

Be Careful How You Eat

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[0:00] Welcome. Please do come and speak to me afterwards. I'd love to say hi to you. Well, my name is Mark. I'm one of the pastors here. Before I forget, Matt did it in Cantonese. I'll do it in Chinese.

Sing Nian Kwa La. Happy New Year. Happy Chinese New Year. It's actually the first day of a 15-day Chinese New Year celebration where we eat and eat and eat.

So I think the topic tonight might be quite appropriate, actually, for us Chinese. Well, as I was going to say, we are resuming our study in the first letter of Corinthians.

We left off at the end of last year at Chapter 11, halfway through that, and so we're just picking it up. And over the next couple of weeks, we'll be looking at the rest of the letter. And, in fact, these next few chapters will be a lot about Christ's body and what it means to live as the body of Christ.

So I invite you to come along, and appropriately tonight, we'll be celebrating the Lord's Supper as well after this passage. We've heard from this passage. Well, you've got some outlines if you want to use that to help you follow along.

[1:10] And please, if you could, and you've already closed your Bibles, please reopen the Bibles back to 1 Corinthians Chapter 11, and I have to do the same myself. Thank you. I wonder how many of you might suffer from one of these poor eating habits.

No need to put up your hands. Skipping breakfast. A high-fiber, high-fat, sorry, and low-fiber diet. A caffeine hit at every meal, and one in between. Or worse, a caffeine hit in place of a meal. Sweets as staples.

This one's not so good. Binge eating or emotional eating. Chocolate as cheer-up. Well, we all know how our eating habits impact our health.

Poor eating habits lead to poor health, to disease, and problems like heart attacks, diabetes, and then, in the worst case, death. Well, tonight, we're going to look at the eating habits of the Corinthians.

[2:25] But not so much in what they ate, but in how they ate. And we're going to see what harmful spiritual impacts it was having on them. Well, we can actually put quite a good picture of what was happening in what Paul was talking about, based on what we read in the text, but also a bit based on what we know Greek society to be.

Not precisely, but I think good enough. It seems the picture was that churches in those days tended to be house churches. And so they met in large homes of their wealthy members.

And these homes would house not only the owner and the immediate family, but very often the extended family and all the servants that would be employed, and slaves, I might add as well, to keep the house running.

And so the church would comprise not just the household and the slaves, but also people who would come from outside to worship at the church. So it's a bit like, if you watch your TV, a bit like Downton Abbey, where the owner and the guests would often eat very separately to the servants or the slaves.

And it was also that the Lord's Supper was often observed as part of an ordinary meal, a bit like this last supper was with Jesus. And they would probably use the food that was already on the table, the bread and the wine.

[3:51] And so the scenario which Paul refers to here may have gone something like this. The owner of the house where the church was meeting would have perhaps invited some friends over for dinner before church.

And as Greek society dictated, perhaps these would have only been the richest members of the church. Or perhaps it would have been those that were part of his or her clique.

Remember the start of the letter where Paul was talking about the controversy that they were having around who was Cephas and who belonged to Apollos and who belonged to Christ. And, you know, sort of subdivisions of the church within that.

And then perhaps during the meal, they would pause to observe the Lord's Supper. But in doing that, the rest of the church would have been excluded because they weren't part of the meal and because they weren't waiting until everyone was present before they ate.

And so in those first few verses, Paul said, some of you are hungry while others are drunk, as in drinking too much. And so it seems here there are two issues.

[4 : 59] The first is that some in the church were actually left physically hungry because they could not share in the dinner. But then secondly, they were also excluded from the Lord's Supper, from that act of worship.

Now, it could be that the people were doing this deliberately to enhance their standing in church. And verse 19 seems to suggest that that's what they were trying to do, accentuating their differences to get God's approval.

Or it may just be that they were unthinking and following along the Greek customs of the day. But either way, Paul was scathing in their behavior. And all through the verses from 17 to 24, we see him having a really good goal, and rightly so at the Corinthians.

And so he says in verse 17, your meetings are doing more harm than good. If it's going to be this way, you're better off not doing this. It's not the last supper you are having, he says in verse 20. Stop using the meal, in verse 18 and 19, to differentiate yourself and try and gain God's approval. God takes no pleasure in this disunity.

[6 : 11] And if what you're thinking is showing love in the church, well, what you're doing is actually despising the church of God. It's pretty strong language.

You know, he says those you are humiliating are part of Christ's body and members of God's church, and this is what you're doing to them, whether deliberately or unthinking.

So Paul ends that by saying, what shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter. So here they think they were doing something really spiritual, and instead all they were getting was a year of food from Paul.

Don't they realize the significance of what they were doing? That the Lord's Supper that they were eating and partaking in was no ordinary meal.

