

1 Corinthians 11:17-32  
*“Mistaken Identity”*

Mrs. Miller was a member of the first church I served in Mercer County, a small, rural congregation in an old coal-mining town. I began to notice that on the worship days we celebrated the Lord’s Supper Mrs. Miller declined to come forward. At first, I thought it might be a case of mistaken interpretation of the Church’s invitation, so I labored to invite publicly all those who were present to come and give thanks for God’s awesome mercy and love made known to us in Jesus Christ!

Still, Mrs. Miller remained anchored to her pew.

Realizing this could be a personal crisis with her faith, I visited to inquire. She reported to me a Bible passage that she’d learned some time before, a passage about being “unworthy” – and that one word seemed to settle into her memory bank. And like many others, she felt unworthy to take communion. She felt unworthy of God’s love. Knowing her own secret life, she felt unworthy of grace or mercy; unworthy of Christ’s sacrifice on her behalf.

I tell you, she had me stumped, because I wasn’t familiar with the passage she had tried to quote, but I looked it up after that, and I’d like us to read through this passage today.

READING 1 Corinthians 11:17-32

<sup>17</sup> Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. <sup>18</sup> For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. <sup>19</sup> Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. <sup>20</sup> When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. <sup>21</sup> For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. <sup>22</sup> What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took a loaf of bread, <sup>24</sup> and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” <sup>25</sup> In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.

<sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. <sup>30</sup> For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Now understand, Paul is irritated with the way Christians are acting. Some of these verses are the words of an angry man. He begins, in verse 17, “I do not commend you...” Then as he reflects on the drunkenness of the communion service Paul explodes, “What? Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?” (vs. 22)

Paul rebukes the Corinthians for receiving the memorial of Jesus’ crucifixion in an

“unworthy manner.” Let’s be clear about the conflict Paul identifies in their communion practice.

- First of all, Paul highlights their “division” or quarreling. How frustrating that must be for God, who longed for a faithful, powerful, spirit-filled group attuned to the mission and purpose of sharing faith and love for Jesus Christ! But we fall apart as a united Church when the devil is able to plant those seeds of dissension and disagreement within us ...and the mission of Christ lays stalled on the board room tables of His Church.
- Secondly, Paul criticizes their selfish attitudes of gluttony or consumption. The Lord’s Supper was much different then than it is now. The Church came together with a love feast that was anything but love in Corinth. People refused to share, to wait, to practice simple hospitality! **“When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.”**
- But then Paul brings to mind to what Mrs. Miller referred, vs. 27 – **Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.**

And let’s understand what the Bible is teaching us, first. **Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner...** What would be an unworthy manner by which we receive the body and blood of Christ? We begin with the first two warnings: Is there hostility among us? Is there animosity within us? Are we fragmented in our faith relationship with God, with one another, and with our world? And secondly, are we practicing kindness, hospitality, and love with those in the family of God?

You see, the Bible says, **Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.**

So in order to take part in the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner we should examine the condition of our spiritual relationship with God and with each other! And through this honest examination – we are worthy and welcome to come!

Now that doesn’t mean we *can’t come* to the Lord’s table if we recognize or acknowledge some things for which we’re ashamed. It is with my *acknowledgment* that I need to come!

- I come to this altar, giving thanks that God has made a place where I am forgiven, welcomed, received, and loved!
- I come here confessing my need for a Savior who will rescue me from my guilt!
- I come here confessing how troubled I am by the flaws and the failures and the addictions that plague me.
- I come praising Jesus that He offered His life as the punishment I deserve!

I am worthy because of what *God* has done for me and for what He has proclaimed about me! **For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.**

God so loved the world! He loves everyone! He loves me! He loves you! In fact, the mission statement on the side of the Bethlehem manger could have said: “Sent, in order that the world might be saved!”

