

“The Forgiveness of Sins”

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You are welcome here because your badness is no worse than my badness.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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The table of selflessness and grace (Paul)

The year was 1996. Danielle and I went to go see one of our favorite bands at that time called Tesla. They had a song called “Love Song,” and it is about love. Love is all around you, love, love, love.

In the middle of song “love will find a way,” we began to see a disturbance in front of us. The lead singer said, “Hey you guys. Y’all need to calm down. Love, love, love. We are singing about love.”

It didn’t matter. A guy decided he wanted to beat his girlfriend in the middle of the concert right there. Think about the irony of that. The crowd parts, the police come in, and as the guy is being taken out, everyone is getting a lick on him as he goes by.

They have to start back love song all over again. “Love will find a way.” And I was like “not today.” Not going to find a way today. I knew then that God was preparing me for youth ministry. In 1998 I was leading a group of youth in worship, and we were singing all of those songs from 1998—“Shout to the Lord,” “Lord I Lift Your Name on High,” and whatever. We started a song about God’s love and all of a sudden I look down, and one of my youth has another youth in a headlock. We’re singing about Jesus’ love and forgiveness and you are beating your fellow youth. We might need to start back at John 3:16 again and work from there.

You have to imagine the Apostle Paul's dismay, anger, and frustration when he hears about what's going on at the Lord's Supper in Corinth. This thing that is antithetical to what it's all about is happening. These people over here are neglecting these people over there. They are purposely leaving out the poor and the hungry. Some of them are getting drunk at the Lord's Supper!

When we talk about what is going on at the Corinthian church, we need to talk about two meals that they had. The Lord's Supper was simply that time when Jesus was in the Upper Room and transformed a common meal forever. He didn't cook a special meal—there was wine and there was bread. He took the bread, and he broke it. He took the wine and poured it. He showed it, and he talked to them transforming forever what we call now the Eucharist or Communion or the Lord's Supper.

The second meal was called a Love Feast or even an Agape Feast. It was a precursor to our Wednesday night dinner. It's why Baptists are probably more theologically correct on a lot of issues because they've got the covered dish supper right. It goes all the way back to the first church that the Corinthians had the first covered dish supper—someone brought pasta salad, and someone brought Kentucky Fried Chicken. They got together, and they ate. It was the first common meal.

We start in vv. 17-22. What does he say right here in the very first verse? "You all are participating in a meeting that does not bring honor to Jesus." Have you ever thought about that? Why else does the church get together? Even if it's to discuss finances, to practice a song, to plan a mission trip, to work on teaching children—anytime we get together, the whole purpose has got to always be to honor and glorify Jesus. And he says "You guys are getting together and guess what? You're dishonoring Jesus." You're antithetical to what you're supposed to be doing."

I used to read these verses and think "Well, he's talking about people that adhere to false teachings. There could be some of that going on but this is actually talking about fellowship in the church. He's saying "When some of y'all get together, you don't understand that this is about the fellowship of the body. You get with your little set of people and do your own thing and neglect everyone else." He continues "The ones that truly understand Christ—the unity of the body, his love and grace and forgiveness—are going to be seen, and it will be obvious because they will be the ones that don't claim one tribe in the middle of the body of Christ."

The second part of this is that they were unkind to the poor. If you were the poorest of the poor and skipped most meals during the week and you had a chance to go to a covered dish supper once a week that was brought by the wealthiest people in your community, would you dread it or look forward to it? Yeah this might have been the part during the week where the poorest people in the community got to have the best meal they have ever had. But instead of coming to share a meal, they were met with disdain. The wealthy people would take their meal to the side, eat it, and look over their shoulders to get done as quickly as possible so that the poor didn't have anything

to eat. Instead of being warm and welcomed, they were shamed and rejected. People have a propensity to not understand either moderation nor self-control.

One says “We need wine for the communion. I’m going to bring that.” An hour later he’s drunk and says “Are you guys ready for communion?” They rationalized and brought it to the Lord’s Supper. You think Children’s Church is crazy? Try having the Lord’s Supper with drunk people. It brings dishonor not honor to the Lord. This is a community that’s obsessed with spiritual gifts but bereft of the grace of the spirit.

