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**Title: COMMUNION - A PICTURE OF LIFE & DEATH**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, ESV**

We are skipping over to 1 Corinthians chapter 11 today as we share concerning the Lord's Table before we partake of Communion. That doesn't necessarily mean we won't go back and catch chapters 9 or 10. That just means it seemed more fitting to share on Communion on a Sunday when we will be partaking of Communion.

As we have seen, the church in Corinth was filled with all kinds of divisions. There were divisions over convictions about what was right and wrong. There were cultural divisions and there were class divisions. There will always be diversity in the church - diversity of age, background, class, and race; diversity in our preferences, even diversity in our convictions over secondary matters, political preferences, and the like.

Jesus' vision of the church was NOT uniformity in all things culture, but A UNITY IN CHRIST that outweighs any distinctions in lesser things. For the Corinthians, the ONE PLACE that should have most displayed their unity was their coming together around the Lord's Table. However, it seemed to only accentuate their divisions. 1 Corinthians 11:17 - *"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. (How serious is this? It would be better for you NOT TO EVEN MEET. What worse thing could Jesus have said?)* <sup>18</sup>*For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.* <sup>21</sup>*For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk."* Okay, here is the lowdown: Remember, in the early days of the church, there were no church buildings. So typically, they gathered in homes, and it was often the home of a wealthy person, since their homes would have been big enough to host everyone. So, on the Lord's Day, they would have a shared meal together and then do church. They had a full meal; not just a wafer and juice, BUT... As a part of this meal, they celebrated "the Lord's Supper," or communion, or the Eucharist, or whatever you prefer to call it. Well, the rich people - because they knew each other, and most didn't have to work on the Lord's Day - would get there early and eat and drink and have a big time with each other for a few hours. Eventually, the poorer people would arrive about the time for the service to start. By then all the seats in the main room might be taken, and the poor people would end up sitting in another room or on the porch. Basically, it was as if you had two separate churches - one for the rich and one for the poor. Plus, by the time the poor people got there, the food was often gone. And... The rich people had been sipping on wine for hours. So, one group is HUNGRY and the other, Paul says, is BASICALLY DRUNK.

So now you have all this bitterness and resentment growing in the church: the rich don't want to be associated with the poor - they're no fun; they make conversations hard; they are uncouth; and the poor feel excluded, AND... WORST OF ALL, is that the final part of this meal included a moment to observe THE LORD'S SUPPER, the bread and cup, and so the rich and poor are basically observing that supper as two separate groups. The rich people in the main room, and the poor people out on the porch. Paul is completely exasperated by this. His tone in verse 22 is, "I don't even know where to start with you people. Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? You gotta bring this junk to church?"

To address this, Paul lays out a theology of communion - the Lord's table, the bread and cup - because, he says, IF you understand communion, this would have never happened. Paul then shares the gospel and notes the seriousness of the occasion. Here he goes: <sup>23</sup>*"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,* <sup>24</sup>*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.'* <sup>25</sup>*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.'* <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 guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.* <sup>28</sup>*Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread*

*and drink of the cup.*<sup>29</sup>*For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*<sup>30</sup>*That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died...*<sup>33</sup>*So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another."*

3 words arise out of Paul's theology of communion that you should remember in every communion service. 3 words that summarize what is happening in the communion moment when we share the bread and the cup; 3 words which, if we really believed and applied them, would cure so many of our social divisions. They are - **proclamation, participation, and examination.** Here we go.

