

# On the Lord's Supper

by Charles Finney

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*The Lord's Supper is a sacred ordinance that reminds us of Christ's death, shows forth his love and compassion, and promotes the progress of his kingdom.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 11:23

**Topics:** "Self-Examination", "The Lord's Supper"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the significance of the Lord's Supper, explaining its dual purpose: to commemorate Christ's atoning death and to symbolize the spiritual sustenance believers receive through faith in Him. He outlines the conditions for acceptable participation, including self-examination, a living faith, and a deep sympathy with Christ's love and compassion for sinners. Finney warns against the dangers of partaking unworthily, which can lead to spiritual blindness and judgment, while also highlighting the blessings of coming to the table with a sincere heart. Ultimately, he calls believers to approach the Lord's table with reverence, recognizing the profound implications of this sacred ordinance.

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## Transcript

"For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread, And, when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat; this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death until he come. Wherefore, whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." --1 Cor. 11:23-29.

This text gives us the original institution of the Lord's supper. In discussing it I shall,

- I. EXPLAIN THE DESIGN OF THIS ORDINANCE;
- II. SHOW WHAT IS NOT IMPLIED IN AN ACCEPTABLE RECEPTION OF IT.
- III. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN COMING TO THE LORD'S TABLE ACCEPTABLY;
- IV. THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN UNWORTHY PARTICIPATION.

I. The ordinance appears to have two great objects;

One, to show the bearings of the death of Christ in its governmental relations, as a substitute for the death of all who else must die; and the other, to show forth the spiritual relation existing between Christ and his people whereby they live by faith on him. The breaking of this bread and the pouring out of this wine may well represent the breaking of Christ's body and the shedding of his blood, and these emblems so far considered, doubtless set forth the atoning death of Christ as a sacrifice for our sins.

But the ordinance includes another important part;--this bread is to be eaten, and this wine his people are to drink. Now the frequent instructions of Christ to his disciples have made us quite familiar with the use of this emblem to denote the life of faith;--the fact that the hearts of Christ's people are purified, and animated with the spiritual life of the gospel, by means of receiving Jesus to their souls thus to purify and animate. Of this spiritual life, he is the living bread. Whoever eats shall live forever; whoever eats not, has no spiritual life.

Now the fact that Christ had already made so frequent use of this emblem and had so abundantly explained it, leaves us at no loss to assign this same relation as a secondary design of the ordinance of the supper. The breaking of the bread which he said denoted his body, might of itself indicate his death, and might suffice to exhibit its governmental relations; but the other great idea--the life of faith sustained by its appropriate spiritual food, required for its full illustration that these emblems of the Savior's body and blood should be received as food and incorporated into our very being.

Hence this ordinance not only shows forth Christ's death, but shows that by his death we live. If the question then be asked--Why do you eat this bread? The answer might be--To show that we live by Christ. In him in a most precious spiritual sense, we live and move and have our being.

Again, this ordinance is intended to remind us of our sins, and of our relation as sinners to the death of Christ. When he gathers us round his table and spreads before us those elements which represent his mangled body and his flowing blood, and says so mildly and impressively, "This is my body which was broken for you," who can fail to think of those sins of his own for which Christ died? And who can be so hard of heart as not to be melted under the thought--my life, and peace cost the Son of God such a death--a death of fearful agony!

Yet again, this ordinance reminds us how hopeless was our condition as sinners, without Christ's interposition. Surely we cannot fail to reason this;--The Father would not have given up his well beloved Son to such a death if any sacrifice less costly could have sufficed. If man could have wrought out his own redemption; or if there had been any other eye to pity and other arm of adequate power to save, then would the sacrifice of the blessed Jesus have been spared.

The hopelessness of our condition sent up its imploring cry to the throne of God for help. Deliverance could come from no lower source.