And so we move to the next point, from verses 23 to 26, where Paul proceeds to remind them of Jesus' own words regarding the Lord's Supper.

[7 : 16] And these words remind them that this is no ordinary meal that they were at. The gravity of what Paul says is immediately obvious with his words. For he says in verse 23, For I receive from the Lord himself, from the Lord, what I also pass on to you.

The Lord Jesus, on the night 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 in remembrance of me.

That's probably very familiar words to all of us. But this meal that they were celebrating was a reenactment, as it were, of the one which Jesus ate with his disciples at the Last Supper.

And the lesson which Jesus was trying to tell them, to teach them, is the same lesson that he would have tried to convey to them, or he did convey to them at the Last Supper.

And this is the same lesson that he wants to keep reminding us as we come to this meal. Well, what are the things that we are to remind ourselves? Well, first, I think we are to remind ourselves that this is a meal of thanksgiving.

[8 : 25] Jesus gave thanks for the bread and the cup, not so much for the physical bread and the physical wine, but because the bread and the wine symbolize, the broken bread symbolized Jesus' broken body, and the cup poured out signified or symbolized Jesus' shed blood.

And so thanks was given for the gift of salvation which comes through the death of Jesus on the cross. This was not something which the Corinthians, or us, earn.

And so Paul was actually saying, why are you Corinthians behaving like some of you are entitled to God's approval more than others? That some of the blessings that they had in their lives owe more to themselves and their deeds than God.

No, salvation is a gift. Before God, all are equally undeserving. And so Paul says we are to give thanks for that.

The second point is that we are to remind ourselves that this is a meal of remembrance. So we are recalling his broken body and his shed blood. And even as we are thankful, we are also humbled by the enormity of Jesus' sacrificial death.

[9 : 45] Jesus himself said, greater love has no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends. And so if the Corinthians actually remembered that, then the question is, how could they not respond likewise in love to all those that Jesus died for?

Christ died for everyone in the church. Those with money and those without. Those with power in society, those without. Those with gifts of tongues and those without. Those with spiritual knowledge and insight and those without. So how did the Corinthians divide the body along these lines, these unholy lines?

Were they actually remembering the Lord's death and his sacrificial death at that when they celebrated the Lord's Supper? So we are to remember that Jesus gave his life for us when we come to the Lord's Supper.

And third, the Lord's Supper is a meal of proclamation. So verse 26 says, For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

[11 : 03] We are saying with our actions as we come forward what we believe about the Christian faith. We are witnessing even as we are partaking. We as a church and individually are declaring and proclaiming to everyone that we have put our faith in Jesus.

We have put our faith in him for the forgiveness of our sins and for the hope of resurrection when he returns. So again, it is an act of faith in God's grace.

But this time, it is not just merely a private remembrance in our own heads, but a public declaration with our actions. And this public declaration needs to be consistent with all our public acts.

That is, if we declare God's grace at the Lord's table, then we also need to declare God's grace in everything else we do, and not least in how we treat one another, all of us as recipients of God's grace.

So this is not an ordinary meal, and so the consequences of coming to this table are not ordinary either.

[12 : 21] That is, harmful eating habits at the Lord's Supper will not be detrimental to our physical health, but will be detrimental to our spiritual health.

And that's why Paul says in verse 27, So then, whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

And then again, he repeats himself, For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, that's verse 29, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

I don't know about you, but if we actually stop to think about it, it's actually quite scary, isn't it? Because we often come forward thinking that this is a meal that we can come to be blessed, and that's exactly what it's intended to do.

God's here, God's Spirit is here with us to bless us. But he is also here to bring judgment if we do it in an unworthy manner. Tonight, as we come forward, I pray that all of us will be blessed, that there is a possibility that we might come forward and eat and drink in judgment as well.

[13 : 43] And so that's why I think we need to take it seriously how we do this. And I want to think a bit more deeply about those words from Paul, because I think most people, when they hear those words, they think, and without realizing the context, they think that what they're meant to be doing is to examine their lives personally.

That is, they're meant to think, how have I sinned? You know, things like, have I prayed enough? Did I swear during the week? Have I cheated? Have I lied? And then some people on that basis might refrain from participating because they think their sins prevent them or make them unworthy to come forward to take the Lord's Supper.

But I want to say that if we look closely at the context, Paul is saying something slightly different. Yes, there's no harm, absolutely, in reflecting on our own personal party.

But Paul's command here is for us to think about our actions corporately. All the verbs in here are referred to the body as a whole.

The yous are all plural, not singular. And what Paul wanted them to do in verse 33 was to look at how they ate together.