**1. PROCLAMATION (vs. 26).** In verse 26, Paul says, *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* Normally we think of the preacher or teacher as the Proclaimer, and we are, BUT... Paul says the Lord's Supper is itself a proclamation - the bread and cup are like visual aids; One might consider them sermon props Jesus gave us to help us better reflect on the gospel. What are they proclaiming? **The FIRST thing they proclaim is that WE NEED TO BE SAVED!** As Paul notes, on the night before Jesus died, Jesus held up the bread and said, *"THIS is my body which is broken for you for the FORGIVENESS OF SINS."* If salvation could have been obtained ANY OTHER WAY, Jesus would NOT have had to die. If salvation could have been obtained through our GOOD WORKS, Jesus would NOT have had to die. If there really were MULTIPLE WAYS to get to heaven, Jesus would NOT have had to die. Some might think they are being generous and culturally sophisticated when they say, "Oh, Jesus is my personal way to get to heaven, but I'm sure God accepts other ways - just be a good person and sincere in your religion and God will accept that." That may feel kind and culturally sophisticated to you, but do you realize WHAT KIND OF INSULT THAT IS TO JESUS? Jesus prayed, *"Father, if it's possible, if there's any OTHER way, LET THIS CUP PASS FROM ME."* And... You're telling me that God the Father was like, "Well, there are multiple ways to Me, but He says to His only Son, "I'm still gonna make you die." What an insult to Jesus! So, this cup and this bread proclaim, "You need to be saved." Being sincere is not enough. You must be born again, from above. You need to be saved. So, the shed blood and broken body proclaim, "You need to be saved!" **SECOND, the bread and cup proclaim that YOU CAN BE SAVED!** Jesus did not add any qualifiers to the word "you" when He said, *"This is my body, which is broken for YOU."* Which means if YOU are a YOU, then He's talking to YOU. Sometimes people think, "Oh, not me. My sins are too many, and too big. Too shameful. I've turned away from God too many times." Not true. This is my body which is broken for YOU... OR... Maybe you've gotten some messed up view of Calvinism and you think, "I must not be one of the elect." Not true. This is my body which is broken for YOU. If you're hearing this right not, It CAN BE FOR YOU. Jesus said, *"Whosoever will may come and eat the bread of life freely."* I'm glad He said "whosoever," because if He had listed out certain kinds of sinners, I would have wondered if my sin was included in that list. In saying "whosoever," He means ANYONE FROM ANYWHERE, no matter what mistakes and sins and shame you bring. John 3:16... Put YOUR name in that verse. *"For God so loved \_\_\_\_\_, that if \_\_\_\_\_ believes in Jesus, \_\_\_\_\_ will not perish, but have eternal life."* His death is sufficient FOR YOU. "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that blood lose all their guilty stains." The dying thief... He cried "Remember me," AND... He was included. No baptism, no speaking in tongues, no missions trips, no volunteering, no tithing, no fasting, no church clothes, no COMMUNION, he couldn't even bend his knee to pray. But he did pray - "Remember me, AND... He was included! There is a place at this table for YOU, no matter WHO you are or WHAT you've done. No matter what kinds of failures or struggles you bring to this moment. You might be the biggest sinner in Marlowe ... or in West Virginia! THERE'S A PLACE FOR YOU! I'm thinking of the junior or senior high school cafeteria. The room is full. Seats are sparse. Then a friend waves his hand saying, "Here - we have a seat for you. We saved a seat for YOU!" Jesus saved a seat at the table for YOU; He invites you to sit with Him. **THIRD, we proclaim that suffering and death are NOT THE END.** *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."* In this world, good people live with hardship. Sometimes they are poor. This table proclaims, "Death is not the end!" Poverty is not the end. Jesus rose, and... He will return again." The book *The Early Christians in Their Own Words* by Eberhard Arnold says that one of the favorite worship postures of the early church, and they used it in communion, was worshipping with their arms