Still another object of this ordinance is to awaken and quicken our compassion for sinners. Around this table we see the fresh manifestations of the Savior's compassion for sinners;--this should enkindle ours. Did he feel compassion for sinners, and shall not we also? Did his compassion burn so deeply and so strongly that he could die for sinners, and shall not our compassion at least move us to pray and weep and toil and deny ourselves that they may live? Shall there be no power in Christ's example to make us feel as he felt?

Yet again, this ordinance should keep alive in our hearts a sense of that great love which Jesus had for his enemies. We must not forget that it was for enemies--for us while we were yet sinners, that Christ died. Let us never lose sight of this fact, nor of the lesson it reads us respecting the feelings we should cherish towards all the enemies of God.

Oh, what a flood of light does this great fact shed upon the infinite compassion of Jehovah! Could he send his own Son to die for his enemies! Then we may hope in his mercy--if we will repent and trust him.

Again, this ordinance is valuable as affording conclusive evidence of the truth of the Christian religion. Every body knows that this ordinance exists. No fact of history is better attested than that it has existed as far back as the death of the Apostles.

But even if it were otherwise--if the historic evidence were very much less than it is, we should still stand on solid ground in affirming the utter impossibility of imposing such an ordinance upon mankind, if it had not been instituted by our Lord himself. The fact of its existence therefore stands an incontrovertible proof of the great facts of the gospel scheme. It proves that Jesus Christ did die for the sins of men--and that he desired his followers to show forth this great fact to the end of the world.

II. We pass now to enquire what is not implied in an acceptable coming to the Lord's table.

It does not imply an avowal on our part of Christian confidence in all those who come with us, or of Christian fellowship with them. I have often met with persons who hesitated to come to this ordinance; and when I have asked them why they hesitated, they have replied--"There are persons there of whose piety I stand in doubt. Therefore I do not feel free to come." Now this position assumes that in coming to the Lord's table we endorse the piety of all who come with us.

But this cannot be correct ground. Judas was present when Christ first partook of the supper with his disciples. The disciples to be sure might not have suspected his hypocrisy, but Christ knew it well. The example of Christ therefore in coming and allowing his faithful eleven to come also and eat with the known traitor, forever settles this point.

Suppose the disciples had known Judas' true character. The circumstances might still have been such as to justify them in coming with him to the table. This is not the place to go into detail upon the duty of disciplining those who give evidence of hypocrisy; suffice it only to say that we do not of course make ourselves responsible in coming to the Lord's table for the sincere piety of all who come. They come on their own responsibility.

If I held the views of which I am speaking, I could not commune with any church I ever saw. I could not administer the supper to any church with which I have ever been acquainted. I may believe the church to be a church of Christ, and yet may not have satisfactory evidence of the piety of some of its individual members. The general confidence I have in Christian character of the church justifies me in administering the ordinance, or in communing with them.

Yet such scruples as I here refer to are very common, and are the alleged reason why many absent themselves from the Lord's table. The reason is not a good one. If the devil should come, I would come too. Why should I be kept away by him? If he comes, let him bear his own responsibility.

III. We next enquire what things are implied in coming to the Lord's table acceptably.

1. A living, efficient faith, as opposed to a faith that is dead and inefficient. A dead faith is a mere opinion, held in the intelligence, but not affecting the heart or the conduct. Men sometimes hold certain opinions, and suppose themselves to hold them with entire sincerity; yet those opinions have no efficient influence upon their life. Such a faith is of no avail.

On the other hand a living faith is a vital, efficient belief which at once affects and controls both the heart and the life. In every case of living faith, the mind receives the truth in love and cheerfully obeys it. This receiving the truth in love is a living faith. It is a trusting, confiding, committing the mind to the influence of truth. The efficiency of such a faith will be manifest.

It overcomes the world. "This is the victory that overcomes the world--even our faith."

This faith worketh by love--being efficient because love and trust are sweetly blended together,--this constitutes a fitness for acceptable coming to the Lord's table. But no amount of knowledge--faith being inefficient--can fit the soul to come to this table of the Lord.

