“DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”

1 Corinthians 11:2–34

Key Verse: 11:25

“In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

Do you have trouble remembering things? It can be embarrassing! Some people tie a string around their finger to help them remember something they need to do. We create national holidays to help us remember important events or people. But even then, we get caught up in the holiday food and drinks and totally forget what the holiday is supposed to help us remember. In today’s passage Paul reminds the Corinthians that while eating the Lord’s Supper, they need to remember Jesus. It’s not just a nice suggestion; it’s a serious matter; it determines whether we are spiritually healthy or spiritually sick. It also can solve all the problems of a church community. What does it mean for us to remember Jesus? Why is this so important, both individually and as a church? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In chapters 8–10 Paul has been teaching on the controversial issue of eating food sacrificed to idols. Now in chapters 11–14 he addresses issues in church meetings. In verses 2–16 he begins with women wearing head coverings during public worship, and in verses 17–34 he corrects their way of celebrating the Lord’s Supper. As we’ve seen throughout this letter, Paul is very concerned about the health of their church. Though some of the specifics here are not relevant to us today, there are principles in his teachings that we need to take to heart if we want to be a church that’s pleasing and useful to God.

However, in this part about head coverings, the meaning of several things is not so clear. First of all, the head covering itself could mean several things—a veil over the face, or long hair flowing loosely, or a scarf over the head. Secondly, we wonder why having either short or long hair for men or women could ever be considered “a disgrace.” Thirdly, in verse 10 Paul uses the expression “because of the angels,” and no other passage in the Bible can help us grasp its meaning. Fourthly, Paul seems to be teaching women to be under men, which is never an easy teaching to accept. Finally, in verse 16 he says the churches at that time had “no other practice,” suggesting that wearing head coverings was a custom, not a command of God. With so many uncertainties, we should approach the verses with humility and not rush into literal applications.

We first notice in verses 2–16 how Paul uses the word “woman” 16 times. To understand why he spends so much time on this, it’s good to look at how he addresses women elsewhere in this letter. In chapter 7 in his teachings on marriage he uses the word “woman” another six times. There he seems to be indirectly contradicting a group of women in the church who thought that being married and having relations with a man was unspiritual and unnecessary. These “super-spiritual” women thought they were brides of Christ, full of the Holy Spirit, and didn’t need men. They were encouraging others either to divorce or refuse to get married, so that they could be fully spiritual. Paul taught that being married and intimate with one’s spouse pleases God and protects us from immorality.

The other place Paul mentions women in 1 Corinthians is in 14:34,35. He writes, “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” Paul seems to be disqualifying women from any preaching or teaching role in ministry, or even from a discussion of the Bible in a group. To our modern ears it sounds misogynistic. Some churches take this literally and forbid mixed gender Bible studies or women in church leadership. But again, Paul seems to be addressing a specific problem with women in the Corinthian church. These “super-spiritual” women were likely speaking out during church services, challenging the men who were trying to teach or preach.

But we know that Paul truly valued women. In verses 11,12a he writes, “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman…” Men need women just as much as women need men. It’s true in marriage, in society and in ministry. In his final greetings in chapter 16 Paul mentions Aquila and Priscilla and “the church that meets in their house.” This couple was leading a house church ministry. In fact, the Bible mentions how Priscilla and Aquila taught the Christian scholar Apollos “the way of God more adequately” (Ac18:26). They were probably Paul’s closest co-workers. Paul clearly didn’t forbid women from teaching the Bible to men.

But here, in 15 verses, Paul teaches women to wear a head covering in church. Why? To us it may seem too trivial. But it was likely because in Corinth those “super-spiritual” women were defying the normal custom of women covering their heads in public. When they refused to wear the normal head coverings, they were making a statement and drawing attention to themselves. It was distracting and disruptive. So Paul emphasizes order. Read verse 3. Here, “head” can suggest authority; it also can mean “source.” God our Creator made an intrinsic order in creation, as well as in our spiritual lives. Christ submits to God the Father, not because he is lesser, but to honor God’s order (cf. 15:27,28). Man submits to Christ in order to honor Christ as Lord. Women submit to men not because they are lesser, but simply to honor God’s ordering of things. In verses 8,9 Paul writes, “For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” Women need to realize God’s order and find wisdom to use their God-given gifts not to enhance themselves but to help men spiritually. Paul writes in 14:33, “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.” Paul’s principles for church meetings are order, mutual respect and cooperation, and seeking to honor Christ and others when we gather. How can we not be “contentious” people in the church but rather live according to these principles?