outstretched, not this way (vertical), but this way (horizontal), imitating the posture of the cross - for them it was the ultimate posture of triumph. The cross - what looked and felt like death - was part of God's great triumph. The gospel says to the POOR: You're not going to be poor forever. Jesus will return in triumph and then you WILL feast at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. To the SICK it says, "You're not going to be sick forever. You will suffer a little while, and... The Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in His wings." The gospel says to the OPPRESSED, "You won't be oppressed forever. The righteous Judge will return and make all things right and make all things new." To the LONELY and those who FEEL ABANDONED, the gospel says, "I'll NEVER leave you or forsake you. I have gone to prepare a place for you, and I'm coming again to take you home to be with Me FOREVER." This table proclaims that our hardship, like Jesus' cross, is part of bringing God's good plan into the world. Don't you dare look down on the poor; they are likely not poor because they did something wrong and certainly not because they are not good enough. JESUS was poor, and THAT was all part of God's good plan. **FOURTH, this table proclaims that this church is first and foremost a COMMUNITY OF THE FORGIVEN.** If the above is true, that we ALL need to be saved, and that all of us CAN be saved, and that poverty and suffering are NOT the measure of our lives, just temporary states that God has assigned to bring salvation in the world, soon to be overturned by His coming. That ought to create a profound equality around this table, right? **RELIGIOUS PRIDE has no place at this table.** *"Where is boasting?"* Paul says. We are first and foremost lost sinners who have been redeemed. *"For by grace, we've all been saved, by faith, and not even that of ourselves. It's the gift of God' not of works, where no man can boast."* All our best righteousness, Isaiah says, is like filthy, diseased rags. The blood of Jesus is the ONLY hope for the best of us and the CERTAIN hope for the worst of us. The Lord's Supper was fashioned after the Passover meal: In the Passover the Jews reflected on the fact that they were all slaves until God delivered them. There were no classes of slaves - rich slaves, poor slaves, good looking slaves, ugly slaves - JUST SLAVES who needed to be freed. Religious pride has no place around this table. **CLASSISM has no place around this table.** In God's eyes, we were all poor, wretched, helpless, and blind when He saved us. If you know the story of the Titanic, you know that boat was divided up into 3 separate classes or sections determined by the price of their tickets. The WEALTHIEST passengers on board typically traveled FIRST class - Business men, Politicians, High-ranking military personnel, Entertainers, Professional athletes, Socialites, and Bankers. SECOND-CLASS passengers were predominantly MIDDLE-CLASS travelers and included - Professors, Authors, Tourists, AND... Clergymen. THIRD-CLASS or STEERAGE passengers were primarily IMMIGRANTS moving to the United States and Canada. After the Titanic sank, and back in America people were wondering if their loved one had been rescued or drowned, the *New York Times* printed 2 COLUMNS of passengers: LOST and SAVED. There were NO other distinctions. In that moment, that's ALL that mattered. Everything else was inconsequential. **At the table, we should all recognize that at our core, WE ALL WERE SINNERS that GOD SAVED.** Classism does not exist around this table. **RACIAL DIVISION has no place around this table.** Yes, God created the ethnicities of the world as a panoply of His beauty; but in our most fundamental sense, we're the same. **At our most fundamental level, there's only ONE RACE: the HUMAN race.** Men and women made in the image of God. We ALL have the SAME PROBLEM - SIN; We all ONLY have ONE hope, the BLOOD and RESURRECTION OF JESUS. That by itself should destroy racism. Jesus didn't die as a white man or a black man or a Latino. He died as the perfect Lamb - without spot or blemish - the perfect Son of God. He died as the representative of ALL humanity. And... When He was raised from the dead, He wasn't raised as a Jew or a Greek but the LORD OF ALL. One of the biggest failures of the church in America was that, in large part, the church did not lead the way in the civil rights movements, and they should have. Because of all people we have the gospel that teaches us that we're all equal: one race of people made alike in the image of God with - a common problem, SIN, and a common hope, JESUS. Author Phillip Yancey said that "The sit-ins never would have been necessary if Christians had been sitting down together in church, at Christ's table, all these many years. People argued whether they could sit down and eat hamburgers and drink Cokes together, when they should have been sitting around Jesus' table drinking the wine and eating the bread together. The Lord's Supper is a sermon, a **PROCLAMATION**, that destroys ALL these divisions.