But I want to visit this common misunderstanding Mrs. Miller had, because I think it’s typical for others. When the Bible says: **Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner...** (vs. 27), I think others can hear, “If you are unworthy ...and you eat this bread and drink from this cup ...you will be judged.” This misinterpretation is a matter of self-worth. What is my self-image? How do I see myself? Am I invited to the Lord’s table? Am I welcome?

If you've conditioned yourself to hear in this message, "I'm unworthy, and therefore I'm unwelcome," it's important that you know – in the scheme of things – we *are* unworthy! If it comes to merit – and whether I can *earn* God's love through my own goodness, I'm unworthy. If it comes to effort, I can't do enough to hide my sins. When it comes to accomplishments – yea, "I'm unworthy!" There are times when I feel like a miserable failure.

But God bases your worth and value on *His* heart, not yours; on His love, His passion, His purpose for your life!

You were made for Him! And He makes a way for you to come, despite your worst sins.

Maxie Dunnam wrote: I've not discovered a more common malady crippling people and stifling their growth in Christ than varying expressions of worthlessness. It is a spiritual disease:

- a disease that works on our minds, distorting our vision of reality;
- a disease that attacks our spirits, sapping our spiritual energy;
- a disease that engages our emotions, poisoning our feelings;
- a disease that always makes us neurotic because it fills us with fear and anxiety;
- a disease which can make us psychotic because, if allowed to run its course, feelings of worthlessness turn into suspicion and hatred of others.

[*Workbook on Becoming Alive in Christ*, pg. 68]

Self-esteem refers to an inner sense of worthiness that gives a person resilience and resistance to discouragement or criticism. But we have problems with self-worth – how I feel about myself – when our own "self-talk" confirms the criticisms, replaying the old recordings from an earlier day, "You're no good. You're a loser. You're a failure." A person with low self-esteem has little resistance to criticism and isn't strong enough to overcome the destructive messages that keep repeating themselves!

Our self-esteem is in trouble when we allow others to determine our value or significance instead of the One who created us. And I know the culture in which we live rewards those who are great actors, performers, athletes, celebrating others based on what they *do* or what they *know*. Most people who struggle with low self-esteem believe lies about their value to God, feeling that there's nothing in them to love – because we haven't achieved or accomplished something great!

But God declares your value based on *His* desire to choose *you*. He loves you and He has a purpose for you! Remember, God chose Abraham and Israel to be His covenant people – not based on anything they had done, but because He simply chose them to display His glory and grace to the nations! And God purchased you with the ultimate price – the life of His Son! You were separated from Him by sin. You were dying – and condemned! But God has reclaimed and redeemed you! *You* are *His* pearl, His diamond, His desire!

So you can join me in acknowledging our own corrupt and sometimes perverse nature, but stand in awe – or kneel in awe – of this great God who chooses to overlook the worst in us – in order to love us and protect us from the fears or frustrations of our own sin.

You are worthy – because you are valuable and precious to God!

INVITATION: Our heavenly Father wants you to stop believing the old recordings that tell you you're unworthy. And put yourself in places where you are encouraged and lifted up. Surround yourself with those who are positive and uplifting, and draw boundaries around those negative influences in your life. Don't let them penetrate your spirit with their lies!

Look beyond the evaluation of grades from school and the performance-evaluation at work, or the critical opinions unleashed from your spouse or your parents. Be patient – listen and believe the positive, powerful Word of God from the Bible!

Today, you're invited to come and praise God for His incredible love! You may be barely able to thank-Him; barely able to find words to use. But I want to invite you to say something like this, "Thank-You, Father – for your love. I've never been able to say that before, but now I am trying to trust Your love and Your desire for me."

Can you trust His love? God answered that very question through the prophet, Isaiah:

**Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for a child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you! See, I have written your name on my hand.** (Isaiah 49:15-16)

This time of prayer can be the repentance God looks for in your heart. If you're turning to Him in a new way – that act of turning to Him is the way we repent.

Today, as you come, examine yourself: Are you here for Him? Examine your relationship with those in your Church. Is there anything for which you need to apologize – or forgive? Let the power of God arise in us and in His Church through our humble obedience today!