

HOW TO BENEFIT FROM COMMUNION

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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INTRODUCTION

Federal law gives the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authority to require nutrition labeling for most foods. The rationale behind the legislation was that an informed public would be a healthier public. In practice this has not always been the case. A recent International Medical Survey bears this out. Researchers discovered that the Japanese eat very little fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans. On the other hand, the French eat a lot of fat and also suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans. The Japanese drink very little red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans. The Italians drink excessive amounts of red wine and also suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans. As a result of this survey the doctors came to this conclusion: Eat and drink whatever you like. Apparently it's speaking English that will kill you.

Americans seem to follow their own rules of nutrition regardless of the facts. There is the ever-popular Out-of-Sight Rule that states, "If no one sees you eat something, then it has no calories." The widely held Diet Coke Rule, "When drinking diet coke with a chocolate bar, the diet coke cancels out the sugar in the chocolate bar." And the Neighborly Theft Rule, "Food consumed from someone else's plate has no fat as it rightfully belongs to the other person and will cling to his or her aura."

But if Americans have only limited knowledge when it comes to the actual nutritional benefits of their meals they are even less knowledgeable when it comes to spiritual sustenance. Such ignorance is not a new problem. The Church members of Corinth faced such a problem. The combination of ignorance and abuse meant that they received no benefit from the Lord's Supper. The Apostle Paul wrote to them in order to get them to stop the abuses surrounding the Lord's Supper and also so they would have the right attitude when observing the Lord's Supper. And if we pay attention to what he says we, also, can learn how to benefit from the Lord's Supper.

1. DESIRE REAL COMMUNION

The Lord's Supper can benefit us if we come with a desire for real communion but it will have no benefit to us if we make it a mockery. Paul writes:

¹⁷Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, to begin

with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Cor 11:17-22 NRSV).

The early Church practiced a meal called the "Agape" or Love Feast, remarkably similar to our "potluck" suppers. The Christians came together, bringing what food they could, and they sat down to a common meal. It was a way of fostering real Christian fellowship and it set the stage for celebrating the Lord's Supper.

But in the Church at Corinth things had gone sadly wrong with the Love Feast. In the Church there were rich and poor; there were those who could bring plenty, and there were Christians who could bring very little. For many a poor Christian the Love Feast must have been the only decent meal in the whole week. But in Corinth the art of sharing had fallen by the way side. The rich did not share their food but ate it in little exclusive groups by themselves, hurrying through it in case they were asked to share, while the poor had next to nothing. The result was that the meal at which the social differences between members of the Church should have been obliterated only succeeded in aggravating these differences.

The Lord's Supper is often called communion. In fact, Paul himself uses this term in the previous chapter (1 Corinthians 10:16). The Greek word is *koinonia* and it means "fellowship marked by sharing." If we come to the Lord's Supper and do not desire real communion, that is, fellowship with God and his people, or if we do not wish to share with those in need then we make a mockery of communion, a mockery of the Lord's Supper.

Over the centuries the Christian Church has done two things to overcome these abuses: (1) encouraged an offering for those in need, and (2) discontinued the Love Feast. I think the first was a good idea and it is the historical and biblical basis for receiving special offerings whenever the Lord's Supper is observed. For example, on communion Sundays here at First Pres we encourage members and regular attenders to consider contributing to the Deacon' Fund to aid those who are distressed and afflicted.

However, the second action, the discontinuation of the Love Feast, means that the modern church has lost the custom of associating a regular supper with the Lord's Supper. In general, the loss of the Agape or Love Feast has, I believe, impoverished our Christianity.

In any case, we must not despise the church of God or show contempt for those in need. Rather, in order to receive the benefits of the Lord's Supper we need to desire real communion, a fellowship marked by sharing.

2. DESIRE RECURRING COMMUNION

The Lord's Supper can benefit us if we come with a desire for recurring communion but it will have no benefit to us if we take it too lightly. Paul writes:

²³For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:23-26 NRSV).

The Lord's Supper brings to mind Christ and his costly sacrifice that paid for our sins once for all. It reminds us that the cross is the ultimate demonstration of the Savior's love for us. The Lord knows how forgetful we are and so has commanded that we continue to observe this meal and never forget its significance. The phrase, "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup" indicates a recurring experience in the life of the church and individual believers. There are spiritual benefits we cannot receive if we neglect this meal. Sadly, many do. At best such people regard the Lord's Supper as a nice religious ceremony but never as the vital necessity it is. If we would receive the benefits of this meal we must not be neglectful in our participation rather we need to be diligent in using this meal to make personal application of the meaning of the Lord's death to our lives.

3. DESIRE RENEWAL IN COMMUNION

The Lord's Supper can benefit us if we come with a desire for renewal in communion but it will have no benefit to us if we approach it unworthily. Paul writes:

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.

²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. ³⁰For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. ³³So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come (1 Cor 11:27-34 NRSV).

John Calvin was one of the leaders of the great renewal movement we call the Reformation. He had a concern, based on this passage, that Christians prepare themselves before they come to the Lord's Table. This concern was institutionalized through the use of Communion Tokens. No one could receive the Lord's Supper unless they had a token. A communion token was given to each member if and only if the session of elders felt that the person was worthy to receive communion based on church attendance and an oral exam on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed and the Shorter Catechism. On the day of the communion service, tables were placed in the front of the church. The bread and wine were placed on the tables and communicants would take their place at one of the tables according to the "table number" stamped on their token. The tokens were considered the property of the church and were returned before the end of the service. The format changed over time but the use of tokens was widely practiced up until WWI. I have mentioned on previous occasions that paper communion tokens were used by First Presbyterian Church as recently as the 1920s.

The concern of our spiritual ancestors to be faithful to Scripture is commendable but the use of communion tokens produced at least two serious problems: (1) After a time people began to treat the tokens themselves as somehow holy and so were distracted from the elements of the meal. This was especially so for metal tokens that resembled coins. From time-to-time these tokens are available on eBay and fetch a hefty price. (2) More seriously, they saw the Lord's Supper as something you have to earn instead of as a gracious gift from God.

This all came about through a misunderstanding of what it means to approach unworthily. The original word is an adverb and in context means to come before God without any expectation that one needs to change. In other words, it means your heart has become hardened and if your heart has become hardened not only will you not receive any benefit from the Lord's Supper it may also bring a kind of judgment upon you.

In the past, there are at least three kinds of people who have been kept from the Lord's

Supper or who have kept themselves from the Lord's Supper: (1) Those who do not feel especially close to God, (2) those who know they have committed sin, and (3) those who believe they have a long way to go in their spiritual maturity. The great irony (and tragedy) is that the Lord's Supper is intended for just such people. If you do not feel especially close to God today or you are filled with regret over something you did or failed to do or you feel inadequate because there is so much about God and the Bible you do not understand then, Guess What? This meal is for you! On the other hand, those who think they do not need God's forgiveness or who have no desire to change into the likeness of Christ are probably the ones who should stay away.

CONCLUSION

Someone once said, "We do not need to understand the chemistry of bread in order to be nourished by it." In the same way, we do not need to understand everything about the Lord's Supper in order to be nourished by it. What is needed is the right attitude and a sincere appreciation for what Christ has done for us. If our desire is for a real, recurring and renewing experience with God and his people we shall reap untold benefits from this meal and delight forever in the grace of God.