2. Sympathy with Christ in his love for his church. All who come acceptably must have this. Christ's love was so great that he is represented as giving himself--his very life for his church. Oh! what love is this! Love that could induce him to lay his life down for his people! Let no one expect to be accepted at his table who does not sympathize deeply with Christ in this great love of his for his church.

3. Sympathy with Christ in his compassion for sinners. On this point we need to get before our minds the state of feeling in which Christ laid down his life for the lost and guilty. Into this feeling we must enter most fully if we would enjoy his presence and his smiles of love at his table.

In short you need to have a sympathy with the whole mind of Christ. Go back to the scenes of the last supper. There are his disciples. How intense the Savior's care and love for them! He would not leave them orphans--he could not part from them until he had promised them an abiding comforter--poured out his soul for them in prayer--giving them the largest promises, even assuring them that they might ask what they would in his name, and it would be given them.

Conceive too of the spirit with which he had all along anticipated the cross. Ready to sacrifice himself--ready to be arrested, dragged like a lamb to the slaughter;--ready to be insulted, tortured, nailed to the tree--ready to endure any thing--I mean not merely, any thing short of death, but any thing with death itself--any form of dying however full of agony. And all this for sinners! O what an emptying of self! what a consecration to the good of the vile and the guilty! Was every love like this! With all this love we are to sympathize if we would come acceptable to his table.

Take still another view of this point. Suppose the disciples when they came together for the first time to this supper of their Lord, to have understood its design as well as they did afterwards. Then conceive how they must have felt. There sat the meek and lovely One, around whose feet they had so often gathered to hear his precious words;--he is preparing to sacrifice himself. It is as if a man were making ready his own winding sheet. He is thinking of a memorial by which his death for them shall be had in perpetual remembrance through their lives and throughout the lives of all that should believe on him through their word down to the end of the world. Now if the disciples had well understood all this, with what emotions would they have gathered round that table! With emotions much the same should we now celebrate the supper he then instituted. If your souls, beloved, were thoroughly to enter into these sympathies, you would find yourselves drawn into most deep and blessed communion with your Savior at his table.

4. Another condition of acceptable communing in this ordinance is a deep sympathy with Christ in respect to the progress of his kingdom upon earth. One great and leading desire of this ordinance is to promote the progress of Christ's kingdom. It aims to quicken the faith, the zeal and the love of his people, and to testify before the ungodly to the great fact of the death of Jesus Christ for their salvation if they will come and receive it. We cannot therefore come acceptably unless we come in sympathy with Christ in this respect.

5. Every church must maintain wholesome discipline. If they neglect this they ought not to come to the Lord's table at all. They are guilty of greatly dishonoring Christ and his cause. How can it then be any thing else than mockery for them to publish to the world their professions of honoring the Savior, as they do in coming to his table? If I as pastor should find that a church refused to maintain wholesome scriptural discipline, I should feel it my duty to refuse to administer to them this ordinance. I could not make myself accessory to their contempt of the Lord's authority and of the rules of his house.

6. Stumbling blocks must be removed. If any members of the church have openly disgraced religion they must reform and put away the disgrace they have brought on the name of Jesus. Else how can they hope to meet his smiles at his table!

7. All difficulties between brethren should be amicably settled. The church ought to insist on this, before they come to the communion table. All hard feelings should by all means be allayed before brethren meet together at the Lord's table. How can they appear before their Lord with such feelings cherished towards one another! And do they think to secure the smiles of their Lord, coming themselves in such a spirit?

8. Self-examination is always an indispensable condition of coming acceptable. So Paul taught;--"But let a man examine himself and so eat of that bread and drink of that cup." This self-examination ought to be a most thorough scrutiny into one's own heart and life. We ought to know where we are and what our spiritual state is, before we come to the Lord's table to meet our Savior face to face. We ought to know whether we are prepared to come; we ought to know what blessings we need to seek from our Lord when we meet him at his table.