Looking at v. 23-26, we come to these two words I’m going to superimpose on the entire rest of this chapter. These words are *remembrance* and *reexamination*. He’s saying in v. 23-26, “You’ve got to reexamine why and how the Lord instituted communion and the Lord’s Supper.” How did he do it? Why did he do it? When did he do it? It’s not only a remembrance of the words he said but of how Christ died.

Christians are the only people that get together and celebrate our Savior’s death. If you love someone that was assassinated or killed—maybe it was JFK or Martin Luther King—you typically don’t spend a lot of time talking about that moment when he died or reenacting his death. That’s morbid. But that’s what Christians do. He’s saying “Remember, Jesus held up the bread and tore it.” Why did he do that? “This is what’s going to happen to my body.”

He poured the wine into a cup, and they saw that red liquid flowing down. He’s saying, “Remember what happened. Remember the manner in which he died. Retell the story.” There is a huge difference when someone passes away, and we get together to tell stories about them. There’s interaction but it’s not the same kind of interaction when you are still alive and retell the stories of things that used to happen. That’s what we are actually doing when we remember or examine. We forget we are not telling stories about Christ who has died and is gone. We are telling stories about Christ with Christ whose presence is here because he is risen through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In v. 26b, Paul reminds us of some other part. We just don’t have hope in this life because we are forgiven. We celebrate and retell and talk about Christ’s death until he comes again in the body. So we have hope not just in his forgiveness but in his return.

In v. 27-28, he says “Now listen. I also want you to remember and reexamine your tendency to sin. Your sinfulness. And when we reexamine our hearts, we want to do that not with shame but sobriety. We are sinners. And we want to think about it soberly. Not shamefully but soberly. You also want to reexamine your heart.”

The first time we men vacuum, we do a crummy job, don’t we? Like during a commercial in the Panther’s game, your wife tells you to vacuum or you are trying to be a good husband and you run the vacuum. You leave the cord out so everyone knows you vacuumed, and you don’t put it away. Your wife walks in the room and says “Did you vacuum in here?” And what do you say? “Yeah of course I did. The vacuum is out.” She

says "I can't tell." Then you have to really go back and vacuum.. We are the same way with sin. "We're good." Jesus is like "No, no. Reexamine your heart."

Paul talks about something very interesting in v. 29-30. He says "Listen. There are also physiological effects on your body when you refuse to confess and repent of your sin." David says this absolutely in Psalm 32:3-7. He says this "When I had unconfessed and unrepentant sin in my life, I was sick. And I kept from confessing." We hate to confess our sin because we think we are going to be met with a 2x4. Instead, we are met with a loving Father that embraces us and says "I know. Come in and receive grace. Come in and receive mercy." It's his kindness that leads us to repentance. As far as east is to the west that is how far he removes our sin from us. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and rich in unfailing love.

Sometimes at the end of the day, my family and I watch a show on TV called "Dr. Pimple Popper." A person has a growth on their back. It's some kind of skin condition, and they've been ashamed of it. It gets bigger and bigger, and they say they can't go. "I live in NY, and Dr. Pimple Popper is over here in LA. I can't go, and I'm afraid of what's going to happen." Finally, they go, and she doesn't greet them at the door and ask "What have you been doing with yourself? Put Clearasil on that." No, she graciously and tenderly receives them, takes care of it, and they always say "Why did I wait so long to come in here and do this?" Why are you waiting? What do you think will be the reaction of God the Father? He knows. He's just waiting for you to come and ask for forgiveness.

Then in v. 31-32, Paul is simply saying this: "Listen, you can't forget that the Holy Spirit lives in you. He will guide you to repentance. He will guide you to correctly repent. He will guide you to confess your sins. Do that empowered by the spirit before you have to come under the Father's discipline." Notice he doesn't say punishment. Parents we punish in sin and in anger all of the time, right? We want to be perfect parents but we are not. We punish in anger and sinfulness and sometimes retribution. But the Lord is always perfect. Notice it doesn't say punishment. It says discipline. A loving Father.

Then in v. 33-34, Paul says, "How did Jesus set the table at the Last Supper?" He set it with grace and selflessness. He set the table, and he tore the bread, and he poured the cup in front of a man who would not only completely sell him out but sell him over to be killed. And in front of another man who would deny him three times, and in front of a prepubescent girl and nine other dudes who ran away and weren't even there at the foot of the cross. And in front of one man who stayed with Mary and Mary Magdalene. The table that was set for them, and it is set for you. It was set with selflessness and grace. And so he reminds them if it was set and prepared for you with selflessness and grace, you had darn better come to the table with selflessness and grace. Approach the body of believers with selflessness and grace. Share in the Lord's Supper with selflessness and grace. And be the body of Christ in selflessness and grace.

