

1 CORINTHIANS 11:31, 32 GOD'S TENDER MERCIES

“If we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. When we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”¹

No doubt the title of the message appears strange to some people. How can discipline be merciful? And if there appears a general contradiction between the two concepts, how much greater is the disconnect when we speak of divine discipline and divine mercy? However, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that God is revealing His great mercy when He holds His people accountable for sinful behaviour. The subject is sufficiently vital to congregational health to merit careful study. Join me, therefore, as we explore God's tender mercies as revealed in the affirmations found in the text before us today.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS MEMBERS OF THE BODY — “If we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.” We are called to examine ourselves whenever we come before the Lord in worship. Some translations faithfully bring out the force of Paul's statement. For instance, the Holman Christian Standard Bible translates **VERSE 31**, “If we were properly evaluating ourselves, we would not be judged.”² The New Living Translation, examining the same verse, translates it, “If we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way.”³

In order to appreciate fully the importance of self-examination as presented by the Apostle, remember that he pointed out the obvious to the Corinthian Christians with the observation that many of them were weak and ill, and some had even died [**VERSE 30**]. This was the result of a general tendency to participate in the Meal without discerning the Body [**VERSE 29**]. Earlier, we observed that the Body in question referred to the congregation of the Lord. The people were treating the Meal as a time of private worship rather than an opportunity to confess mutual interdependence. Thus, they were treating the Body of Christ (the church) with disdain. Consequently, though they imagined that their actions enjoyed God's approval, they were actually invoking divine discipline.

What is called for in our text is less a matter of critical judgement of actions at the Lord's Table—either our own actions or those of others—than it is a call for frank and honest self-evaluation of our personal motives as we approach the Lord's Table. In our studies during the preceding months, we have examined the attitude that is to be exhibited when we come to worship at the Master's Table. It will undoubtedly be beneficial for us to refresh our memories before we proceed further with the message today.

It is tragically obvious that as many professing Christians, perhaps even most professing Christians, approach the Communion Meal in our day, they view participation as a right. Whenever we hold such an opinion, we are in effect saying that at the Lord's Table, we as worshippers are of greater importance than is He who is worshipped. Whether we say the words or not, we effectively say, “If we were not here, there would be no Communion.” Our actions are presumptuous and arrogant and ultimately a disgrace to the Name who hold as dear.

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² **Holman Christian Standard Version** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)

³ **New Living Translation** (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL 2004)

The Corinthians had fallen into just such a trap when prominent members had reduced the Communion Meal to attempts to worship performed by individuals who only incidentally happened to be in the presence of other people. It appears that many of the Corinthians no longer saw the fellowship aspect of the Meal, focusing solely on their own private worship.

Review the extended passage in which Paul provides corrective instruction for the Corinthian Christians. The Apostle pointed out that they were sectarian in their worship, treating members of the Body as though some were inferior. Hence, the Body was divided [vv. 17-19]. He saw that they no longer recognised their purpose to function as a community of faith, but rather as a collection of individuals. Some provided richly for themselves and their immediate friends while neglecting others within the congregation who were impoverished [vv. 20, 21]. Consequently, their actions fairly screamed out individualism rather than expressing an understanding of corporate responsibility and strength. In short, they had reduced the worship of the Lord's Table to a private act, which they saw as their right.

It is serious enough when a minority within the congregation leads a congregation into an aberrant practise. However, when such action is left unchallenged, the membership soon adopts the deviant view as normal. After a time, the irregular practise will be elevated to the position of regular—the abnormal will be normalised, the unorthodox will be thought orthodox. Then, when a voice calls for a return to biblical practise the people of God will be at best confused, and at worst indignant that their practise should be questioned.

So, in many churches today, as was true in the Church of God at Corinth, Christians have so long conducted themselves improperly at the Lord's Table that they imagine there is no other way to observe the Communion Meal than to see it as a right and as a private act of worship. Christianity could be defined as the art of practising theological balance—ethically and morally. This doesn't mean that there is room for wickedness to be mixed with righteousness, but it does mean that there are usually multiple facets to doctrinal issues.

