1 Cor 11:28 Self Examination and the Lord’s Supper

Today we will take the Lord’s Supper together as the body of Christ meeting here at SRYMCA. And, there is so much in this passage we just read and so many possible sermons to preach. The Lord’s Supper was given to us in the Church as a command and it is the greatest drama we could ever have pointing to the person and work of the Lord Jesus. But, I would like to focus on v. 28, a command by the Apostle Paul (which is also from the Lord Jesus himself) to examine oneself, and this in the context of the Lord’s Supper. As I begin this morning, I must say honestly this has been a laborious week of study for a few reasons. One, there is so much here, it is hard to narrow down. Two, what I have narrowed down is difficult because of missing context, as well as translations and word meanings in the Greek. Three, I am a sinner and the Lord has convicted my heart, especially in respect to the seriousness with which we should understand these words. I must also say that there are some things I still don’t understand completely and because of this I must be broader than I would like to be on some applications. By God’s grace, I approach this subject with the utmost humility. May the Lord Help me and us today!

So, What does it mean to examine yourself in the context of the Lord’s Supper? Here are three truths with some applications to follow.

1. Remember Christ. Look at v. 29. The ESV says, “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.” Some of you may find the word “unworthy” in this verse. This is one of those times where some manuscripts have a word while others do not. But, it doesn’t really matter in this case for he has already said the same thing in v. 27. We will come back to this later. For now, I would like for us to focus on the words “discerning the body.” I think “discern” is a good translation. Throughout the NT this word is translated “judge” or “discriminate.” It is not the kind of judgment we see from God see later in this text.

Paul uses this word in other places with the Corinthians and in these cases he is asking them to discern something and make the right decision. I will give one instance. In cp. 6:1-5 in the midst of great conflict in the Corinthian congregation, he says “When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? 2 Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? 3 Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! 4 So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? 5 I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers.” Paul is asking them to “settle” or “discern” this case themselves. In other words, you should be able to figure this out and rightly “judge” what is right.

Now, this word is right before the word “body.” So Paul is asking them to judge the body. There are two main interpretations. One says he is speaking about the “body of believers” gathering in Corinth. In other words, they are the body of Christ and they should act like Christ when they meet. Although this is certainly true, and can be interpreted this way, I believe he is speaking about “discerning” the body of Christ in some way. In other words, the bread represents the body of Christ that was sacrificed for his people on the cross. And, when the Corinthians acted in such
a way, they did not “discern” the true meaning of the sacrificial death of Christ pictured in the bread of the Lord’s Supper. To put it another way, their actions contradicted the true meaning of the death of Christ pictured in the supper.

Let me try and explain this further. When early Christians came together to meet they shared a meal. From what I have read, this was common even for non-Christians. It was simply part of their culture. But when the Christians came together, they called it a “love feast.” It was much like out “potluck” suppers. Everybody would come and bring all kinds of food. It is just like today when we say, “Hey guys, bring enough for your family and a bit more for Tommy.” But what is different about what we do today and what they did was this: They incorporated or added the Lord’s Supper into their meeting time with this meal. Most of those I read said that the Lord’s Supper was probably added somewhere near the end of their meeting.

I believe they simply followed our Lord’s example he gave during the Passover Meal. Now, all this is ok when done in the right way. But, there was great error in “discerning the body.” Their gatherings should have been in the right spirit with good deeds following. But Paul says in vv. 17-18, “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. 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…” Then in vv. 20-22 he says, “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 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!”

You see, there were both rich and poor in that congregation. Probably, there were more poor than rich. But, in Christ all are one. And those who brought the food and the drink should have been sharing with their brothers and sisters who had none. Maybe they were coming early and eating their own food with nothing left for the poor. There was certainly class discrimination. There may have also been racial discrimination. Instead of taking all the food that was brought and giving equally to all who were present, cliques were formed, and relatives, friends, those of one clique ate together, probably at private tables, the rich and prosperous separated from the poor, letting those who could bring little or nothing sit by themselves. It certainly wasn’t a love feast, much less the Lord’s Supper. In fact Paul says that what they were doing wasn’t even the Lord’s Supper. Imagine that! To think you were taking the Lord’s Supper, but instead, Paul says, “Some were eating and drinking judgment upon themselves, and some were weak and ill and some had even died.”

At this point it is almost as if Paul is so angry at what was happening that he is at a loss of words. “Can you not discern the meaning of the supper and what Christ did for you!? What you are doing is not CHRISTIAN. What you are doing is a mockery. In fact it is no communion at all! You have the ceremony, but not the reality! Do you not remember what Christ did for you?!” Then, right in the middle of this rebuke, Paul gives them these words in vv. 23-26. “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, 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." 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.” MacArthur says these words are like a diamond on a muddy road. Right in the middle of great conflict, I image Paul is saying, “You may be breaking some bread, passing the cup, and repeating some words of Jesus, but what you are doing has nothing to do with Christ. Remember Christ! Remember what he did. Remember what he said.”

