



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 11.6 – The Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper

Worthy and Unworthy Partaking of the Lord’s Supper

Everyone who partakes of the bread and wine when the Lord’s Supper is celebrated receives Christ’s body and Christ’s blood. Jesus said to His disciples: **“This is My body”** as He gave them the bread, and: **“This is My blood”** as He gave them the cup of wine. What Christ said He is giving is what we receive. Every communicant receives Christ’s body and blood. The bread is the communion of Christ’s body, and the wine is the communion of Christ’s blood.

But even though all communicants receive Christ’s body and blood, not all communicants receive Christ’s body and blood in a worthy manner. For this reason, the apostle Paul warned the Christians in Corinth: **“Whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord”** (1 Corinthians 11:27). One can partake of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner, and those who partake unworthily are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. They are sinning against the very body and blood of the Lord that they are receiving with the bread and the wine.

The Lord intends to assure us of the forgiveness of sins through the Lord’s Supper by giving us the very body which He gave for us on the cross and the very blood which He poured out for us on the cross. But those who partake unworthily miss out on that great blessing. For Paul writes: **“He who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body”** (1 Corinthians 11:29). The one who partakes unworthily does not discern the Lord’s body; he does not realize that he is receiving the Lord’s body with the bread; he thinks of it as ordinary bread. In other words, the one who partakes unworthily partakes to his spiritual harm, not for his spiritual good. He is under God’s judgment rather than receiving God’s blessing.

The apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth how God’s judgment was affecting them personally. He wrote: **“For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world”** (1 Corinthians 11:30-32). Because they were partaking of the Lord’s Supper unworthily, God was inflicting various judgments or chastisements on the congregation to arouse them spiritually and to make them aware of what was going on. He was sending weakness, sickness, and even death (**“sleep”**) among them, not to bring them into eternal death in hell, but to arouse them through this chastisement to repent of their unworthy partaking of the Lord’s Supper and turn to the Lord for forgiveness. Our Lord does not want any of those who partake unworthily to be **“condemned with the world.”** But that will happen if those under judgment do not repent. If we judge ourselves as unworthy sinners and turn to the Lord for forgiveness, the Lord will not have to send such judgments as He was sending to the Corinthians.

The proper preparation for partaking of the Lord’s Supper is to **“judge ourselves”**, or, as Paul specifically says: **“Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup”** (1 Corinthians 11:28). It is always good for a Christian to examine themselves, but it is especially important to examine oneself as one prepares to partake of the very body and blood of the Lord Jesus, true God and true man, our Savior. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote: **“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless indeed you are disqualified”** (2 Corinthians 13:5).

How should we examine ourselves? It is apparent that we should ask ourselves at least four questions and answer them truthfully. Since the Lord's Supper is for the forgiveness of sins, the first question we should ask ourselves is whether we need the forgiveness of sins. **Question 1: Am I a sinner?** Our answer should be yes. If we have difficulty in thinking of ourselves as sinners, we need to remember the apostle Paul's teaching in Romans 1:18 through Romans 3:20, where he concludes: **"By the law is the knowledge of sin."** If we examine ourselves according to the Ten Commandments, consider the special duties we have in our station in life and our failures to fulfill our duties faithfully, we will all have to conclude that we are sinners in great need of the forgiveness of sins.

This leads us to **Question 2: Am I in the faith? Do I believe that Jesus, Son of God, has saved me from my sins by His life, suffering, death, and resurrection?** If we are unbelievers when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we will still receive the Lord's body and blood, but we will not receive the forgiveness of sins. For Jesus said: **"He who believes in Me has everlasting life"** (John 6:47) **"He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"** (John 3:36). **"He who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son"** (1 John 5:10).

Believing in Jesus includes believing what Jesus says. In connection with the Lord's Supper, this means believing His words: **"This is My body"** and **"This is My blood."** The apostle Paul said that those who do not discern Jesus' body in the Lord's Supper are eating and drinking judgment for themselves; they are partaking of the Lord's Supper for their harm. Therefore, **Question 3: Do I believe I am receiving with the bread the Lord's body and with the wine His blood?** This is simply a matter of accepting Jesus' words at face value, whether we can totally comprehend them or not.