In verses 17–34 Paul teaches about observing the Lord’s Supper. It’s not just technical rules about a ritual. Paul is getting at the core of how we are one body in Christ. Of all his letters, he explains the meaning of the Lord’s Supper only to the church in Corinth, perhaps the most divided and contentious one. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper meaningfully is the best way to be truly united.

Paul starts out with a stinging rebuke. Read verses 17,18. Church meetings should never be a place to fight and argue, or to leave people feeling humiliated. Church meetings should do us good, not harm. They should not be discouraging, but encouraging. One of the most discouraging elements in their church meetings, Paul says, was “divisions among you.” What divisions? In the earlier chapters he mentions various church leaders people were claiming to follow. Here, the divisions seem to economic and social. Read verses 21,22. It’s shocking that church members could be behaving so badly, even worse than non-believers! The main problem was their selfishness and indifference—especially those who were well-off. Officially it was supposed to be the Lord’s Supper, but really it was about gross self-indulgence.

Paul teaches them the real meaning of the Lord’s Supper. Read verses 23–26. The Lord’s Supper was created by our Lord Jesus himself. Jesus transformed the Passover meal, which commemorated the Israelites’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt, into a Christian celebration of his own death, the only way we can be delivered from our slavery to sin. In these verses there are some important details about his death. First of all, it says he was “betrayed” by one of his closest followers. It’s a painful fact. It also mentions his body and blood. On the cross Jesus sacrificed his own body and shed his own blood to become the Lamb of God for us. He’s the true fulfillment of the Passover lamb. His death was the ultimate humility, the ultimate obedience, the ultimate self-sacrifice—the exact opposite of sinful people trying to advance and enhance themselves.

Read verse 25 again. Jesus says the new covenant is in his blood. The old covenant was given at Mt. Sinai when God gave the Law to his people. It was conditional on their obedience. Of course they quickly broke that covenant. So much later God promised a new covenant (Jer31:31–34). It would be based not on peoples’ performance but on God’s forgiveness. Jesus’ shed blood confirms God’s promise to forgive all our sins, if only we believe in him.

We also notice a phrase that is repeated twice: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Eating the bread reminds us of how Jesus gave his body, and drinking the cup reminds us of how he shed his blood. In 10:16 Paul writes: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” As we take the bread and the cup, we are, in a way, participating in his death. How so? As we think about his body and blood given for us, we’re having spiritual fellowship with Jesus. We’re receiving his sacrifice for our sins personally. We’re believing in him and receiving his love. In John 6 he taught that we all need to continue to feed on him, on his body and blood, in order to have life.

Here Paul teaches us that basically, we all need to remember Jesus. There are so many ways we need to remember him. We need to remember all his words. We need to remember his way of life and ministry, how he lived humbly and was always doing good, serving people, and depending on God in prayer. We need to remember how he raised disciples. But perhaps more than anything else, we need to remember how Jesus died for us. If we don’t remember that, we probably aren’t remembering him at all. Remembering his death renews God’s grace in our souls. It fills us with the love of God, and it gradually molds us into his gracious image. If the Corinthians would truly celebrate the Lord’s Supper, it would erase their divisions and pride and all their contentious behavior and make them a truly loving community.

Paul goes on to teach how to take communion meaningfully. Read verses 27–29. “Unworthy manner” means without regard to our own sin, our own great need. It also means ignoring the deeper meaning of his body and blood, showing no holy reverence. In verses 29–34 Paul uses a word for “judgment” four times. God responds with divine discipline to those who treat the Lord’s Supper in such an ungodly way. To appreciate his death, we need to come before the Holy God, reflect on our own current spiritual condition, and really ask for his mercy.

Read verse 25 again. May God help us come to the cross of Jesus and remember how he suffered and died for me, for my sin. May he renew his grace in our hearts and help us participate in his death spiritually. May this unite us as his people and make us a humble, gracious and orderly community that truly honors and cares for one another.