In the case of the Lord's Table, we make three great declarations whenever we worship at the Lord's Table. Balance demands that we not neglect any of these three great truths that are to be proclaimed; each must be recognised as part of the rite in order to honour the Lord who is worshipped. In his instruction, Paul points to three aspects of worship—remembrance, fellowship, and anticipation. The three aspects of worship span time as we look back, as we look about us, and as we look forward.

Remembering we look back to the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus. The Apostle writes, "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, 'This is My Body which is for you. Do this is remembrance of Me.' 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*'" [1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-25].

Approaching the Communion Meal, we are enjoined to actively recall the love of the Saviour—a love which was extended without condition to all who will receive it. The evidence of His love is that He took our punishment on Himself. The Apostle Paul never quite got away from this love. Writing the Galatian churches, Paul boldly stated, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" [GALATIANS 2:20]. In the Ephesian encyclical, Paul reminds his readers that "Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" [EPHESIANS 5:2]. The love of Christ for His people is a model for the love that should be expected of a husband for his wife [see EPHESIANS 5:25].

One of the powerful verses included in John's first missive to Jewish believers is found in **1 JOHN 4:9**. Listen to his powerful words and meditate on them in light of the admonition to remember the love of the Saviour. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him." John's words echo that best loved verse that he penned on another occasion, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" [**JOHN 3:16**]. Indeed, we know that "God is love" [**1 JOHN 4:16**], and in Christ our Lord we see the love of the Father revealed.

Almost without exception, those coming to the Communion Meal will acknowledge that they recognise the sacrifice of the Saviour. Most will speak of His love as demonstrated through the fact that He gave His life in our stead. However, Paul also instructs the Corinthian Christians that they must also remember that this is to be a Meal of Anticipation. In the verses preceding our text, Paul reminded the Corinthians, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until* He comes" [**1 CORINTHIANS 11:26**].

Did you note the preposition "until?" Jesus also used a preposition when He instituted the Meal in the presence of the Eleven. He said, "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine *until* that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's Kingdom" [**MATTHEW 26:29**]. In instituting the Meal, the Master pointed forward to a day when His people would share in this Meal one final time. The only difference is that He now is with us in Spirit, but then He will be with us bodily. He is no less real today, but we shall see Him face-to-face.

As we come to the Lord's Table, each of us has at one time or another felt weary. The stress and demand of the day drains our energy and jades our souls. It is easy to grow disillusioned with our lives and even to become depressed at the thought of the tasks that remain undone. At such times, we need to lift our eyes to remember that He who called us has appointed us to succeed in the duties we perform for His Name's sake. The Communion Table provides opportunity for us to remember that this world is not what He promised. And though we may amass the tawdry baubles of this dying world, we are convinced that there awaits a better and a more permanent treasure at the conclusion of the journey.

The coming of the Lord to gather His people is a note that is woefully neglected in this day. We have become so intent on living comfortably in this present world that we often forget that we are destined for another and a better world, just as Peter has said. "The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" [**2 PETER 3:10**]. The things that are valued and esteemed in this dying world have no lasting value in the world that is promised to us who are destined to inherit eternity. We are appointed to reign with Him, sharing in His eternal glory.

Is that not great encouragement that is provided by Paul in his first Thessalonian letter? "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words" [**1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18**].

I know that some of you coming to the Table have at times felt keenly the truth of Paul's words, "I am ... being poured out as a drink offering... I have fought the good fight." Before the Lord, we may also recall the remainder of the Apostle's words, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing" [2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8]. Coming into His presence to worship at His Table we are reminded that we live in hope, not only of the resurrection, but hope of competing well now and completing the race.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the woman who was ill, and she knew that her illness would lead to death. Her pastor, speaking with her to prepare her for the transition from night to day, was inquiring what she desired for her funeral. The woman made a strange request; she asked to be buried with a fork in her hand.

"What a strange request," said the Pastor. "What is the significance of the fork?"

"Well," the dying saint replied, I've been to a lot of church potluck meals. When everyone has eaten all they wish, we are then asked to keep our forks because desert is coming. When you bury me, place a fork in my hand because I know that desert is coming."

That is real hope! There is something more to come when this life has ended.