9. It is always important to renew our covenant at these seasons of communion with Christ. I do not believe that Christians can come acceptable unless they do virtually renew their covenant with Christ on such occasions. It is eminently fit and proper at these seasons to review our past life--to see what sins we have committed--to repent of them; confess and forsake them and again solemnly renew our covenant to be the Lord's fully and forever. All this is so fit and proper that no Christian in the right frame of mind for acceptable participation can fail to do it. You sit around the table of your crucified Lord, and before you are the elements which bring to your mind the scenes of Calvary. You stand as it were by the side of the sacrificial Lamb, and as the Jews of old, so you now lay your hand on the head of the victim and "there confess your sins." How appropriate and solemn to confess one's sins over the broken body of Jesus Christ! What place can be like this for breaking one's heart for sin, and earnestly putting it forever away! Oh let us never come to this impressive scene without improving it for penitence and confession, and for solemn renewal of our covenant with our Savior.

10. Restitution should be made amply for all wrongs done, as far as it lies in our power to make it. "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." These precepts of our Lord's applies pertinently to any act of worship, but preeminently to communion with

Christ at his table. Its meaning none can question, for nothing can be plainer than his language--nothing more reasonable than its obvious meaning. If you have done your neighbor wrong, so that he has reason to have somewhat against you, stop where you are--go not forward a step in your professed worship of God while wrong toward your brother lies unretrieved--go and make this wrong right as far as you can; make all reasonable or possible reparation and the most ample confession; become reconciled to thy brother; then mayest thou appear before thy God acceptably--not otherwise.

How can any one who has ever read this precept dare to come to the Lord's table until he has first made restitution for all known wrongs against his fellow beings?

Restitution should also be made to God. By this I do not mean to imply that we can remunerate God for injuries done him; but I do mean that we can restore to his cause and service what we have wrongfully withdrawn or withheld. If you have in your hands of the Lord's wealth which of right ought to have gone into his treasury for the use of his poor, or of his laborers;--or if, as the case may be, you have been squandering this wealth upon your taste or your passions as you have reason to know God would not have you, then you have wronged your Maker and robbed his cause; and it becomes you to make ample restitution before you venture to meet your Lord at his table.

So if you have backslidden from the Lord, and your heart has gone after other gods, what business can you have to come to the table of your Lord, except you can come in the spirit of most deep and humble repentance? How can you come acceptably, unless it be to re-consecrate your heart and all your powers to your dying Lord? In coming to the table of the Lord, you publicly profess to sympathize with Him; if this profession is mere mockery, can you hope to be accepted?

IV. The consequences of coming unworthily, next demand our consideration.

One of the results to be expected,--one indeed which always follows an unacceptable coming is great spiritual blindness. This is true of all religious duties;--performed in a wicked state of mind, they induce great spiritual blindness. But I have often thought that an unsuitable attendance upon the Lord's table must harden the heart beyond everything else. There are many in the churches who do this; who come to this table, conscious most fully that they are in no fit state of mind to come acceptably; but they feel that they must come--they fear being disciplined if they refuse to come; or at least, they fear the loss of their Christian reputation; hence they come, and consequently, become dreadfully hardened.

Do you meet with a professed Christian who is in deep and awful darkness, or whose conscience seems to be seared as with a hot iron? Search out his history, and you will find in most cases that he has allowed himself to come to the Lord's table in a careless, wicked state of mind, and having thus trifled with the most solemn and effective means of melting the heart, he is now hardened fearfully--perhaps so much so that no means or influences can ever reclaim and restore him. When one comes to the table in this wicked state of mind, he is likely to go away more bewildered and hardened than ever. The curse of the Lord is upon him.

On the other hand, coming acceptably has the opposite effect. It quickens our spiritual sensibility--melts the soul in godly sorrow; and makes every grace thrive and grow like the cedars of Lebanon. Those that be planted thus in the courts of the Lord shall flourish in the house of our God.