The critical pillar of forgiveness (Bob)

It's been two weeks since I was in this sanctuary to preach the word, and a lot has happened in our church body during that time. There was a Moldova mission trip, Big Stuff Camp for teens, the opera on Joan of Arc, Vacation Bible School, a number of deaths, illnesses, births, and weddings and things going on in our church body where we tend to surround one another as an extended family. Linda and I visited her mom and as we traveled. We listened to the biography of Oswald Chambers. I never really knew his story except for his devotional book "My Utmost for His Highest." No matter what has happened in the last two weeks, particularly related to the community that we call Corinth Reformed Church, it has been undergirded, it has been driven by the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. Everything we do relates to this critical pillar of who are and what we believe because of Jesus Christ. We believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Pastor Lori, Linda, and I attended the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. In this year's national meeting of the UCC the body was deciding whether our group, Faithful and Welcoming Churches of the United Church of Christ, should continue to have an exhibit booth there and be publicly present at the General Synod

I was the only voting member of our delegation. I was surprised at my emotion at different times—"You don't want me?" I have been a part of this church for 40 years. At times it felt like the two positions were: (1) "These people are narrow and bigoted, and they should just go home" v. (2) "These people are narrow and bigoted but we should love our enemies so they should stay." But the truth is there were many, many people who said publicly they genuinely want us to remain in the denomination.

We could not have done what we did last weekend without the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. You may think I mean that people have sinned against me and I forgave them. No. I'm not talking about their sins. I'm talking about my sins. One of the most liberating responses you can make when someone accuses you of sins is you can say "You know, you're right. There are a lot of things that I've done that I'm not proud of, and even though my position has not changed about the issues we are talking about—sexuality and marriage—I've grown a lot in my ability to love people where they are. The United Church of Christ has taught me that." Rather than becoming defensive when you really believe in the forgiveness of sins, you're so much freer to say "You're right. Sometimes I have been a jerk, and sometimes I still am. But I can confess that out of a sense of security that I know God loves me and that I know that I'm loved within the community in the body of Christ."

At a luncheon last Sunday, we were having a Q&A about our group. And one of the things I said was that the message I hear in the United Church of Christ is a message that sounds like this: "Everybody is good. We are no better than you are. Everybody is good so everybody is welcome here." My response is that everybody is welcome because everybody is bad. It doesn't matter what your badness is, you are welcome here because your badness is no worse than my badness.

We all come with a similar need. We all come with the need of the cross. We all come for the need of the forgiveness of sins, and that's why we can welcome anyone. We are all just differently blinded, differently flawed, differently screwed up. That's what it means to be the body of Christ and believe in the forgiveness of sins. My point is when we come to a passage like this, it almost doesn't matter what you're studying in scripture. The theology that undergirds is this: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

The Apostle Paul talks to the Corinthians, who are coming to the festivals drunk and selfish. He can confront them. Why? Because he has already declared them saints at the beginning of the letter. How can he declare them saints? Because he believes in the forgiveness of sins. When there is security in the relationship with someone that you not only see yourself but them as being forgiven by God, then out of that freedom you can confront in a much more grace-filled way.

Paul says, "Let me remind you what Jesus said. 'This is my body broken *for* you. This is the *new covenant* in my blood.'" The reason we have this celebration is because Jesus made possible the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, we need to examine *ourselves* when we come to the table. He doesn't say to examine *one another* before you come to the table of the Lord. That's not Paul's message. It's not my job to figure out if you are worthy to come to the table of the Lord; you examine *yourself*. Why can I challenge you to do that as a pastor and leader? It is because of the forgiveness of sins. I can assure you, when you examine yourself and you bring those sins before the presence of the Lord, the table is not scary. It is a place of deeply abiding assurance and strength.