A balanced approach to the Meal will include remembering the love the Master had for us as demonstrated through His sacrifice and it will permit us to renew hope through reflecting on His promised return. However, a balanced observance will of necessity enhance fellowship. Those who are intent on transforming the Meal into an act of private worship will say, "Yes, but the fellowship is between me and the Saviour." However, we must remember that love for God is demonstrated through love for His people, and without sharing our life with His people, there is no possibility of sharing in the life of Jesus. This truth is demonstrated in an extended passage in John's first letter.

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

"By this we know that we abide in him and He in us, because he has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the Day of Judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" [1 JOHN 4:7-21].

If we love one another, we are walking in the light. And "if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" [1 JOHN 1:7]. Therefore, love for God is demonstrated in love for the people of God; and love for the people of God is expressed through fellowship with one another.

The Lord's Supper is assuredly to be a declaration of fellowship, observed when we "come together as a church" [1 CORINTHIANS 11:18]. When Paul wrote the Corinthians, it was observed at the conclusion of a fellowship meal—the Agape. This is the reference he makes in an earlier chapter. There, he writes, "The Cup of Blessing that we bless, is it not a participation (fellowship) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation (fellowship) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" [1 CORINTHIANS 10:16, 17]. We do well to see that the Meal is not a confession of sin; it is a confession of fellowship. If this understanding is absent or neglected, we distort the Meal and dishonour Him who loved the church and gave Himself for her.

Truly, the Meal before us encompasses the three eternal verities—faith, hope and love. We are taught that "the greatest of these is love" [1 CORINTHIANS 13:13]. Faith is equated to remembrance, for we looked back to His sacrifice because of our sin. Hope is equated to anticipation, for we live in the hope of His return. But the love of Christ is a present reality, expressed through the love of His people for one another at this present time. These attitudes are to guide our approach to worship at the Lord's Table. This, then, is our responsibility—to ensure that we are motivated by faith, hope and love.

FAILING OUR RESPONSIBILITY — "When we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world." From modern pulpits, there is great emphasis upon privilege in the Christian life. Indeed, there is great privilege in being a child of the Living God. However, our exalted position with Christ the Lord imposes great responsibility as well. Privilege that ignores responsibility invites divine discipline. If, as the professed people of God, we refuse to accept responsibility for our own actions, we may be assured that God will hold us accountable. Though this concept insults modern sensibilities, it nevertheless remains a truth with which each Christian must reckon. In stating that we may indeed be judged by the Lord, Paul is reminding us of this neglected truth.

Remember that the context for his warning is a discussion of how the Christians of Corinth were approaching the Lord's Table. They were compelled through divine discipline to accept responsibility for their attitude. We may anticipate that God will also hold us accountable for our attitude whenever we come into His presence to worship. This admonition to review one's attitude whenever approaching to worship is not restricted to this portion of the Word.

Perhaps you will recall Jesus' words concerning worship that He delivered during His Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny" [MATTHEW 5:21-26].

The Master confronted our tendency to justify our anger, exposing the darkness of our heart when we harbour hatred toward a brother. His words are sobering, but the important point for us today is to note **VERSES 23 and 24**. The conjunction "so" ties what follows to what has preceded. If your heart harbours anger, you cannot worship. It should be apparent, therefore, that our attitude when we approach to worship is important to God.

The Master says something similar when speaking about prayer in **MATTHEW 6:14, 15**. “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” This requirement to accept responsibility for your own attitude is iterated in **MARK 11:25**. “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in Heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

If we will honour Christ who redeemed us, we must assume responsibility for our attitudes as well as our actions. It is the inner attitude that dictates the outward actions of an individual. You will perhaps recall Paul’s instruction to the Colossian Christians. He wrote, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” [**COLOSSIANS 3:5-17**].

It is an axiom of the Faith that God is much more concerned with the attitude of His people than He is with their actions. I am not suggesting that what we do is unimportant, but if our attitude is to seek God’s glory, He will transform our actions so that we are pleasing to Him. If we have a heart to honour Him, His Spirit will continually work to change our attitude so that even our actions glorify Him. We can do the right thing, but if our heart is wrong we will not be blessed. Just so, approaching the Table while holding the wrong attitude ensures that we will not, in fact, truly worship. Through stubbornly insisting on our rights instead of seeking His glory, we dishonour His Name, injure those who are weaker among us, and invite His discipline.