[15 : 05] So that was a corporate action. They were to correct themselves as the body of Christ rather than as individuals. So as each of us come individually and collectively, I think we need to

reflect on what we do together as Christ's body when we observe the Lord's Supper.

In verse 29, it says, the unworthy manner relates to the discernment of Christ's body, that we are eating and drinking without discerning the body of Christ.

That is, we are eating and drinking without regard to the welfare of others in the church. And at its core, this reflects a sin of pride which translates into selfishness and perhaps abusive behavior.

So I think the unworthy manner does not refer to us not being good enough to eat. In fact, if we are humble and we recognize our sinfulness and repent of it, then that's precisely the attitude that we are to come forward in to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

We recognize that we need the body and blood of Jesus. So judgment is not going to come to someone who is humble and repentant. Instead, it comes on the person who is self-righteous and thinks he or she is better than others and is more deserving of God's favor.

[16:33] It comes on those people who continue to act in the body in a way that reflects that somehow they're better than others to come to this table. Now I want to think for us to think now a bit about our life together.

and it would seem on the surface that, you know, we are pretty inclusive. So we don't exclude people from coming to the Lord's Supper. In fact, we even offer things like gluten-free bread and non-alcoholic wine to make sure everyone can participate.

And, you know, to me, actually, I think that's important. So on the surface, I don't think we deliberately exclude people from eating with us. But I want us to think about our life perhaps in less obvious ways.

Are there subtle ways in which we try to distinguish ourselves at church? And do we create, I guess, two different classes of Christianity or Christians in our midst?

Yes, we are all saved by grace, we will say. But then inside or in how we act, we say that some deserve it more than others. Now the reality is that we are all different, right?

[17:46] Some of us have more money than others. Some of us are more theologically trained than others. Some of us have more visible gifts than others. And so the human tendency is for us to perhaps favor one group more than others.

You know, and I'm just giving examples here, perhaps we plan activities that only those people that have money can afford to go. So for example, with the camp, we've said that we shouldn't let money deter people from coming.

So if you can't afford to come to camp, still come and we'll find a way for you to come. Or perhaps when we're meeting in our Bible study groups, perhaps we show more deference or courtesy to people who are, you know, trained theologically, whereas we sort of ignore other people that we deemed to not be as studious in the Bible.

Or perhaps that's how we speak. We quote theologians and scholars as a way of sort of putting down others and humiliating those people that don't seem to have knowledge of these things.

Or maybe we choose songs at worship. And I'm not saying the song leaders do this by no means. But maybe we choose songs that only highlight how good the singer at the front is without having regard to whether the rest of us can sing.

[19:04] Well, these might seem like small examples, but they actually do send a message, don't they, about whether we actually value everyone or we actually treat someone, some people, more than others because of their visible gifts or talents or things that they have.

My point, I guess, is that I want us all, I want to encourage all of us to think carefully and be sensitive to the way we treat one another. we cannot come to eat the Lord's Supper and divorce that with everything else that we do together.

Our life together must reflect the principles in the Lord's Supper. The meal which we give thanks for and remember and proclaim. And so, it may be that I've got my own blind spots or if there's something that you've seen about us together that you think needs to change, then please come and talk to me about it because I think it's serious enough that we do this so that we do not come under God's judgment.

Now, I just want to make one final point about verse 30 and that is, let me read it. Paul says, that is why many among you are sick and weak and a number of you have fallen asleep.

But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under judgment, under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

[20 : 44] I just want to say that we mustn't misunderstand what Paul is saying here. Paul is not trying to say that if someone is weak or sick in our midst, that he or she is under God's judgment.

Neither is he saying that all sickness is proof of God's judgment. I think it's a corporate thing where he says, some of you may be suffering because others are eating the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.

And so the judgment actually I think is coming upon the whole body even though the physical impacts of which are suffered by some. But I also want to say if we read it carefully that this judgment is actually coming from a loving and merciful God.

He judges, why, in verse 32, so that if we are judged in this world, we are being disciplined so that we are not finally condemned in this world.

And so it is, God is using sickness and suffering as it were to stop us in our tracks, to stop all of us in our tracks and to make us realize our sin and bring us to repentance so that all of us or none of us will come under final condemnation in the world.

[22 : 02] So, friends, by way of conclusion, what we are going to do is move straight into the Lord's Supper. I think it is very fitting that we do that. And given what we have sort of heard tonight from God's word, I am going to give us extra time for reflection tonight.

Not just reflecting on our own lives, but also thinking, and this applies particularly for those of us who have been here for a while and know how we live together, thinking about ourselves and how we live together.

And as I said again, if there is anything that you think needs to change, then please come and talk to me because I think it is very important that we do. So what I am going to do is I am going to sit down and do the same with you and then after that I will come forward and pray and then we will celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.