**2. PARTICIPATION (vs. 27-29).** At the Lord's Table, we "participate" in the body of Christ. Now, technically, the word "participation" doesn't occur in chapter 11. But... It's implied in verse 27 when Paul warns people not to participate in these things in an unworthy manner, because if we do, he says, we're sinning against Christ's body. You're literally touching something holy - the symbols of the death of His Son - while your heart is in a posture of rejecting them. In the chapter right before this one, chapter 10, Paul DOES use the word "participation," check it out: 10:16 - *"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a PARTICIPATION in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a PARTICIPATION in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup>Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."* "Participation" here means "fellowship." You are mingling with it; Its presence is touching you. There are two ways Christians go wrong with this: The FIRST is where Christians over-read this, believing the bread and cup become the actual body and blood of Jesus as we eat it. That's called "transubstantiation." That's the belief that the bread and cup literally transform into His flesh and blood - His actual DNA - as you take them. That's NOT what is happening here. The righteousness and presence of Christ are given to us THROUGH FAITH, not through eating. What does Romans 10:10 say? *"For with the HEART man believes unto righteousness, and with the MOUTH confession is made unto salvation."* Righteousness doesn't come to us by getting wet in the baptismal tank or by eating bread or by drinking wine. How does righteousness come into your life? By believing the Word of God, by trusting in Christ and, by confessing Him as Lord and Savior. Communion is not some kind of extra grace blessing that goes beyond the righteousness of Christ imputed to you when you trusted Him. When you trusted in Christ, you got the full righteousness of Christ, not a down payment that you supplement with communion or other sacraments. In the same way, the presence of God was given to you THROUGH FAITH. Isn't that what Paul says in Galatians? *"Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?"* (3:2). Did you receive the Spirit by taking communion or by hearing the gospel with faith? His answer is, *"by hearing with faith."* You received the Spirit the same way you were given righteousness - by believing the gospel. You got all of Him when you trusted in Christ. So, communion brings neither the righteousness of Christ nor His presence into you. Both of those were given to you fully when you accepted Christ. These things - the bread and the cup - are symbols of His body and blood, not His actual body and blood, BUT... That leads to the SECOND ERROR that Christians make with Communion. They see this whole ceremony as JUST SYMBOLIC. Just walking through some ritual that helps illustrate the gospel. Paul says that in Communion we are actually participating in Christ. We are experiencing His presence in a special way. His presence is here in these moments in a unique way. You say, "Pastor, Jesus is in my heart. He's ALWAYS here." Yes, but He manifests His presence in special ways at different times, and I hold that COMMUNION is ONE of those times. Communion brings to the forefront exactly the measure of His love for me and the price He paid for me. To understand that at any level should overwhelm us with His love. His presence manifests itself when we set aside the many distractions of life and focus on the ultimate sacrifice given for mankind - US - through the body and blood of Jesus, God's Son. That's what happens in Communion. His arms are even closer. If you quiet your heart, you should be able to feel the squeeze of your Heavenly Father. Maybe you can hear Him whispering His promises in your heart. Perhaps you can feel His delight over you as He dances over you and assures you that you are His child; promising that He will never leave you or forsake you. So, this moment is NOT just proclamation; it's ALSO **PARTICIPATION**. But see, that raises the stakes a little bit.

**3. EXAMINATION (vs. 28).** <sup>28</sup> *"Let a person EXAMINE himself... <sup>27</sup>for whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord... <sup>30</sup>(For) this is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep."* DID YOU HEAR THAT? Paul warns that eating and drinking from this table "UNWORTHILY" brings JUDGMENT on you. When you touch the bread and the cup in an unworthy manner because Christ's presence is here in a special way, you can actually bring God's anger on you. Because the stakes are raised with His presence, so is the demand that we COME INTO THAT PRESENCE WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE. Coming into that presence unworthily can bring God's discipline, His judgment, onto you. So, if you have NOT received Christ as Savior, you should NOT partake of communion today. I'd encourage you to leave the elements in the holder in the seat in front of you. Now, you CAN make Jesus Lord

