

The Lord's Supper

Lesson 4: What is it to receive the Supper unworthily?

WLC 169-170

Intro

1 Cor 11.27-29. This part of our subject calls for serious consideration, because we don't want anyone to come to the Table *unworthily* and thereby incur the Lord's *displeasure. But neither do we want sincere communicants kept from the Table out of a fear of their unfitness.

Bickersteth: "The *timid and fearful* are either deterred from a most valuable means of grace by needless fears and scruples, or come with suspicions, anxiety, and distress. The *careless and worldly* approach the most solemn right of our holy religion without hesitation and make that service a sort of "passport to heaven," which only hardens their hearts and fills them with pride and self-righteousness; while a *large body of professing Christians* think the danger of receiving unworthily a sufficient reason for not coming at all."

- I. To what was Paul referring when he spoke of "an unworthy manner"? What were the Corinthians doing wrong? cf. vv.17-22.
 - A. They slighted the Supper which represented the Saviour's death, making no difference between it and a common meal, and they were guilty of excesses at the Table such that they were eating the bread and drinking the wine as if it were mere food for the body, leaving others hungry and getting themselves drunk. (The way in which the Lord's Supper is administered now renders such glaring abuses impracticable. But we can still slight the meal and treat it as less or other than Christ intended it.)
- II. What receiving unworthily *is not*
 - A. It's not feeling your own unworthiness. In fact it's just the opposite: we come in a worthy manner when we recognize that we *are* unworthy sinners who need our Saviour.
 - B. It's not having a weak faith. The meal was given by God to strengthen our faith and therefore welcomes those with weak faith to come.
 - C. It's not having doubts and fears and anxiety about our welcome at the Table. These things usually arise from an unhealthy introspection and a faulty expectation of finding the warrant for our welcome in ourselves rather than in Christ. We should be instead looking at the riches of Christ and the liberty of His gospel, which assure us of welcome.
 - D. It's not feeling the power of indwelling sin. This feast is not for angels, but for men encompassed with sin and infirmities.
 - E. It's not feeling a coldness and dullness in the duty. Regardless of how we feel, if there's a willing mind, it's accepted according to what a man has and not according to what he doesn't.
 - F. Nor does our falling into sin afterwards prove that we partook of the Supper unworthily.
- III. What is it to receive unworthily or in an unworthy manner?
 - A. We partake *in an unworthy manner* when:
 1. We are living in willful and allowed sin. Those who live in any known sin or the allowed and habitual neglect of any known duty are excluded from the Table of that Saviour who died to save us from all sin and unto all righteousness. It's a horrid sin to come to the Table with a conscience still defiled by sin and hands still unwashed from sin.
 2. We are impenitent of known, practiced sin. *Haweis*: "Can it ever be supposed that God would respect our offering when He sees our hearts going awhoring from Him, following abominable things that He hates?"
 3. We are too young to "discern the Lord's body," i.e. receive the grace signified in the meal.

4. We have no suitable qualifications to enjoy the meal: i.e. faith in Christ for salvation and a love for Him as Saviour, with a hatred for and repentance towards the sin from which He came to save us, and a love for His church. *Haweis*: “No one can profitably partake who has not found acceptance with God through the righteousness of the Saviour and has not experienced the mighty power of His grace on their souls.”
5. We have no scriptural encouragements to go to the Table because we can’t be counted among the penitent. *Haweis*: “Repent of your sins, or else come not to that holy Table.”
6. When we think that a fitness for the Table consists merely in a purposed “strictness” the week or night before. This is to wash the outside of the cup.
 - a) *Haweis*: “No one is fit to approach the Table who’s not *every day* maintaining spiritual communion with Christ and [sincerely striving to] always [be] ready for His Table whenever the invitation comes.” In other words, what the Lord looks for at the Table is nothing extra-ordinary to what He looks for in our heart and life every day.
 - b) *Wherever Christ has true communion with the soul, there will be daily sacramental vowing of fidelity to Him and an exercise of faith in His death and its benefits—a daily communing of the soul with Christ between those seasons of communing at His Table.
 - c) It was once said that pastors should always be ready to: *pray, preach, and die*. In the same vein, Christians should always be ready to *pray, commune, and die*.
 - d) *Haweis*: “It’s absurd to put on religion as our best clothes, whether once a month or once a quarter. Such persons, instead of being friends of Christ, are no better than ceremonious visitors whose room would be more welcome than their company. Christ will ask such persons, “How did you get in here without a wedding garment?” (Mt 22.12). ***Haweis*: “The great end of this ordinance is that its influence may abide with us, and not that it be merely a ceremonious visit that is soon forgotten until administered again.”
- B. *Bickersteth*: “He who makes no difference between the sacrament and a common meal, does not look through the outward signs and by faith regard them as signs of the Saviour’s body and blood, does not trust in Christ’s death, has no love to Him, and whose tempers towards his fellow creatures are unforgiving and malignant, he does not discern the Lord’s body but receives it unworthily.”