Since it is easy for us to deceive ourselves, it is generally profitable to add **Question 4: Do I seriously intend, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, to amend my sinful life?** The apostle John wrote his entire first letter as an aid for self-examination. He brings up three tests that we need to use: the test of love, the test of truth, and the test of righteousness. If we truly believe in Jesus, our faith will show itself in love. John says bluntly: **"He who does not love his brother abides in death"** (1 John 3:14). If we truly believe in Jesus, we will teach the truth He has revealed to us and turn away from false teachers. John says: **"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world"** (1 John 4:1). If we truly believe in Jesus, we shall strive to live righteous lives by following His commandments. John says: **"Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure"** (1 John 3:3).

But when we ask ourselves these questions about whether our faith in Jesus is showing itself in our lives, we must remember that our sinful flesh always remains with us. We should not despair because of our frequent failings. Remember Jesus' words: **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick"** (Matthew 9:12). And remember Jesus' invitation: **"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"** (Matthew 11:28).

In view of what our Lord and His apostles say, it is clear that not everyone should come forward to partake of the Lord's Supper when it is offered.

Open unbelievers or idolaters should stay away from the Lord's Supper, for they will not receive it for their benefit. The Gospel of Christ should be preached everywhere and to everyone, but the Lord's Supper is not for all.

Those who are unwilling to confess that they are sinners or who are unwilling to confess certain sins of which they are guilty should not receive the Lord's Supper. This would include those excommunicated from the congregation who have not yet repented of their sin.

Those who do not believe Jesus' words about the real presence of His body and His blood should stay away from the Lord's Supper, for they do not discern the Lord's body; they do not realize that they are receiving the very body and blood of the Lord.

Those who are unwilling to forgive someone who has sinned against them should not partake of the Lord's Supper, for Jesus said: **"If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"** (Matthew 6:15).

Those who are unable to examine themselves should not partake of the Lord's Supper, since the apostle Paul wrote that we should examine ourselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper. This would include infants, children and adults who have not been instructed in the faith and the meaning of the Lord's Supper, the insane, the severely mentally disabled, and the unconscious. It has been customary among many Christians to bring the Lord's Supper privately to those individuals who, for one reason or another, are unable to join in the assembly, but only to those who are able to examine themselves.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **"Note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them"** (Romans 16:17). For this reason, those who follow, promote, or support any teaching that is in addition to or contrary to the true teachings of God's Word should also stay away from the Lord's Supper. The Lord wants us to have true unity with one another in doctrine. The Lord's Supper is a demonstration of that unity, as Paul wrote: **"For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread"** (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Those Christians who have been called to administer the Lord's Supper to others should not invite any of those listed in the above paragraphs to partake of the Lord's Supper with the congregation. This may upset some who think that they are being labeled as not as good as those who are partaking. But in order to be faithful to our Lord's teaching concerning the Lord's Supper, it is necessary for us to practice what we call "close communion" or "closed communion". The Lord's Supper is for penitent Christians gathered around the Lord's Table in one united confession of faith.

How often should Christian congregations celebrate the Lord's Supper? How often should Christians partake of the Lord's Supper? These are questions that our Lord has not answered specifically. There are some Lutherans today who insist that every time Christians gather together to hear the Word of God, they should also celebrate the Lord's Supper. But our Lord has given us no such rule. There have been times and places in church history when the Lord's Supper was celebrated every Sunday, but there have been other times and places when the Lord's Supper has been celebrated much less often – sometimes only once a year, sometimes three or four times a year, sometimes once a month. Christians are free to make their own decisions on such questions. In our American Lutheran churches at the present time, the practice is to celebrate the Lord's Supper at least once a month.

Questions

1. Why can we be sure every communicant receives Christ's body and blood?
2. What does the apostle Paul say about those who partake in an unworthy manner?
3. What does it mean to eat and drink judgment upon one's self?
4. What judgments was God sending to the Christians in Corinth?
5. What was the purpose of such judgments?
6. What did Paul say we should do before we partake of the Lord's Supper?
7. What four questions should we ask ourselves?
8. What parts of the Bible shows us our sin?
9. What do unbelievers receive when they partake of the Lord's Supper?
10. What three self-tests does 1 John give us?
11. List the kinds of persons who should not receive the Lord's Supper.
12. What is the difference between open communion and closed communion?
13. Why should faithful Christians practice closed communion?
14. How often should a Christian partake of the Lord's Supper?
15. Who decides how often the Lord's Supper is celebrated?
16. How often is the Lord's Supper celebrated in your locale?