today before we get to that point. Then it would be grand for you to partake of communion with us. So, you ask, what exactly does it mean to eat "unworthily?" It CAN'T mean that we should only take communion when we feel worthy of Christ's presence, because that would be NEVER. None of us are worthy to take the bread and the cup. None of us are worthy of Christ's presence. Jesus said that at our best - on your best day, when you're having the longest righteousness streak you've ever had, our righteousness is still like filthy rags. Even though we're forgiven, we still deal with the corruption in our hearts. So, it doesn't mean ONLY partake when you FEEL worthy. So, what DOES it mean? Well, notice that "unworthily" is written as an adverb, which is how it is in Greek. You say, "What difference does that make?" "Unworthily" as an adjective would describe you, and like we said, you are always "unworthy" to participate in Christ. But... Paul's focus is on something different: He's talking about how you approach this table. You can approach this table unworthily. So, WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE? **First, A Spirit of SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS:** You likely don't realize how dependent you are on Christ's mercy. Most don't see how their only hope is the body and blood of Jesus. The irony - the paradox - is that you approach this table unworthily when you fail to see how unworthy you are to partake of this table. I don't know how to say it except that - If you KNOW YOU ARE UNWORTHY, then you are approaching this table WORTHILY. If you think you ARE worthy, you are approaching this table UNWORTHILY. **Second, A Spirit of DEFIANCE:** If you partake of this table when you know that you are NOT submitted to Christ - that is, you are openly and intentionally living in a way that you know displeases Him - you are engaging in the very lifestyle that put Jesus on the cross. Think about it: In taking the bread and the cup, you are saying, "Thank God for Jesus and His death, it is my life and my hope," but then with your life you are openly crucifying Him. With your mouth you are celebrating His cross while practicing the lifestyle that put Him on the cross. You CANNOT shout "WORSHIP HIM" and "CRUCIFY HIM" at the same time and not expect God's anger. I say this with all humility: DO NOT TOUCH the elements of this table if you are not surrendered to Christ. I don't mean if you're struggling with sin or overwhelmed by your sin. Jesus came for people like that. His death is healing and help for those who know they are sick! What I mean is, don't touch this if YOU KNOW there's some area you refuse to submit to Him. Don't add to your condemnation by hypocritically saying, "Thank You Jesus for your death" while stubbornly doing the very things that put Him on the cross. Keep your rebellious hands off of these elements. You eat unworthily when you come with self-righteousness, defiance, and lastly: **A Spirit of DIVISION.** Considering the division Paul spoke of in the early part of this letter, I'm thinking that a Spirit of Division was what was most in Paul's mind when he said, "DON'T come to this table unworthily." Because that's the context of this passage in verse 33: *"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, welcome one another."* (Other translations say - tarry for one another; show respect for one another; wait for one another.) Don't come when in your heart you are separated from others by some kind of pride or classism or racism. Don't come when you harbor resentment or unforgiveness in your heart. Don't come claiming to cherish the forgiveness of God when you won't forgive someone else. Don't come when you are divided from your brothers and sisters over some secondary, non-essential matter - a political perspective or a cultural bias. Don't touch this table if you harbor divisions and resentments unbefitting of the body of Christ. That's eating in an unworthy manner. Jesus put it this way in the Sermon on the Mount: *"If you are offering your gift at the altar, and you have division with your brother in Christ, leave your gift before the altar and go reconcile with him."* FIRST be reconciled with your brother, and THEN come offer your gift. Paul is saying something similar: FIRST, feel a real sense of unity with your brothers and sisters, and... let that be reflected in your attitude toward them, and how you behave toward them, and how you fellowship with them, and ONLY THEN PARTAKE of these elements. What happens if you don't? What happens if you disregard THE BODY? What happens if you disregard the LORDSHIP OF CHRIST? What happens if you EAT FROM THE TABLE UNWORTHILY? Paul says, (verse 30) - *"this is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep."* (Other translations say - many are sick and die.) You say, "What does that mean?" I haven't come up with a way to sugar coat this. Paul means that many people have gotten sick and died for not taking this moment seriously. Not everyone who participates in communion unworthily dies, but... Paul says that SOMETIMES that happens, and that at least shows you how God feels about those who don't take this sacred moment seriously. The theologian D.A. Carson tells the story of a pastor friend, who had a church of about 200

