

Ungodly behaviour at the holiest of meals

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Date: 11 October 2026

Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0:00] 1 Corinthians 11, verse 17 to the MS Pray. Father, we've just sung that we might worship you in the beauty of holiness, with lives that have the odour of Jesus, that look like him, feel like him, both individually and corporately.

Think about our celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Would you help us to think through this passage, that that might be true for us here in Jesus' name? Amen.

1 Corinthians 11, last week it was hats and head coverings. Today the troubles in the church in Corinth concern bread and wine and some unholy behaviour at the holiest of meals.

Now you might have missed it last week, but at the beginning of that passage when Paul speaks to them about head coverings and hats or whatever it is about, Paul actually, before he got into that condemnation for their behaviour, he had some words of commendation.

It was as if he was saying, you've remembered the overall idea, you've remembered the teaching and the traditions, but you're applying it in the wrong way. You're doing the wrong thing, but you're doing it for the right reasons.

[1:14] They had understood that they were free in Christ, they'd just misapplied that knowledge in some unholy and ungodly ways. But here, did you notice Paul has got nothing positive to say at all?

Did you notice that? Verse 17, in the following directives, I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more good than harm. Sorry, more harm than good, wrong way around.

More harm than good. He tells them their practice is so bad that whatever they think they might be doing, it is not the Lord's Supper that they're eating. And that's verse 20.

And then he asks a question in verse 22, what shall I say? Shall I praise you? What's his answer?

No, no, not in this matter. Something serious has gone wrong and it's left Paul frustrated and angry. So what's going on in Corinth that Paul is commenting on here? Well, remember in the early days of the church, there were no church buildings. Some of the meetings we read through the book of Acts took place in the temple courts, sometimes in meeting rooms that were in some of the Gentile cities.

[2:24] But most of the gatherings, as the church grew and was planted, happened in people's homes, private homes. Now, when a church is five or six or maybe ten or a dozen, actually most of us would have maybe a lounge, where it might be a bit of a squeeze, but we could get that number of people in.

But imagine that the church is this big. 45 adults plus some children today. And it's not many of us that would have a lounge big enough for that, is there?

So, of course, the meetings started to become in the homes of the wealthy because they were the only ones who had homes big enough to accommodate everyone. Now, that's not necessarily a problem.

The Bible never criticises people who are wealthy simply for being wealthy. It has a lot to say about the misuse of wealth, how the wealthy should be generous with what they've got, how they should certainly not rely on their wealth for their security.

And no doubt there were in Corinth some people who were gracious and generous with their wealth, who would have been great hosts. We read that in other parts of the book of Acts. People opening up their homes for the apostles to meet in doing it in a gracious way.

[3:36] But it seems that in Corinth, not everyone had that same attitude. In chapter one, we heard that there were divisions amongst the people in terms of who, which leader they followed, some with Paul, some with Apollos, some with Peter.

But here, Paul is pointing to some deeper divisions around status and power and wealth. So let me paint a picture for you. It is the day of the church gathering and the church gathers in the evening,

long before Sunday was given as a day of rest away from work.

And in this particular occasion, the church is meeting in the home of Julius and Julia, their Gentile converts to Christ. They're wealthy, they are well-connected.

And they have a huge home so they can accommodate all the church. Like many Roman-style homes, it's got a special dining area with couches to lay on, all with their heads pointing towards a central table where all the food would be laid out.

It's also got a far larger atrium area. No seating, maybe some low walls, but that's where you'd get a much larger gathering. Church starts early evening, as I said, soon after the time when the rich and the wealthy had finished whatever work they were doing, not that many of them had much.

[4 : 59] But sometime before the ordinary workers and certainly the slaves finished their shifts. Because right throughout the early church, the church was made up of the rich, the wealthy, the powerful, and the ordinary people, and slaves as well.

Slave owners and slaves coming together as believers in the same family. So the rich arrive first. They bring their food because this is a shared meal to start with.

The church is gathering, it's going to eat together, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper will be part of it. So the rich come in. You can imagine them bringing their hampers from the local equivalent of Fortnum and Mason.

All the best food they've got. And because they're there first, well, they get the seats in this special dining area. They sit, they lay out the food, and well, they're a bit hungry.

So they start eating and drinking to their heart's content. As the evening progresses, the ordinary workers come in, followed perhaps later on by the slaves.

[5 : 57] They bring together whatever meagre provisions they can afford. Some of them maybe have nothing to offer at all. And what do they find? Well, it's not good. The rich and powerful are by now well-fed and sadly rather well-oiled.

The Fortnum buffet food is all gone. The only food left are some scraps, maybe some of the more homely offerings that others have brought. And there isn't enough food to go around.

And of course, there's nowhere to sit because the rich who got there first have grabbed all the seats. The poor have a choice between standing or crouching on the floor in the atrium. Now, it's great to be with the church family, but that loud, wine-fuelled laughter from the central room only goes to highlight the divisions of class and wealth that might be there in society, but that now made their way into the church and split it asunder.

The poor are left to feel like second, maybe even third-class citizens. And that's not good. The meal draws to an end. One of the leaders gathers to people together to remind them of the death of Jesus on the cross.