In our Tuesday evening Bible study, we are looking at the life of David. Studying David’s life, we are discovering that he erred seriously in many of his choices. Nevertheless, we know that he was a man after God’s heart [see **1 SAMUEL 13:14; ACTS 13:22**]. He sought the Lord and constantly was led to do what was right. When disciplined by the Lord—and he was disciplined on several occasions which are recorded in the Word, he accepted the discipline as given by a Father who was too good to needlessly hurt him and too wise to make a mistake. His heart was right and therefore his actions were corrected.

The Meal is not blessed by the one hosting the Meal, nor even by the setting in which the Meal is hosted. The Meal is blessed by the presence of the Lord Jesus Himself. Because He is present with His people, it is important that we recognise Him. He is, of course, in the midst of His people, walking in and out among them and ministering through them. Therefore, we must accept responsibility for our own attitude as we come into His presence.

WHY GOD DISCIPLINES — “When we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.” The point of our study is ultimately to see the love of God in a new way. God’s love is demonstrated in providing a sacrifice for our sin and in accepting us as His own beloved children. God’s love is revealed through His grace showered upon us. However, we don’t often think of the love of God as revealed through His discipline.

The Master’s discipline of His people is evidence of His love, for we know from Scripture that He does not discipline those who are not His own. Recall the word written in the Letter to Hebrew Christians. “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?”

‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.’

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” [HEBREWS 12:3-11].

Several truths are presented here—truths that are often neglected by the pulpit of this day. Assuredly, the love of God is written large here, for God will do what is necessary to deliver His own beloved child from the dangers of eternal condemnation. God loves His child too much to neglect that child, leaving her or him to their own devices. God has invested His very Being in the life of His children, and He will not fail to bring them to glory [see HEBREWS 2:10, 11].

This truth is evident from a review of Paul’s testimony provided to Roman Christians. “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” [ROMANS 8:28-30].

Again, the judgement of wickedness is clearly addressed here, for God shall judge the wicked. This is the warning Peter delivers as he urges Jewish Christians to live holy lives. Peter warned, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”

Then, he urges his readers to live godly lives. “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” [2 PETER 3:10-13].

There is an errant view of salvation which seems regnant among the professing churches of this day. It says that God saves an individual and then leaves that person alone to pretty much live as they wish. Consequently, there is little difference between the professed people of God and those who are clearly and deliberately identified with this dying world. Other than an occasional nod toward religious practise, treated as a duty, lives of professing Christians continue essentially unchanged. Since there are no consequences immediately apparent, they assume that all is well with their lives. Should someone question their faith, they become indignant and accuse their interlocutor of a judgemental attitude.

Jesus said of those who profess the Faith that “You will recognise them by their fruits” [MATTHEW 7:16a]. He continued by challenging those who profess to follow Him to reflect on nature itself. “Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will recognise them by their fruits” [MATTHEW 7:16b-20].

As God's child, you may anticipate discipline *because* you are His child. However, this discipline is a mark of His love, for God does not discipline the devil's children. He will not ignore you when you sin, but rather He will demonstrate His great love for you by drawing you back into His perfect way. That leads me to ask of each one sharing the service this day, “Do you have a living, vital relationship to the Living God? Does He guide you and hold you accountable? Do you have the witness of His Spirit, guiding you and correcting you when you stray?”

If upon reflecting on that question you realise that you have no relationship with the Living God, your first need is to be born from above and into the Family of God. This is the second birth that is promised to all who believe the message of life that is preached through the Risen Son of God. Jesus died because of your sin. He was buried and raised from the dead on the third day. Now, God offers the forgiveness of sin and a new quality of life for all who believe this truth.

The Word of God declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Believe on the Son of God and you shall receive the gift of life. God promises that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Our prayer is that all who share in this service do indeed have faith in this Living Saviour. Then, having faith, our prayer is that you are even now accepting responsibility to bring your attitude into line with His will so that your life will be pleasing to Him. This is our prayer and this is our offer to all who will receive it. Amen.