

Worthy or Unworthy?

1 Corinthians 11:27-34 (ESV)

The question set before us today is this: who is worthy to receive the Lord's Supper? This question comes from Paul's warning against being an unworthy partaker in the body and blood of Christ. But, we don't really use the terms worthy and unworthy in our day-to-day talk. So, I'd like to define these terms with this illustration: the worthy or unworthy use of a handicap spot. Those prime and special parking spots closest to the store are marked with a blue sign and a stick figure in a wheelchair to mark only those who have the need can use this spot. The worthy are those with a need (and registration). The benefit they receive is a spot with much less travel to the front doors. Now, if I try to take that spot, that is an unworthy use of the handicap space. I am unworthy because I have two perfectly functioning legs (though my knees crack a lot). I might like that benefit of a close spot (because I'm lazy), but if I gain the benefit it comes with a punishment. If I unworthily use the spot, then I might face a hefty fine for abusing the gift meant for someone else. Back to the Lord's Supper: we have discussed quite a bit what the benefit of this meal is and we've even touched on how this benefit is received. Today, we will discuss who should receive this benefit and gift. We will answer: who is worthy?

THE ONE WHO IS WORTHY TO RECEIVE HAS FAITH.

The reason we can speak of one as worthy or unworthy to receive the Lord's Supper is because there is something actually being offered here that is more than just bread and wine. St. Paul says, "**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**". If there was nothing here but bread and wine, then what is the worry concerning who comes to the altar? Anyone can eat bread and wine; but, not everyone should eat the Lord's body and blood. The one who eats in an unworthy manner will stand under judgment for desecrating and disregarding the very body and blood of God. This is not play food with which we handle. Unfortunately, there are some Christians who believe that there is no guilt for unworthy persons to eat the bread and drink the wine. They think that the only ones who receive the body and blood of Jesus are those who have faith. Everyone else just receives bread and wine. That is a dangerous error though, my dear Christian; do not fall into the same trap. Everyone who eats the bread and drinks the wine, at the same time, eats the body of Jesus and drinks the blood of Jesus. That reality does not depend on our faith, but on our Lord's promise. That also means that those who unworthily receive, receive guilt for doing so. In our simple example of unworthily using the handicap spot, there is guilt associated with a non-disabled person like me parking in that designated spot. If I am caught, I pay a hefty fine. So too there is a punishment for the guilt of unworthily receiving the Lord's body and blood.

And this is a scary and frightening thing: to be responsible for handling and receiving God through means of this eating. That is why such great care and responsibility is required. That is why St. Paul says, **“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.”** Before the eating and the drinking there must come the examination. There must come the questioning. Otherwise there is judgment, or condemnation, from God. As Paul points out, this judgment was already manifesting in the Corinthian congregation. There were some who had become unfeeling towards spiritual things. They had been wasting away from a spiritual sickness, even to the point of spiritually sleeping. They didn’t care, or think through what this great treasure they were receiving by eating the Lord’s Supper; it was not changing their life whatsoever.

Well, what is this required examination? Because you certainly do not want to be placed under God’s judgment. You are under the fear of the Lord; you have a care that you do not become an unworthy recipient. Do you have to pass some great academic test to be admitted to the altar? Is this all about knowledge? (Maybe confirmation felt that way to you). No, it’s not all about learning and knowledge. If there was rigor about learning the catechism, it was not meant to be like a bouncer keeping you from entering this sacred space, but as a means and a way to help you treasure the content of the Scriptures. Is this examination all about being a good person before you can receive the Lord’s gifts? Do you have to check all the right boxes and get your life in order before you can receive the great treasure of your Lord’s body and blood? No, of course not. This meal is meant for sinners. Your Lord Jesus gives his body and his blood as tokens of his forgiveness of sins won for all who have sinned. This is not a meal for those who have self-worth, but for those who see themselves as unworthy, who need a savior.

So what then is a proper examination? The proper examination is to see if you have faith. Behold, it’s simple; but, this examination is not simplistic. Do you have the faith required to receive this gift? What is this faith? It is the faith which trusts in two things: one, I need this gift, and two, I know my savior Jesus will provide it here. First, you have to know why you specifically are coming to the altar. You must recognize that you are a sinner and need the forgiveness of sins. You ought to understand that if you had to stand before God’s judgment seat, you on your own abilities would be pronounced guilty. How do you learn of this? You measure your life against the Ten Commandments and see whether you have kept them completely. You ask yourself: “Have I trusted in someone or something other than God? Do I pray regularly? Have I always delighted to hear God’s Word? Have I treated my spouse, children, friends, co-workers, or family well? Have I spoken kindly to them, been patient with them, and spoke well of them to others?” As you ask yourself these questions, and being honest with yourself, you see the need for help from your merciful and gracious God.

Well, where does God want to help you with all the ways you have been disobedient and rebelled against him? This is the second part of the necessary faith required to come up to this altar. You must know why you are coming to this specific spot. You need to know what your Savior promises concerning the bread and the wine he distributes so that you may receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. This has been the content of our midweek series. This has been the point and aim of preaching all these sermons on the Lord's Supper: so that you might know what is offered here. Now, you can be confident that your Lord Jesus Christ gives you the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation when you eat the bread and drink the wine. And you know this through the promise words: "Given for you..., shed for you..." So, because you know you are a sinner, you are also offered a specific promise on where to obtain the forgiveness of sins.

How often should this examination take place? It must occur every time before you receive the Lord's Supper. Remember, this gift is not a trifling, or trivial, matter. This is the body and blood of your Lord Jesus Christ. So, you must flee from the temptation of just receiving the Lord's Supper because that's what you've always done. You cannot just put the autopilot on and lay back in your seat with your faith. No, this gift is meant to be cherished by always reflecting on why you come up to receive the bread and the wine. Yet, it is not like we need regular, public examinations like our catechumens receive before confirmation. They receive a public examination because they have just gone through an intense study and preparation concerning the content of the Bible. This doesn't mean they are done learning the Bible just as you are not done learning the Bible. But, what they experience is not the barometer or test that all Christians everywhere, all the time, must experience before they can receive Christ's gifts. Remember, what is the proper examination? To have faith; to have faith in the fact that you are a sinner, and to have faith that Jesus gives you forgiveness through eating his body and blood.

All this is testified by the words of St. Paul: **"But 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."** The Christian congregation is concerned about you and your self-examination because we want no one to receive the Lord's body and blood unworthily. We do not want anyone to come under judgment. That is why Paul says, "if we judge ourselves truly, we would not be judged." We ask ourselves if we are worthy (and find that we truly need forgiveness), so that we do not come under God's judgment. This discipline from the Lord - this reflecting on the Ten Commandments and finding ourselves as failures - is much better treatment than being condemned with the world. It might be unpleasant to be frank with ourselves with how we are sinners, but it does not remain unpleasant for long because we know that God provides the salve and nourishment for sinners.

All this shows the importance of the question: am I worthy to receive my Lord's body and blood? Am I worthy? We ask the question in the first place because there is a danger to disregarding and treating lightly the gift of God, the Lord's Supper. Since we want to be found worthy, we have to know why we come to this place regularly. We need to judge ourselves, to examine ourselves. The examination is only trying to answer this question: do I have the faith required? Do I know that I am a sinner? How did I find that out? Do I know and trust that the help for sinners is offered in the body and blood eaten and drunk? How can I be sure of that? Once those questions are answered, then we can be confident that we are found worthy. Not because of anything we have done, but all because of what Christ has done. Amen.