IV. The great guilt of partaking of the Supper in an unworthy manner

- A. This is not a trivial transgression. Paul says we will be “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” and “eat and drink judgment on ourselves” (vv.27, 29).
 1. In the full sense of the term, this was the guilt of those who crucified the Lord. In a secondary sense, this is the guilt of those who apostatize from the faith. But in a measure, this is the guilt of those who profane the Supper by partaking unworthily. —*However*, let’s remember that this sin is not unpardonable, as many of those who crucified the Lord were graciously and mercifully converted in Acts 2 (cf. Lk 23.34).
- B. Severe afflictions have sometimes followed this guilt, vv.29-30
 1. Paul’s reference to judgment clearly does not mean eternal ruin. It refers to the displeasure and discipline of God, a displeasure that resulted in sickness and death (v.30), but also a discipline that proved them to be God’s children (v.32).

V. How to avoid partaking unworthily

- A. Don’t receive the meal *ignorantly*. Keep before your mind the great end designed in the Supper and look through the sign to the thing signified. Seek to understand the ordinance and have right views of Christ’s atoning sacrifice as you partake. None should attend who have no knowledge of Christ, the nature of salvation, and are unaware of their need for Christ or of the benefits they are to expect from Christ. *Where knowledge is lacking, the sacrament is mere bread and wine that cannot refresh the soul. We should have a right

knowledge of our sin, our sinfulness, our need for Christ's person and work, and of Christ as atoning Lamb, Saviour, Justifier, Reconciler, Redeemer, Fountain for cleansing.

- B. Don't receive it *irreverently*. Don't treat it lightly or come to it carelessly.
- C. Don't receive it *impenitently*. Sin must be hated, repented of, and cast off. Not just particular, known sins, but sin as a whole, sin in substance, sin as an enemy and murderer of your Lord.
- D. Don't receive it *unlovingly*. If we're entertaining a bitter, resentful, unforgiving, or hateful spirit toward any person, and especially toward our brethren, we're entertaining a temper directly contrary to the spirit of the ordinance, which was instituted by the heart of our Saviour when it was overflowing with love for His church.
- E. Don't receive it *with a carnal mind*. Looking to see who's there. Observing people's appearance. Looking to see who does or doesn't partake. Looking to the meal itself and not to Christ who's being offered in it. Serious inquiry is necessary before you presume to eat and drink at Christ's Table. Too many rashly and carelessly come to the Table, not discerning the Lord's body.
- F. **NOTE:** this is not to say that *any* unallowed ignorance, irreverence, hate, or carnality constitutes the sin of unworthy receiving. Where we know these things to be true of us, and lament them before God as something we want help with and want healing from, then we may, and indeed should, come to the table for the grace we seek. It's the habitual and allowed presence of these things that would give us reason to fear that we partake unworthily. If that's our case, then we should, without delay, seek for pardoning mercy, and come afresh, in a better spirit, to the Lord's Table. cf. WLC 172
- G. **Moreover:** let's notice what the Apostle says in v.28, 31. We're to examine ourselves, as best as we can before the Lord, *and then come*. The stress is on *coming*. The intent of the Apostle is to *include*, not exclude. His insistence on self-examination is with every intent to enable and prepare yourself *to come* to the Table. Hence, while there's a danger in receiving unworthily, there's a greater danger in willfully neglecting the ordinance altogether. It's better to sincerely discharge a duty, even if it be done defectively, than neglect it altogether, cf. 2Chr 30.13-22.
 - 1. *Bickersteth*: "It was the saying of a truly pious woman that "she would rather spoil ten duties, than omit one."" "Let no threatenings against the mingling of sin with the discharge of your duty lead you to neglect that duty, but rather lead you to a more conscientious and faithful discharge of the will of God."

VI. What is it, then, to *discern the Lord's body*?

- A. To discern the Lord's body is an act of the soul, the believing soul. The soul must see Christ by the eye of faith; it must truly receive Him to nourish the soul, just as bread and wine would be received to nourish the body. It must "so handle the word of life" that it appropriates and applies the blood of Christ and all His saving benefits to the soul. —All this necessarily presupposes new life implanted in the soul, resurrection from the death of sin, and a desire to grow in grace. **Only the living can feed at the Lord's Supper. The dead may partake of the *Supper* of the Lord, but they do not partake of the *Lord* of the Supper.