

1/3/2016 **Communion: The Passionate Pursuit of God**

NWCC 1 Corinthians 11: 23-34

(message by Charlie Laughlin)

Introduction:

Good morning and Happy New Year! My name is Charlie Laughlin. It has been my privilege to serve on staff here at Northwest since 1994. Occasionally I've been given the honor to stand here, in our pastor's place, to bring a message from the Word of God. So if you're visiting, be sure to come back next week as Pastor Dave returns and resumes his series from the New Testament book of James.

When Pastor Dave invited me to speak on this Sunday, I realized it was a communion Sunday. So I sensed an opportunity to frame the message around the Lord's Supper in a special way. That made even more sense to me since this particular Sunday would be the first Sunday of the New Year and most, if not all, of us, have been reflecting on the year that has just passed as well as contemplating the New Year before us.

2015 may have been a year which you're glad is finally over. On the other hand, 2015 may have brought great joy into your life. But whether on the mountaintop of life or scarred by spiritual battles, whether blessed with sufficient resources or just making ends meet, as we sing these first two songs of praise, recall with me the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who while in the midst of an incredibly difficult struggle wrote this affirmation:

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed,
Because His compassions fail not.
They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"Therefore I hope in Him!"
Lamentations 3:22-24 (NKJV)

Songs: *Lord I Need You* | *Never Once*

*Never once did we ever walk alone
Never once did God leave us on our own
You are faithful; God, You are faithful*

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Those lyrics underscore Christ's promise to His disciples and to us, ". . . I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:20b

There is something in that promise and in the general premise of Scripture's message of redemption and reconciliation that is inherent in the Lord's Supper. And it is this: God has, and is, passionately pursuing us! He longs to have fellowship with YOU! And when we observe the Lord's Supper we are remembering to what lengths God was willing to go in His pursuit of us.

God SO loved YOU that He gave His only begotten Son – Jesus – so that by faith alone in Him, you could have everlasting life. That's just how passionate God is about you.

Now the Bible text we use most often when we observe the Lord's Supper is found in the New Testament in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian believers – 1 Corinthians, chapter 11. That is our text for today.

As you turn to that passage in your Bible, let me suggest there is so much more going on here than just a history lesson for these believers. Perhaps you already knew that, so this morning may simply refresh your spirit with a reminder of the depth of what Paul is writing to these believers.

On the other hand, perhaps you've only heard this passage used on a Sunday when communion was served. You've not yet explored the context in which Paul reminds the Corinthians of the importance of grasping the incredible truth which communion represents and what it means to them – and to you – personally.

If we grasp this truth, even just a little, it will begin to transform how you and I think about our fellowship with God and with each other.

Let's look at this wonderful passage from 1 Corinthians Chapter 11, starting in verse 23. I'll read aloud as you follow along silently in your own Bible or as you read the video display.

23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

You can see why this is a favorite text to use when Communion is observed. Yet this passage is like a slice of pie taken from the whole and, in my opinion, if we overlook the rest of the pie we miss the real lesson Paul is attempting to communicate.

For instance, just back up to the last part of the verse that precedes this passage – verse 22. Paul appears to blurt out, "I do not praise you." Without understanding the context, we might ask, "What's with the attitude Paul?"

So, to better grasp one of the important truths of observing the Lord's Supper, let's explore for a moment the larger context of what Paul has written.

This letter to the Corinthian church is fascinating in so many ways as it clearly depicts believers whom Paul refers to, more than a few times, as "saints," while also rebuking them for their carnal, self-centered, spiritually stunted lifestyle.

In fact, once you begin to realize just how carnal these believers were, you might think that such a lofty explanation of the Lord's Table is out of place here and might fit better in a letter written to the believers at Philippi or Ephesus. But Corinth – not so much!

Yet the Divine Author of the text directed Paul to pen these words to these believers even as they struggled with their spirituality in a world which had seduced them to live contrary to what Paul first taught them about God's grace and life in the Body of Christ.

Part of what is fascinating to me about all of this is that at no time does Paul question that these men and women in the Corinthian church are believers.

