

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 15

The Lord's Supper and 1 Corinthians 8-11, Part 2

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Teacher: Dr. Michael S. Heiser (MH)

This episode builds on the previous one, where Dr. Heiser discussed the context of Paul's teachings on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 — namely, the three chapters prior, 1 Corinthians 8-10. Those chapters show Paul laying out the “fellowship context” of the Lord's Supper, that Paul wants believers to know that they “partake” of a meal by which they enjoy fellowship (*koinoinia*) with the Lord. His context for that thought is the partaking of OT priests in sacrificial meat (though not of the sacrifices for atonement or sin offering), and the demonic “fellowship” that is the result of pagan sacrifice. This episode moves into 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul describes the Lord's Supper in relation to a fellowship meal. This context is crucial to understanding the focus of the Lord's Supper and the admonitions of Paul in connection with observing the Lord's Supper.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast. Last time on the podcast, we looked at 1 Corinthians 8-10, the three chapters that give us the context for 1 Corinthians 11 (the key passage with respect to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper). That context had a lot to do with the Old Testament notion of the participation in sacrifices as a communal meal. As such, Paul's discussion of the Lord's Supper is linked to that idea--the notion of a fellowship meal. We also noted that in such meals with respect to Old Testament priests, no portion of the atoning sacrifices were given to the priests for consumption. Instead, they took their portion of meat from other sacrifices known as “peace offerings.” As such, the priests didn't get grace from God for salvation or forgiveness in such participation. Rather, there was the enjoyment of fellowship that was possible by virtue of other sacrifices that purified the priests, atoned for sin, and put them into a right relationship with God.

As we'll see in this podcast, Paul proceeds from this context to cast the Lord's Supper as a meal about fellowship, not about receiving saving grace or soliciting forgiveness. So let's jump into 1 Corinthians 11. The section on the Lord's Supper begins in verse 17 of that chapter. Paul tells the Corinthians:

¹⁷ But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.

Paul notes right away that when the Corinthians get together for the Lord's Supper (which is what he's going to talk about in the next few verses), something is amiss. Something is going on that he can't commend or endorse. Continuing in verse 18:

¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.

Paul's charge is pretty straightforward. When the Corinthians meet for the Lord's Supper, they are doing something that invalidates it as being a true observance of the Lord's Supper. Paul alludes to a factionalism problem. But then he gets even more specific in verses 21 and 22.

²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

This description may seem odd until one realizes that in New Testament times there was a meal associated with the Lord's Supper. This was probably done to parallel the communal meal idea associated with the Old Testament priests. After all, according to New Testament theology, the Church was a "priesthood of believers." (That comes from 1 Peter 2:5, 9.) We know from ancient descriptions of what the early Christians did that a love feast of some kind (as it was called) was tied to the observance of the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11, we get a glimpse from Paul of how the Corinthian Christians were abusing that custom.

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First, Paul notes that "each one goes ahead with his own meal." Apparently, some were bellying up to the table and eating their fill, and others got neglected and went hungry. Additionally, this bit of information lets us know that a good amount of food was present--enough to fill a number of people as a regular meal, apparently at the expense of others. Paul was angry that certain people were being humiliated when they tried to participate in the meal. He simply can't commend their behavior.

Second, Paul says that some people were getting drunk at this meal. Again, that's evidence that a good amount of wine was present, not just one little cupful for people to pass around or the little tiny cups that are often used today. This was a meal spread out for the people in the church.

Now let's look at verses 23-26. Paul continues:

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Several observations from this portion are very important. First, Paul's language clearly links his understanding of the Lord's Supper to the Last Supper, not John chapter 6 (which isn't connected to the Lord's Supper in the Gospel of John). You recall that John 6 is obviously seven chapters removed from John 13, where we get the Last Supper scene. It's absolutely clear that Paul is not thinking about John 6 when he instructs the Corinthians. He's thinking about the Last Supper. Second, Paul says he had received this instruction directly from the Lord. This is noteworthy in that if you go back and look at the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, there is a command to take and eat. Only one of the Gospels (Luke 22:19-20) has the command to "do this in remembrance of me." In fact, these are the only commands in the New Testament about *why* we are to observe the Lord's Supper. This is it! In both cases, we are to do it not to receive grace or to be forgiven, not so that we can be saved, but simply, as the text says point-blank, "to remember the Lord's death and proclaim it [that is, the gospel] until he returns." That's all. One wonders why we've come up with so many reasons to observe the Lord's Supper when we have only these commands and they're so clear and consistent. Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 11 and we pick up with verse 27.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 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. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Here's where we get into more disputed territory. What does it mean to eat and drink "in an unworthy manner?" Why should we examine ourselves? What does "discerning the body" mean? With respect to *what* should we judge ourselves so as to avoid being disciplined by God with sickness and even death? Just about everyone I've read in evangelical circles on this section of 1 Corinthians 11

assumes that the issue being described is unconfessed sin on the part of the one partaking of the Lord's Supper. And so evangelicals teach that we need to confess sin before partaking, or make restitution with a wronged brother before partaking. Those are good ideas and the right thing to do in general. I certainly don't have a problem with them. But I do have a bit of a problem with this being the point with this interpretation for two reasons:

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1. Paul actually says nothing about the need to confess sin before partaking or making sure we're right with God. That has been imported into the passage by our traditions.
2. This explanation actually ignores what Paul telegraphed was the problem, and that is the manner in which the feasting that was part of the Lord's Supper was being conducted and abused. That was the problem he's targeting.