As he comes to the end of the passage, he says "Wait for each other." Why can we wait? Not only in a food line, why can you wait for others to progress in their spiritual life at a different pace than you do? Because we believe in the forgiveness of sins. Take any topic of the Christian life—what we believe, how we live—we don't deal with it in a strong and healthy, balanced, and Godly way unless we undergird that topic with the forgiveness of sins. Let's look at several topics.

Family: I've been married 41 years as of tomorrow. Let me tell you, you can't have a marriage that goes the distance unless you believe in the forgiveness of sins. Every day forgiveness is given and received. You can't raise children unless you believe in the forgiveness of sins. I preached a sermon years ago on Jeremiah 31 where the Lord prophesied there will be a time where there will be a new covenant. This is the language that Jesus uses at the institution of the Lord's Supper. What God says to his people is "When that new covenant comes, I will remember their sins and wickedness no more." They still are sinful and wicked and yet God is going to make a way so that he never has to pay attention to our sins and wickedness. God prefers imperfect intimacy over outward conformity. He knows that we're not going to keep all of the rules but He says "I still want you. I'm going to make a way to make this about you by shattering the barrier that has kept you from me and that's your sins and wickedness."

Church: I can't preach or teach, supervise employees, receive criticism, work with imperfect people, reflect on my own blind spots and failures. We can't be church if we don't believe in the forgiveness of sins. You're all screwed up, and I can't deal with your "screwed-upness" as your pastor unless I'm willing to own and admit that like the Apostle Paul, I am the chief of sinners. When I stand before you and admit that I'm the most screwed up of all and you love me and look to me as your leader, then it enables me to say that we are a community of people in whom God is doing his work because we believe in the forgiveness of sins.

History: I can find blind spots of every person and movement in Christian history. There are no perfect heroes or movements in church history. This is humbling because we must admit are not doing it all right in our time and generation. I've studied church history enough to know that if I don't believe in the forgiveness of sins, I can't see how God could have ever used those movements to perpetuate the church so we are still here today. This flawed thing called "the church" is still around, and the reason is because God forgives the sins of one generation and moves on to do something new in the next generation.

Media: I can't read the newspaper or watch TV without the grasp of the forgiveness of sins. I not only notice what's good in the world but what's wrong in the world. There is ultimately no one that is a role model—no politician or sports figure. I look to Jesus Christ as my role model. He teaches me what it means to believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Salvation: I can't be in relationship with God unless I believe in the forgiveness of sins. Unless I realize that the one who knows me best and loves me most because he accomplished everything necessary on the cross and by his resurrection to declare me absolutely perfect.

Outreach: Whether I am doing evangelism or working for justice or just trying to make the world a better place spiritually, physically, or relationally, I am nothing as a person or Christian. I can't represent Jesus Christ unless I know that he sees me as worthy of being his representative – not because of anything that I've done or said but because of what he has done in and through me.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in this text that the forgiveness of sins is not automatic. It came a great price—God's own son. It also comes at the price that we are willing to release our need to justify ourselves. Every time we come to the communion table, we need to examine ourselves and remember again that it was our sins that were the cost, and the price Jesus had to pay for in order for us to be seen as the way God sees us as completely pure and clean.

We come to the table not to get saved all over again; God has done that in Jesus Christ. We come to the table to name him as savior and Lord and accept and embrace his gift. The Apostle Paul says "Don't come without thinking about what you're doing

and don't come unworthily." By unworthily he doesn't mean you have to come thinking you deserve the sacrifice of Christ. To come unworthily is to come indifferently, unrepentantly, pridefully. To come worthily is to come with the basis of understanding that once again I need the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

The only phrase in the Apostle's Creed that actually deals with my life here and now are the four words—the forgiveness of sins. The rest of it is about God the Father, Jesus Christ his Son, the Holy Spirit, the church, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. The only phrase that deals with how we live out this life knowing who God is, is this one phrase. This phrase reminds me that every time I come to church, every time I interact with somebody about Jesus, every time I'm at home or at work, every time I take a breath, the thing that I need to remember about me is that I am a sinner and because of Jesus Christ, God has declared me not guilty. I am free. I am liberated. I am even liberated to confess my sins because of who he is and what he's done.

The healthiest way to live life together is not in defensiveness or hiding; it is simply in admitting that I need this. Remember why it is you need to come next Sunday ready to share together the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We all come with brokenness, need and awareness that we have no hope without this gospel and without the forgiveness of sins. Amen.