The judgments of the Lord will follow the deliberate or reckless abuse of this ordinance. So the text plainly teaches. "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment to himself.["]

There can be no doubt that in the primitive church, not merely spiritual but physical judgments befell those who abused this ordinance. For this cause said Paul, are many weak and sickly among you, and many asleep--doubtless in death. There is no reason to doubt the fact that God often sends judgments upon people in this world for their sins; and especially for the sin of perverting or disregarding this sacred ordinance.

Another danger of most fearful sort awaits those who abuse this ordinance. It is reprobation. They are in the greatest peril of being given up of God. When the best means which the Lord can use to melt the heart prove unavailing, it only remains to give over the helpless reprobate to his fit doom. If the view of his crucified Lord, dying for his sins fails to move and melt his soul, there is little if any hope of his ever being brought to repentance. In the judgment day we shall find a great many professors at the left hand of the Judge--because of their hypocrisy at the table of their Lord, and of the [j]udicial blindness and hardness of heart thus produced. Hence followed reprobation, and their place on the left hand. They may plead--"We have eaten and drunk in thy presence and thou hast taught in our streets;" but he shall say, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.

#### REMARKS.

1. Satan tries often to keep weak believers away from this ordinance, and especially young converts. He makes them doubt whether they are real Christians, harasses their mind--accuses them of playing the hypocrite; makes them feel that it would be a horrible thing to come to the Lord's table; and perhaps ultimately succeeds in inducing them to forsake the table of the Lord and even prayer itself, and other religious duties. Now young converts and indeed all Christians ought to be on the alert that they be not caught in this snare. They should repel Satan by saying--I know I am in danger of being deceived--therefore I will flee to Christ now. Now if never before, will I repent of my sins, and take hold by faith of the offered gospel salvation. Now I will lay hold of the arm of the Lord for my help, crying, "Search, me O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." I know it is a solemn thing to come to the Lord's table, but Jesus invites me and I cannot stay away. I cannot forego the spiritual blessings which may be obtained there; there is no reason in the universe why I should. I will indeed be on my guard most diligently lest I come and partake unworthily, I will go to Jesus and confess my sins--my soul shall lie in the dust before him--and if my brother has aught against me with any good reason, I will go and be reconciled to my brother before I come to that divine table of the Lord;--but how can I be persuaded to stay away and starve--while I know there is bread enough and to spare in the banqueting house of love?

In this way, Christian brother, you may quite baffle Satan, and make his temptations a blessing and not a curse to your soul. If you will be really honest with your God and with your own soul, you shall have nothing to fear.

2. Satan often tries to embolden real hypocrites. The true convert he will try to harass with the fear of being a hypocrite; but with the real hypocrite he plays another game. He tells him to fear nothing--H[h]e helps such persons to come to the Lord's table with heedless self-confidence, as careless, as to any special preparation, as if they were coming to any common meal. Horrible presumption! Perhaps they never really ask the question--"Am I prepared in heart to commune with Jesus Christ at his own table?" If their mind does glance at such a question it soon glances off again, and they do not give themselves solemnly to self-searching in the light of God's word, and with prayer for the Spirit to guide their minds deeply into the secret things of their own real character. Those who never examine themselves may know,

if they will believe it, that they are deluded by Satan and may expect to lift up their eyes in hell in the awful agony of final, remediless disappointment.

3. Satan often plays a game with backsliders which is adapted to keep them forever in a backslidden state. He says to men--This is a means of grace--you must by all means go. But he is careful not to tell them they will need to prepare their hearts by solemn self-searching and deep repentance before the Lord. He keeps this idea quite out of sight--if he can. His plan is to make them trust in external means for their salvation. Prayer he tells them too is a means of grace; hence if they will pray in form--enough to keep conscience quiet--all will be well. Thus he keeps them away from real repentance--lures them along in their backslidden state, and puts their souls in infinite peril of final perdition.

