purpose of the Lord's Supper.¹

The very strong words of warning Paul gives in this context help us to understand that these saints were truly coming together **for the worse!** Who could imagine that these Christians would do anything except heed these strong warnings sent them by Paul? Some progressives among us seem to think that this might even be a good practice to take up today, but they are definitely mistaken in that assessment!

THE INSTITUTION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IS PART OF THE APOSTLE'S DOCTRINE (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

The source of the teaching Paul did in Corinth regarding the Lord's Supper, he points out here, is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself! Lest anyone should question Paul's authority, he wants it to be known from Whom this teaching came. Just as the Jerusalem church continued in the apostle's doctrine (Acts 2:42), so must we. The apostles received that teaching from the Holy Spirit, sent by the Lord Jesus (John 16:13). We are taught by the Apostle John that we are to be abiding in the doctrine of Christ (2 John 1:9).

There is a connection between the institution of the Lord's Supper and the proper observance of it else Paul would not have brought it into this discussion at this point. Paul says that he could not praise these brethren; they were not following the teaching he had delivered them regarding the Lord's Supper! We are blessed to have four accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper (Mat. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). If we wish to

avoid the pitiful mistakes these Christians made in their observance of the Lord's Supper we ought to spend time frequently meditating upon these four passages!

THE PURPOSE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IS TO REMEMBER (1 Cor. 11:24)

How could anyone be following the true purpose of the Lord's Supper in those ungodly assemblies in Corinth? If it is our intention and desire to please the Lord, we must pay attention to the purpose of commands He gives us. When a purpose is mentioned in connection with a command or practice, we must respect that purpose. Just as baptism is for the purpose of the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), the Lord's Supper is for the purpose of remembering. That is, remembering the great love of God and Christ shown by the shed blood of Jesus at Calvary and all that was involved in that remarkable sacrifice. In a similar way, the Passover Feast of the Old Testament was designed by God to be a memorial (Exo. 12:14; 13:3, 9; Deu. 16:3).

Infinitely more significant than the Passover is the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper commemorates the death of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Rather than deliverance from Egyptian bondage, His death grants deliverance from the bondage of sin and saves us from eternal death. The death of Christ is the central theme of the gospel (1 Cor. 2:2).

There were no statues or personal relics left by Jesus to bring His sacrifice to our remembrance. But there is this simple feast. Without a doubt, the Lord's Supper is the world's greatest monument intended to bring to our remembrance the world's greatest event! Knowing His creation, the Lord, would be aware of our tendency to forget. Indeed, our tendency to forget is the purpose for all of the monuments that ever have been established.

The Bible contains the pattern for the frequency of observance of the Lord's Supper. It is really strange that some religious groups do not follow that pattern. We have no need for ten or

twenty verses telling of the frequency of observance. One is sufficient. That passage is Acts 20:7. With the reading of this passage, the answer to how often comes with the answer to the simple question, "How often does the first day of the week come around?"

Christians benefit enormously from a **regular** observance of the Lord's Supper. When we find ourselves struggling with the enormity of the vileness of sin, observance of the Supper gives us comfort each week. As we properly observe the Supper, how is it possible that our love for Christ is anything but enlarged? Weekly considering the sufferings of Christ on the cross helps us to have a proper perspective on that light suffering or affliction with which we deal from time to time. If we do so properly, observing the Lord's Supper will only increase our hatred of sin!

THERE IS A COVENANT CONNECTION

As with the institution of the Lord's Supper, so here likewise we can turn to four passages for an understanding of the Supper's covenant connection (Mat. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; and 1 Cor. 11:25). The ASV uses the word "covenant," whereas in the KJV it is "testament."

God made a covenant with the children of Israel which lasted about 1600 years. Israel was unfaithful to that covenant over and over again. The Book of Judges is often pictured as a roller-coaster-like existence for the children of Israel. They were up and down in the sense of faithful and unfaithful to the Lord and that covenant. Judgment from God came during their periods of rebellion. The desire God had for fellowship is seen in the promise of a "new" covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). With the coming of that new and better covenant and in contrast to the old would be the actual forgiveness of sins (cf., Jer. 31:34; Heb. 10:3; 8:12).

In partaking of the Lord's Supper worthily, we should hear Jesus connecting His shed blood, symbolized by the fruit of the vine, with the new covenant. We are part of that covenant. When we partake of the Lord's Supper weekly we are reaffirming that since we desire the promises attached to the new covenant, that we will also accept and obey its commandments. This will lead to our living lives pleasing to God which do bring glory to the Lord. When we observe the Supper, we are recognizing the blood of the covenant is **the only power to save us from sin**. When we learn to appreciate the covenant connection, we will understand that our salvation cannot come from our own goodness or good behavior, but on the covenant relationship furnished by the blood of Jesus. So many rich benefits accrue to us as we partake of this memorial feast!

