

Nov. 26, 2017

## Lesson 13: God's True Covenant People

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11

### **Context:**

Our final lesson for this series on covenant takes us to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It is in this passage that we receive some of our most formative theology surrounding Holy Communion and is the only known recording we have of the Eucharist in the Pauline writings.<sup>1</sup> The words that are used in this scripture passage are the same ones that we use in our liturgy whenever we receive Holy Communion in our churches.

The background of this passage is that the Corinthians are struggling with how to treat and interact with one another. As the church would gather for a communal meal, some of the Corinthians who had greater resources would feast on their own food and wine, while the others who had less would go hungry.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Paul relays to them that they are not participating in the Lord's Supper as they are having a private meal.<sup>3</sup> Yet this private meal is causing disruption as they are continuing a Roman tradition and not a Christian one. There is also the fact that as they are gathering, some individuals are eating before others arrive.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Paul writes to give them some instructions about how they are to see this meal together.

In verses twenty-three through twenty-five, Paul gives them a pattern of Jesus' words found in Luke's Gospel where they are reminded to "do this in remembrance of me." Whenever the people eat, they are to be reminded that Jesus is with them. The sharing of the Supper calls the community to think of Jesus' death for others and that death is understood to initiate a new covenant.<sup>5</sup> This covenant relationship is to bind them to God and one another and is to be reflected in the meal that they share with one another. The Corinthians are to have better table manners where they do not participate in the Roman structure of the day. Christ's death changed them all as he died for all social classes and all people. To have special positions or to only feed a few dismiss Jesus' death and is an unhealthy form of amnesia. The covenant is forgotten when people do not receive the same invitation as others.

Paul's words in verses twenty-seven through thirty-four remind them of the table manners they are to have when they eat: everyone sharing the meal and not giving only a few social privileges to those born in a certain social class. Paul makes a judgment case in the text that the reason the church is suffering in the community is because of their own divisiveness.<sup>6</sup> They have caused suffering to one another by continuing on with their distinctions. In the process, they have forgotten their identity in Christ and they have forgotten that Jesus' gave his own body and blood so that others might live. It was time to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, "First Corinthians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1997), 203.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>4</sup> I Cor. 11:33, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

wake up and to remember the transforming nature of Jesus' redemptive life and death.

**Application:**

How appropriate that this week's reading falls after Thanksgiving, the time when we gather with our loved ones to give thanks for our many blessings and to fellowship with one another over a meal. Most of us have different stories or favorite times where we can comment that God was present at a family meal.

One thing that has always stuck with me is that Thanksgiving is to not just be something that we celebrate once a year as a prelude to Christmas so that we can add more items to our households. The same comes while reading this scripture passage. Whenever we think of Holy Communion, we should be reminded of the gratitude that comes with God's new covenant with humanity. The Lord's Table is first and foremost a place where the entire community is made one in Jesus Christ. Divisions and conflicts should reveal to us the places where we have been ungrateful for the work that Christ came to do. Christ came so that all may have life abundantly, rich and poor, male and female, young and old. Whenever we divide over contentious issues, we break the table and say that somehow someone doesn't belong there. We become ungrateful for the beautiful diversity found in humanity and miss the point about the connectedness that is to unite all brothers and sisters.

The Lord's Supper also focuses us on the memory of Jesus' death. To know Christ is to hear the Eucharist story and to realize that he gave himself for us. As such we are to live sacrificially for others giving ourselves to our communities and churches. We are empowered by the meal to go out and give to others just as Christ has given his life for us. It may break the norm of only living for our own interests and pleasures, but it is what we are called to do. In our churches, this means doing things in our own community and including all people, even those in the neighborhood who look very different from us. It also means that we embrace new people with their gifts, their talents, and even their questions about the faith.

As we come from this season of Thanksgiving and reflect on these words to the Corinthian church, we are reminded that these words speak to the church today. With all the different contentious issues facing our individual churches and our corporate church, we are reminded in these words that to dismiss one another or to not ignore the pain of others is to forget the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. At the table of Christ, all are given healing and all are welcome. The elements are to be shared and we are to be made one together even with all of our differences. "Do this in remembrance of me," is to be a phrase repeated over and over again from church to church, generation to generation, person to person.

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