What I'm suggesting is that Paul actually tells us what he means by partaking in an unworthy manner. Once we understand that, the rest of the passage falls into place. Eating and drinking in an unworthy manner means conducting the Lord's Supper and its feast in the manner Paul just condemned--taking too much food so that others go hungry, by getting drunk at the meal, doing something that humiliates those who don't have as much, that sort of thing. If we accept this idea that committing the kinds of abuses Paul specifically describes is what Paul means by "eating and drinking in an unworthy manner," how does that help us understand the rest of the passage?

First, we ought to examine ourselves--that is, make sure we aren't guilty of doing any of those things. Since most churches today don't practice a full feast in connection with the Lord's Supper, it might be advisable to apply Paul's words to avoid any abuse of fellowship against fellow believers, which is a pretty wide net. But doing so will protect us from the Lord's discipline in this manner. So when we get together to observe the Lord's Supper (however we do it) we need to make sure that we aren't doing something that is of a divisive nature (because Paul cites factionalism in the passage) or that we're humiliating people or that something is going on where we're being cliquish or perhaps doing something to create classes within the church--that sort of thing. There are a number of ways we could specifically apply that.

Second, the phrase "discerning the body" would, therefore, mean assessing the needs of those who have come to the feast to celebrate the Lord's Supper... assessing the needs of the corporate Body of Christ--the local church. In the immediate passage, the Body of Christ would, therefore, be the Corinthian church--their local body of believers. In our case, it's our own congregation. Are there those we fellowship with that we're neglecting or humiliating in some way? I know this sounds simple (maybe too simple for some of you), but it's actually what's found in the text. How can I be sure? Just look at how Paul finishes the chapter. Look at how he finishes his discussion of the Lord's Supper. He tells

readers what he's thinking and, in doing so, answers the questions we just raised. Let's pick up with verse 33:

³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— ³⁴ if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.

Paul's referencing his earlier warning here about eating unworthily, lest judgment come. He does so by warning people to avoid pigging out before everyone else, especially more poor believers (before they get a chance to eat). "If you're just there for eating, hey--you have your own home for that." Essentially, he says that if you're that hungry, eat at home so that the less fortunate in the congregation don't get cheated at the communal meal and humiliated in the process. I would, therefore, propose that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is really simple: to remember the Lord's death until he comes and proclaim that death (the gospel) to any onlookers. Avoiding God's displeasure when doing so is also easy to understand, but conditioned by the way the supper was conducted in the first century. Don't turn it into a spectacle and an occasion where fellow believers (especially the poor) are deprived or humiliated or otherwise dis-fellowshipped by something you do within your own local body.

Today, since most churches don't connect the commemoration of Jesus' death and future return with a dinner, it might do to have the Lord's Supper also be a reminder to care for the less fortunate in our churches. But now think about it: commemorating the Lord's death and future with a dinner sounds suspiciously like the Lamb's Supper in our end-times discussion, doesn't it?

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By way of conclusion, before we wrap up... I hope that listeners who recall the first podcast on this subject can see how some of the odd beliefs mentioned back then that are associated with the Lord's Supper ought to give way to the text (and only the text). Catholicism wants to filter the observance through John 6 and then literalize the elements, but John 6 wasn't the Last Supper. And so that's no basis for the doctrine. Early Protestant theologians like Luther and Calvin didn't want their own positions to sound too Catholic, but they were stuck on the notion that something mystical (they'd probably call it "spiritual") was happening at communion (the Lord's Supper)--that Jesus was somehow present and the act was sacramental in some way in terms of dispensing grace. These ideas are superfluous when we note that what Paul says is linked to an event divorced from John 6, and that the only command associated with the Lord's Supper demands that we do it to remember the Lord's death and declare that event until he returns.

It's hard to imagine how Paul could make things any simpler than by saying, "Do this in remembrance of me." You don't need any mystical presence for that, so I marvel at how so many other ideas have accrued to this simple command. Sadly, these misconceptions have led many Protestant denominations to forbid children

from the observance of the Lord's Supper. That's because they've wrongly associated it with some sort of reception of grace, all the while trying to not sound Catholic while saying that. If you think something mystical is happening at the observance, then I can see why children would be excluded. But to be honest, even that logic has problems. But if we attach the meaning of the observance to what is actually commanded (to do it to remember the cross), then why would it be a bad idea for children to be reminded of what Jesus did on the cross? That just doesn't make any sense. I would argue that's just completely unnecessary and misguided. Everyone, including children, should partake and remember how Jesus died on the cross and that someday they will get to observe the Supper with the Lord himself when he returns. Frankly, that might just capture their imaginations a bit, and that would be a good thing.

Until next time... thanks for listening.