4. Those who know themselves to be backsliders have no right to come to the Lord's table, unless they mean to return to the Lord when they come; for coming in any other way, they really play the hypocrite; and what right have they to do this?

5. This ordinance is often a great curse to the church. The best things perverted, work the greatest mischief. The more precious the institution, the more shocking and pernicious its perversion. The same is true of every doctrine of the Bible; the best and richest for practical benefit, become when perverted, the very worst. It is on this principle that no one can come under all the solemn and impressive influences of the Lord's table and resist with a cold, unmoved heart, and not be awfully hardened and fearfully cursed by that which Christ gave us for the choicest blessings.

6. This ordinance is peculiarly precious to the saints. Here they meet Christ under most affecting circumstances. It is as if they were to meet him at his own funeral or at his cross. What can be more precious! How do the most melting considerations cluster round the heart as you come to meet Jesus and remember his dying groans and his tender love for his people at his own table.

7. This ordinance must have been most affecting to Christ. Think of the circumstances under which he first instituted the ordinance. Beside him sat the traitor; before him lay outspread in full and distinct view that foul and cruel treason--the rush of the chief priests and of their armed men to seize him--the mock trial--the insults--the scourging--the dying agonies--the being forsaken of God; but these were not the only objects of his deep solicitude. Around him sat his eleven faithful ones, and his heart sympathized deeply with their coming trials and with their yet more remote labors, persecutions, and temptations in his service. He foresaw the need of giving them some memorial of his own death, for he knew that so long as they remembered this and saw it in all its proper relations, they would be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Hence he sets up this impressive memorial, and inscribes on it the sad yet glorious and heart sustaining fact of his own bloody death for the salvation of a world.

Yet again, let us consider how affecting is this memorial in its form, and in its natural associations. "Come, he says to his beloved ones, come sit down with me at my table. This bread betokens my body which I am about to give for the life of the world. This wine, which I now pour out foreshows the shedding of my own blood--indeed!--my blood, which is soon to be shed for you." O how he must have felt amid these scenes! and how must they have looked on and listened with mingled amazement, gratitude and love, as the great idea began to break into their mind that their Lord might ere long die for them; and as they saw in his eye and his tones that love unutterable was swelling in his heart and compassion yearning in his bosom. Viewing this transaction in all its bearings, what a scene! Did earth ever witness another such?

8. The celebration of the Lord's supper may be a most interesting scene to the Savior now; perhaps in many respects as interesting now as then. Why not?

When Christ sees a church in a suitable state to come acceptably,--when he sees the humble, broken heart, and the uplifted eye of confidence, trusting in his word and atoning blood, think you not that his heart is affected with tenderest sympathy? It must be an interesting scene for the exalted Redeemer to see his church on earth still celebrating his death age after age, still breaking the symbols of his body and pouring out the emblem of his blood as if they could not and would not forget the love and compassion of that wondrous death--as if they lived in and through the life begotten by that wondrous death!

Beloved, your risen Savior sees you eating of his symbolized body, and if your heart is in sympathy with your act, his eye regards it and his heart beats in sympathy with yours!

9. But on the other hand it must be exceedingly abhorrent to the mind of Christ to see his professed people come in a hard, unfeeling, unbelieving, ungodly state! To see them coming as it were to attend his funeral, without a tear, and without showing or having the least feeling adapted to such a scene! Oh what mockery of the dying Jesus is this! They come and stand before his cross--they can see his blood flow--they come and look into his open grave--but all, with hearts unaffected! Oh, how could they testify more strongly that they never loved this blessed, dying Savior! This I need not say must be utterly abhorrent to the heart of the Savior.

Brethren, are you prepared to come to the table of your Lord this afternoon? Have you such sympathy with Christ that you can come with broken hearts--can abase yourselves most spontaneously before your Savior--can pour out your tears of penitence at his feet, and then can trust and love and adore?

Come, brethren, for the voice of love invites us--come, but let none abuse the call.

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