2. Examine yourself. I get this directly from the command of Paul in v. 28 which says, “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”

I must admit that some of my labor in this passage had to do with this word “unworthy.” And my question before looking at these verses in more detail is: “Who IS worthy?” For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That God would speak and allow any of us in this room to hear is absolutely amazing! I feel like the Apostle John when, in his vision he saw the throne room of God. Listen to his words, “Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.” Then, he heard these words: “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev. 5:1-5)

Let me take a moment so say, If you are in Christ today, Christ is worthy. The benefits of his death have been given to those who believe. “Therefore, there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” If you believe on him, if you have received him, Christ became a curse for you. He was crushed by God on the cross. He took ALL the wrath that your sins deserved upon himself that you would not have to endure what most of the world today will endure for eternity. This is the Lord’s Supper which says, “This is my body which is for you! Take and eat!”

Some people believe that if they have unconfessed sin they must not take of the Lord’s Supper. This can’t be the meaning of “unworthy” in v. 27. For the Scriptures teach that Christ died for all the Christian’s sins, past, present, and future. If his death on the cross did not pay for all of my sins and put the Christian “now” in a “justified,” “right” standing before a holy God, then we cannot say the death of Christ is complete. Concerning his work that he came to do, Christ said, “It is finished.” This is why the hymn writer can say, “Full atonement, Can it Be? Hallelujah, what a Savior!” If you have unconfessed sin (which you probably do – let’s ask your spouse), we don’t have enough time in these next few minutes to contemplate all the sin in your life so that you can continue confessing, then who could ever take the Lord’s Supper?

I would say this morning if you are trusting Christ that not only are you willing to come, but you could have it no other way, for HE IS YOUR SAVIOR. If you are in Christ this morning and you are trusting him as your sin-bearer, heaven and earth will not get in your way of participating in such a gift as the Lord’s Supper this morning. If you say today, “Christ died for my sins. He died
for me. I am forgiven.” If this so, there should be nothing that would keep you from coming and “feasting” on the body of Christ by faith this morning. In THIS way all true Christians are “worthy.”

Now, back to my question: What does he mean by “unworthy?” Let’s remember our context. The Corinthians were (v. 27) “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.” As we saw earlier, they did not consider the meaning of Christ’s death pictured in the Supper as holy, but instead proved otherwise by their actions. In this way, they were guilty and did not partake “worthily.” It would be like the one who burns and tramples upon the flag. It is not the flag itself that is really dishonored. It is the country that it represents. In the way they were eating together, they disregarded and dishonored the One who gave meaning to the supper. They did not remember Him as they ought.

But, there is another aspect here that we need to consider. Look at v. 29. The one who eats in such a way as we have described, drinks judgment on himself. Some of you may have “damnation” instead of judgment. I do not believe this is the best way to translate this word. This translation has added to some of our confusion in respect to what it means to examine ourselves. As we have seen, there is now “no condemnation (damnation) for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Yet, if we read this verse as “damnation” we have a problem. If so, a Christian can take the Lord’s Supper as the Corinthians and condemn himself in eternal judgment. This cannot be the case.

I believe this word “judge” in v. 29 is in the overall context of chastisement. Here is why. Look at vv. 31-32: “Bit if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.” Although Paul did not know who were Christians and who were not, he addressed them all as believers, or as a “Christian” church. Verse 1 says, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus…” And, he knew some of them were truly taking the supper in the right way. Look at v. 19: “For there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.” And, I don’t see how we can get around the fact of v. 30 which says, “That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.”

In some way, Paul was telling the Corinthians to judge themselves concerning the way they were taking the Lord’s Supper. And, if they did so, they would not be chastised by the Lord, even the chastisement of sickness and death itself in his loving chastisement. Remember, the Lord disciplines those he loves.

3. Love the Body of Christ, v. 33 “Wait for one another.” Consider one another. Consider the body of Christ in light of what Christ has done for us. The best explanation of what Paul means is found in Philippians 2:1-7. Listen to his instructions: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,”
who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:1-7).

In the end, he was saying, “If this is what you are doing, then you aren’t taking the Lord’s Supper at all.” It follows that if a church today does the same in spirit, I think they should not take the Lord’s Supper until they can fix the problem. In v. 34, if this is what you are doing, “eat at home, so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.” It is almost as if the whole scene of the way they were doing the Lord’s Supper was an actual picture of judgment instead of a picture of what Christ had done for his church. Instead of displaying the glory of the gospel in their understanding and the way they did the Lord’s Supper, they were actually acting out a real drama of judgment for the world to see.

Applications. So, how can we examine ourselves this morning? There is much I could say; and I am SURE I have missed much in this passage, but here a few things to consider as prepare to take the Lord’s Supper.

1. As a non-Christian. If you are not a Christian, you have no business taking the Lord’s Supper. There are no benefits for you.

2. As an individual Christian. If you are in Christ this morning, there is nothing that should keep you from coming and taking the Lord’s Supper. Of course examine yourself in all areas. This is part of our “testing to see we are in the faith.” This is part of your “working out our salvation with fear and trembling.” But, you can rest assured, that if you come in this spirit, you are not taking unworthily.

3. As a Church. We must consider one another. If we should see that we are behaving in the way the Corinthian Church behaved, I believe we must get things in order and, by God’s grace, make things right. One of the things that will help us is to read our church covenant together.