What he does question is their depth of love and devotion to the Lord and to His Body, the church. What is lacking in their life of faith is a critical understanding of something God is passionate about. And that is why Paul exclaims at the end of verse 22, "*I do not praise you!*"

So, with the laser beam of God's word, Paul focuses on God's passion for us to have intimate fellowship with Him and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And without using the term, "fellowship," he expresses God's passion by reminding them of what the Lord did at what we often call, "The Last Supper."

This passage is surrounded with a multitude of different, tragic ways in which the believers at Corinth were destroying their fellowship with each other, and by extension, their fellowship with God. When our fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ is off-kilter, it says something about our fellowship with God.

Listen to what the apostle John would later write in a letter he wrote to believers:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

1 John 4:20-21

Love God, love one another . . . these two commands are inextricably linked. And the Corinthians were missing it.

Let me say this one more time, Paul writes to the Corinthians as believers. They had an eternal relationship with God through their faith alone in Christ alone. What they were missing, or to put it another way, what they were violating, was the fellowship that God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit passionately desire with us and for us as believers.

As I understand Scripture, we come into a relationship with God, as well as with the church of Jesus Christ, through faith alone in Christ alone by trusting that His death on the cross totally satisfied the just demands of a Holy God regarding the penalty for our sin. Jesus' resurrection from the grave provided evidence that He was indeed the Son of God (Romans 1:4) and as Paul would write later in this same letter, Christ's resurrection is at the very core of our faith for apart from it our faith would be in vain.

The moment you trust Christ as your Savior from sin and its awful, eternal penalty, you enter into an eternal relationship with God. And, you are placed by God's Spirit into the Body of Christ – the church. In addition to your eternal relationship with God, you now have an eternal relationship with your brothers and sisters in Christ as well.

But relationship does not guarantee fellowship; but it does make fellowship possible. So how does a believer move from relationship to fellowship?

Obviously the various letters we find in the New Testament, written to the churches, give us guidance. Too often though, we substitute a strict adherence to guidelines instead of what God provided for us, as His children, through the presence of His Spirit in our lives Who will take the Scripture on which we meditate and guide us as to its application in our lives. So to move from relationship to fellowship requires knowing God better through meditation in His Word and the teaching, convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

When I think about this, one passage in 1 John comes to mind.

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. 1 John 1:5-7

John compares the way a believer develops his fellowship with God and with other believers to a “walk where He provides the light for our path as well as companionship.

Such a walk is relational, person to person. And if your fellowship with God is as it should be so will your fellowship with other believers. The focus is not on rule-keeping but on living as if we were in the constant presence of the Lord. Because . . . WE ARE living in His constant presence!

When we live like that . . . when we walk like that . . . God, through His Spirit guides us in applying His Word with grace and truth, in a way that benefits and encourages others.

I find it interesting that during Jesus' earthly ministry, some of the best teaching times with His disciples came as they were walking. And while we can't physically walk with Jesus today, Jesus' interaction with His disciples then and now is relational because He is passionate about having communion with you.

At Northwest, our goal is to passionately pursue life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with our world.

I would tell you, that what enables us to do that is that God, first of all, has passionately pursued us.

And what He did in passionately pursuing us and, in turn, enabling us to passionately pursue our fellowship with Him, with other believers and to interact with the world around us, all of that is captured in this description of how we are to observe the Lord's Table.

As the Praise Team returns to lead us in song before we partake of the bread and the cup, consider how God has passionately pursued you, how He cares for you, how He longs for fellowship with you because of His deep love, and how He never will let go of you.

Songs: *You Never Let Go* | *10,000 Reasons*

Preparation for Distribution of the Bread & Cup

One theme carried throughout the Bible is God's longing heart for communion and fellowship.

