

"SELF EXAMINATION"

TEXT: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and the blood of the Lord.

Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."

(I Corinthians 11: 27, 28)

INTRODUCTION

Several months ago following one of our Communion services, someone asked me the question: "Just how should I feel when I take communion?" Perhaps the question was due in part to the fact that the Lord's Supper did not mean as much to this person as he thought it ought to mean. He may have felt that his own mood had something to do with it. This may be a question that has come in to your mind at some point when you were getting ready to "take communion"...as we often say.

"How should one feel when he or she takes communion?" I've forgotten how I answered the question and chances are that whatever I said has probably not been remembered. I wonder if there is a straight-forward and satisfactory answer to the question. I wonder...is there a special set of feelings, a mood, which one can put on like a cloak...

On the other hand, one ought never to approach a service of holy communion "cold"...that is, one ought never to come in here carelessly, casually and hapazardly. We are dealing here with symbols that speak to us of holy things. These symbols have nourished the lives of countless numbers across the centuries since Christ first encouraged us to do "this in remembrance of Him". Even back there in the First Century, Paul writing to the Corinthian Church offered this rule for the individual's preparation of himself for communion. Said he,

"Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup...."

DEVELOPMENT

Suppose we think about his word of instruction for a few moments before we share in this Holy Sacrament.

To begin with, I think we must be very careful not to misinterpret what Paul was suggesting. He is not telling his friends at Corinth that before they are allowed to present themselves at the Lord's Table that they must be able, after stringent self-examination, to declare themselves spiritually excellent and without moral blemish.

I touch upon this because occasionally you will bump up against people who feel that they ought not to take communion because they're not good enough to receive it. They feel unworthy. Such feelings of unworthiness generally come from genuine spiritual sensitivity. But often it is a distorted sensitivity...and this feeling that one is not "good enough" to take communion can lead to serious misunderstanding. We need to remember that the Church of Jesus Christ was not meant to be a museum for saints so much as it was intended

to be a hospital for sinners. I think we are missing the meaning of the Sacrament if we see it in some way as a symbol of man's goodness, with participation in it reserved for those who have achieved "honors" in the Christian life. If we insist on a standard of high excellence or of near perfection, who among them...really...is good enough to take communion.

WHEN PAUL SAYS When Paul declares "Let a man examine himself...", he is not demanding the kind of examination for which marks are given, but rather he is demanding the kind of examination which reveals the nature of that which it tests.

He is not calling his reader to perfection, so much as he is calling them to confession. Confession - Paul declares - must precede communion. Before coming to the Holy Table you must look into the very depths of your heart, and be honest with yourself and with God about what you see there. This should be part of one's preparation.

In our Communion service, we generally say a prayer of confession together. Is this a genuine act of confession for each one of us. Or is it merely an empty paragraph filled with old and meaningless words? Richard Hooker, a great Churchman of England in the 16th Century, said that a congregational Prayer of Confession should be applied by each worshipper to "his own particulars". What happens when you join in this congregational confession? Do the words simply roll off your tongue and then through your mind without disturbing a thing in your conscience? Or do you, as I hope some of you do, think about the words you're saying...and imaginatively apply them to your "own particulars"? ...to the sins and the shortcomings of your life, to your own acts of lovelessness and faithlessness, to the sins of your disposition, those terribly mean things - the envy, the pride, the prejudice, the malice, the gossiping tongue, the lust for power....those things which lie just beneath the surface of your life. "Where there is love" who said it? "There is no will to power."

A man, said Paul, just confess his sins and shortcomings before the Almighty before he kneels to receive the bread and the cup.

In one of the great classic liturgies of early Protestantism (the one prepared by John Knox, that great spiritual giant of Edinburgh, Scotland) this assurance is given in the communion order. Here it is:

"Our Lord requireth no other worthiness on our part
but that we unfeignedly acknowledge our naughtiness
and our imperfections".

What "naughtiness" and what "imperfections" ought you to acknowledge before Him here this morning.

CLOSING The Lord's Supper will be for you merely a bit of meaningless ritual if you do not prepare yourself for it...if you do not come to it in a mood of confession and contrition...relating ~~to~~ the words that are being spoken to the "particulars" of your life. If, as you receive the elements, you can quietly say to yourself, as the publican in the parable said, "God... be merciful to me - a sinner"....you will there meet the loving care, the tender mercy, the forgiveness of God. And you will find there the healing for

your life. Indeed, you will rise and depart from here in peace.

There is a story which warrants retelling on occasions such as this about an incident that occurred at a communion service many years ago at which the officiating minister was Dr. Douglas Duncan, one of the great spirits of the Church of Scotland, in Edinburgh. During the service, Dr. Duncan saw a woman sitting in the pew near the front of the church pass the cup untasted while tears poured down her cheeks. He left his place at the holy table, stepped down into the aisle, took the cup from the Elder and gave it to the weeping woman with these gentle words, "Take it woman....aye, He died for you."

LET US PRAY Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence, O God in these moments this morning. We thank You for the gift of life and of love that comes to us in Jesus Christ.

May we find in the bread and the cup such an expression of His life and His love that it may become a part of us. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him....that we may go forth from here renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished, made new.

Point us to those things that are unworthy in our lives....that dishonor You...things that prevent us from living at our very best. Help us to root out those sins of the disposition...the hardness of heart....the selfishness that is there.

Finally, help us to "trust and obey" that we may truly be happy in Jesus, Our Lord and Master. ~~In His name we pray. Amen~~

Our Father, we also offer our private prayers of thanksgiving for the safe return of our brothers and sisters who were held hostage in Iran. Never are our prayers unanswered.

Help us to "trust and obey" that we may truly "be happy in Jesus"....