and sin was so rampant that he could not even discipline, for the leadership was involved in a lot of the sin and didn't want to do anything about it. This pastor prayed for 3 months for God to change the church or move him out. The next year, he said, he had 34 funerals. 20% of the church died in the space of a year! The year after that, he baptized 200. Does that always happen? No. Thank God. In His mercy He doesn't always do that. But... Paul says the fact that it sometimes happens should make us realize how seriously God takes this. We see a similar thing happening in Acts 5 when Ananias and Sapphira came into the church with an offering and lied about their offering. They told everyone that they were bringing the full price of the land they sold when in fact it was only half. The sin was not bringing half - they were free to do that. The sin was in LYING TO THE CHURCH, and TO GOD, about what they were doing. Now, thank God that He does not strike dead everyone in church who exaggerates their giving. Worship is a deadly serious thing. How does God feel about those who take this bread and cup, saying, "I'm thankful for this bread and cup, it's my salvation," all the while harboring in their heart the sin that put Jesus on the cross or relishing in sinful resentments against their brothers and sisters that Jesus died to make into ONE FAMILY. This is supposed to be a moment of incredible gospel clarity where the church visibly displays the unity of the body Jesus died to create. Where we declare, our common hope in Jesus is more important to us than any secondary thing that divides us. It's supposed to be a time of togetherness, where we feel the love and warmth of family. To our online congregation, if you are watching from home this Sunday morning because it's easy or comfortable or you just didn't feel like dressing for church, know that there is something profound that you are missing out on in not being with your brothers and sisters. Certainly, there are medical reasons and physical reasons for some to stay separate. Some are too far away to be with us this morning. Know that we are so glad you are with us. I say that because some people are like, "Oh, I like getting up, coming downstairs in my pajamas and sitting on the couch and watching church with my kids. It just works better for my family." Church at home can be a substitute for church in an emergency and blessing for those who cannot get out, but it's not the same as being in church. Church is being with the body, particularly for moments like this. When I'm away from my wife, I might look at her picture because I miss her. I suppose I could FaceTime her, BUT... Looking at a picture and talking to her digitally represented image is not the same thing as being in her presence; and if you think it is, I'd say you don't understand marriage. Dialing into church online is fine in an emergency, but if you think it's the same as church, you don't understand what church is. So, brothers and sisters, let's take the Lord's Supper together. This is our unity. Do you recognize Christ as your only hope of salvation? Have you fully surrendered to Him? I don't mean you don't struggle with sin - I still do, all the time - what I mean is, right now are you living with some sin you know is wrong, but you just say, "I'm not ready to change that." Friend, if that's true, don't touch the bread or the cup. It's dangerous for you. And if you don't yet know Christ, please don't take these things. Like I said, they are a sermon. You don't preach a sermon you haven't embraced for yourself yet. The sermon is being preached this morning to you. All around you people are about to preach the gospel. What you can do is receive the grace these elements point to, grace that is offered to you this morning if you'll receive by faith - Christ shed His blood for you and you can receive that right now as your own. Trust Christ as your Savior. Accept Him as your own, and surrender to Him, and the forgiveness of sins and new life in Him will be yours! Lastly, are you harboring some resentment, some division against a brother or sister? Reconcile with them in your heart. Forgive them. You may need to hold off taking these elements and go and make things right with them. Just whatever you do, don't be hypocritical when you take the bread and the cup - hating or looking down on someone else that Jesus died to save and has put into your family. Okay? **EXAMINE YOURSELF.** As Paul said, in light of all of this - the fact that the blood of Jesus is the only hope for the best of us and the best hope for the worst of us - let us love as we have been loved.