IT IS A PROCLAMATION (1 Cor. 11:26)

That the Lord's Supper is a proclamation feast is seen from 1 Corinthians 11:26—"For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come (KJV, ASV uses PROCLAIM). The partaking of the emblems is a proclaiming of the essence of the gospel (1 Cor. 2:2). When the children of Israel partook of the Passover feast it would cause their children to ask its meaning. Parents were then to relate the account of God's delivering them from Egyptian bondage (Exo. 12:24-27; 13:14-15). Christians do a similar thing when we partake of the Lord's Supper. We proclaim the gospel, our own faith in Christ, and we proclaim the second coming of Christ. **Till He come** (1 Cor. 11:26) tells us that this observance is to continue until the second coming.

IT IS A SERIOUS MISTAKE TO PARTAKE UNWORTHILY (1 Cor. 11:27)

Paul's language here is pretty frightening. To be guilty of the **body and blood of the Lord** is a most undesirable position to occupy! GUILTY here is the same word used in Matthew 5:21 and Mark 3:29. The consideration of Paul's warning here surely should cause you and me to want all the truth available to be able to avoid the described guilt. It is serious business to worship God in a manner that does not conform to His instructions. I fear that many Christians do not appreciate fully the warning stated here by Paul.

THERE IS A NEED FOR SELF-EXAMINATION (1 Cor. 11:27-29)

With many there seems to be some misunderstanding about this word, **unworthily**. Preachers often point out that an understanding of basic English grammar is helpful in the study of God's Word. Unworthily is not an adjective, a word which describes a noun or pronoun. It is not used to describe a person, but rather it is an adverb, used to describe the two verbs: eat and drink. It is possible for us to take of the Lord's Supper unworthily. Reading further, verse 29 helps to know what partaking unworthily is. It is to partake of the Supper without discerning the Lord's body. When we do not center our thoughts on the body of Jesus (His suffering, His love, etc.), we might just as well not partake of the Supper at all. Worship activities involve the mind. There are no magical qualities of the unleavened bread or the fruit of the vine to bless spiritually those who partake! To avoid the dire consequence of being guilty of the body and blood of the Lord I must focus my mind sharply on the memorial as the Lord intended. If I do not see in the observance that which the elements represent, then I am partaking unworthily.

Examining myself, I should partake of the Lord's Supper in a humble way. As such, I will understand that the gift of Christ's shed blood for the remission of my sins is far above what I deserve. I may be involved in numerous good works, yet Jesus directs me, "When ye shall

have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 7:10). I must partake of the Lord's Supper penitently. Thinking of the suffering of my Lord on the cross will lead me to feel strong remorse, shame, and sorrow for the sins I have committed. I will want to repent of those sins; I will want to confess them to God. I must take of the Supper with great gratitude for the gracious gift.

**THERE IS A COMMUNION OR SHARING ASPECT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER
(1 Cor. 10:16)**

Please notice that this passage is in an entirely different context. This part of chapter ten has to do with the sin of idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14). The word “communion” here is from the familiar Greek term, *koinonia*, meaning fellowship, participation, association. Paul is cautioning Christians to stay away from associating with idolatry. In verses 19-21 a contrast is drawn between the feasts associated with idol worship of the heathens and the feast that honors the Lord Jesus. Paul wants the brethren to understand that when they participate in the feasts attached to idolatrous worship they are having fellowship with idolatry and they are doing the very opposite of what they need to be doing (i.e., flee from idolatry, verse 14). The comparison is made to help them understand this relationship.

Though the lesson in this text is to flee fornication, the point Paul makes about communion should be appreciated by every Christian. There are many ways that Christians have fellowship with Christ. Keeping all of the teachings of Christ brings us into fellowship with Christ (2 John 1:9-10). The Apostle Paul connected the sacrifices he made for Christ with fellowship in the sufferings of the Lord (Phi. 3:8-10). Similarly, whatever Christians today suffer by way of persecution because of their faithfulness to the Lord is a communion with the Lord's suffering. But there is no closer fellowship with Christ than that time each first day of the

week as we surround the Lord's Table. When we partake of it properly our minds center upon the suffering Savior and how we are blessed as a result of that suffering. When we think about His perfectly selfless suffering for us, we become motivated to keep ourselves from sin. This communion on earth is only a foretaste of eternal fellowship in heaven.

Yes, Paul's instructions regarding the Lord's Supper are of tremendous value to us. If we will use these instructions properly, we will avoid the terrible consequences the church at Corinth suffered (1 Cor. 11:30). This means that rather than being spiritually sick or even spiritually dead, we can be strong in the Lord. Knowing of the spiritual battle we face on this earth and our need to be strong (Eph. 6:10), surely we will listen to and follow these valuable instructions.

ⁱ Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John, and Jude* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1973), p. 395.