Dr. Luke, in his narrative of the Last Supper in the Upper Room, adds a detail not found in the other Gospels. Luke tells us that when Jesus sat down with His disciples, He said:

“With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer . . .” Luke 22:15

As I contemplated what Jesus was saying, it occurred to me that one way to understand what He meant by “fervent desire” could be this: He was passionate about this particular Passover meal because up to this point of time, from the fall of Adam to that moment in the Upper Room, fellowship with God was not as open as it could be. Because of the need for reconciliation and redemption, there were barriers to fellowship with God.

One evidence of that was there in Jerusalem, in the Temple. The Holy of Holies, symbolic of God's presence, had its entrance covered by a large veil and only once a year was the high priest allowed to enter to offer sacrifice.

But that was about to change. That is why Jesus came into this world. This was His passion . . . in pursuing us, in loving us, He now would break down every barrier to having fellowship with His Father, Himself, and the Holy Spirit. As Jesus spoke these words, He knew that His time had come, and in less than 24 hours, He would be crucified in your place and mine.

And when He died, the most amazing thing happened: the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom signifying the way into the Holy of Holies was now open! Direct fellowship with God now was available! No more barriers!

When we take this bread and drink this cup, we are remembering just how much God loved us in sending His Son to be the Savior of the world. We participate in His passion and we have communion with Him which enables us to have communion with our sisters and brothers in Christ.

This is why Paul's concern about the Corinthian believers leads him to remind them what this meal was originally all about. Their fellowship with each other needs a strong corrective so he takes them to the Lord's Table.

He issues a stern warning and says that if they do not correct what is wrong with their lives as believers, there will be discipline. Yet the aim of that discipline is for their benefit, to guide them in the direction of serving one another as they engage in the communion their Heavenly Father has designed for them.

Please understand that this Table, this Supper, is the Lord's to offer. He invites all believers to participate. We are to use this as a time to rejoice in what Christ has done as well as to reflect and correct what should be changed in anticipation of His coming again.

If you have never placed your faith in Christ alone, perhaps you would want to do that right now and if so, then you are welcome to join in this meal. But if you're not sure, then I would encourage you to let the bread and cup pass. Speak to me afterwards so I can share with you from God's Word how you can know for certain how to have an eternal relationship with Jesus.

I am going to pray and give thanks for the bread and cup. Then the bread will be distributed. Please hold it until all are served and we will partake of it together.

Use the time while you wait to meditate on just what it is God did for you through Jesus Christ by His death on the cross in your place.

PRAY | DISTRIBUTE | PARTAKE (read 1 Corinthians 11:24)

Before we distribute and partake of the cup, we are going to sing a song of worship to the Lord.

This song reminds us of what Jesus did, what He offers and the measure of the incredible gift He gave us. Stand with me as we sing, *Here I Am to Worship*.

Song: *Here I Am to Worship*

Distribution of the Cup

“I’ll never know how much it cost, to see my sins upon that cross”

As the cup is distributed, reflect on that thought, think about your Lord’s mercy, grace, forgiveness and the opportunity you have to fellowship with Him and with each other.

DISTRIBUTE | PARTAKE (read 1 Corinthians 11:25)

If we take to heart the message of this ordinance – God’s passion for us so we might have fellowship with Him and with each other, then issues we may personally confront in 2016 will be met with the assurance of God’s promise that we are not alone, that He is faithful, and that you have brothers and sisters in Christ who will pray and support you.

And collectively, as a church, in 2016 we can see God’s passion for our fellowship with Him and with each other evidenced as we move toward the launch of a Spanish-speaking ministry here at Northwest.

Also, if the sale of a portion of our property becomes a reality in 2016, we will evidence God’s passion for fellowship as we seek unity and wisdom in determining before God, how to invest the proceeds of the sale in “Kingdom-of-God-advancing” ways.

And I’m certain that in this New Year there will be multiple opportunities for us, as a church, to trust God because our hope is in Him, so we can serve one another in love and He will be glorified.

We are closing our service today singing *Jesus Messiah*.

If our fellowship reflects our Lord’s passion, then we will seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace while displaying God’s grace working through the diversity of spiritual gifts with which He has blessed us so He might receive all of the glory.

Song: *Jesus Messiah*

Benediction

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. Hebrews 13:20-21

God Bless You!