Maybe they share some scriptures, maybe they sing a psalm and some spiritual songs. But as they gather for this final part of their meal with bread and wine, it's explained to the gathered church how Jesus' body was broken for them and the bread is shared out.

[7 : 23] As the copies passed round, the people hear again how Jesus' blood was shared as a sacrifice for the sins of all who believe. The people are encouraged by God's word to keep turning from sin, to keep living for Christ, to keep looking for the day when Jesus comes again and there is that great wedding feast of the Lamb.

And in that moment, it doesn't feel too bad at all. It feels like, well, it's worth coming. It's worth coming for this, except that for some, that tiny sip of wine and that little chunk of bread is the only food and drink they've had already.

The rich and well-connected have gorged themselves on the banquet long before the poor arrived and they did so without a care for their brothers and sisters.

And it seems from Paul's writing here, without a care for Christ either, which is kind of ironic, isn't it, given the meal should be centred on Jesus. Can you see why Paul is so upset about this?

Across all his letters, Paul speaks passionately as Jesus did, as the other apostles do as well, about the way the gospel breaks down dividing walls. The wall between Jew and Gentile, between the religious and the irreligious, between men and women, between old and young, rich and poor, educated, uneducated.

[8 : 45] All those divisions that our society has come crashing down before the face of Christ. scriptures teach us how all those things that the world loves, that puts up those barriers, count for nothing in God's kingdom.

How deep and active love for one another must be a mark of God's people. And then he hears what's going on in Corinth and his heart breaks. Well, if that was the problem, what should it have been like?

Well, notice Paul doesn't criticise the kind of gathering that they have. Doesn't criticise anything to do with the lack of liturgy, what the person taking the service is wearing, whether it's wine or grape juice, whether it's wafers or bread.

None of those things that so often divide Christians today are of any worry to the writers of the scripture. Actually, the Bible in the New Testament says very little about how we should share communion together.

But he was deeply offended at these deep divisions in the church. Divisions here in Corinth based on wealth and social status that seemed to show that many of them were a long way away from God.

[9:58] They may have been sharing in this meal, but they were far away from God indeed. I said last week that our theology, what we think about God, needs to be shown in our lives, both as individuals and corporately as well.

Corinth wasn't doing that. And maybe some of the rich and powerful, as were the big houses that rose to prominence long before their faith had actually grown to a position to be shown.

Maybe they were still outside of Christ, they were certainly behaving like it. See, what the gathering should have shown was the power of the gospel to draw people together across all those different backgrounds and social groups.

It's that idea of the spokes in a wheel again. You've heard me mention this lots of times. Imagine the hub of a wheel, of a bicycle wheel with those spokes connected to the bottom as we're connected to Christ.

What happens? Well, we become connected to all the other brothers and sisters who are also connected to him. The Lord's Supper is shared, a shared meal as we gather around the one table remembering Jesus' one sacrifice and it's supposed to demonstrate that beautiful unity in how we are together.

[11:17] That wasn't true in Corinth. Now, if the people had waited for one another and shared their food together, as Paul told them in verse 33, if they had not, the rich hadn't grabbed all the seats, if they had truly mixed up in their conversations, if they had shown in their unity and how they were talking to each other, that those worldly divisions meant nothing, then the world would have seen something beautiful.

No one would have gone hungry, no one would have got drunk, no one would have been made to feel ashamed, unwanted or weak simply for being poor.

God's invitation and welcome is there to all who repent and believe. Rich or poor, ruler or slave, men and women, old and young, come. The gospel overcomes all of those and that should have been shown to the world in how the Corinthians were behaving as they gathered.

See, there is a wonderful power as we come and receive bread and wine. It's a wonderful illustration for us, isn't it? We all come in the same way. We come to stand or kneel in the same place.

We come and receive the same bread and the same wine in the same way with our hands outstretched. We hear the same words that speak of our shared need of a saviour.

[12:42] And despite our differences in status or earthly prospects or opportunities, we all come humbled by Jesus' death for us, knowing that we have the same need, the same saviour, the same calling and the same glorious hope.

All those divisions of wealth and power and status, education, other things that we might put in place to separate one from another, well, they mean nothing in Christ.

That's what Paul wanted to see lived out in the church when they met to remember Jesus. Once again, big problems in Corinth. Ungodly behaviour at the holiest of meals, but what about us?

What about us? Because things are very different for us, aren't they? We don't meet in someone's home, we meet here or the other churches across the parish. We're in a church denomination which has certain rules around the liturgy of the Lord's Supper that's been put there over time to maintain order.

And the divisions that were rife in Corinth are probably different ones to the ones that we may struggle with today. So what are the warnings here for us? Well, let me start with some warnings.

[13:58] I'll get to some encouragements a little later. But there are some warnings here of ungodly divisions. Firstly, there's a corporate division, similar to the one we see in Corinth.

Then there is a personal division and a spiritual division. The last two are not in this passage, but they are things the scriptures speak of. That's worth us thinking about them today.

So those corporate divisions then, I think we would be appalled, wouldn't we, if our churches were split like Corinth, if there were those same kind of divisions between the wealthy and the poor.

It used to be clearly seen in the Anglican church. If you go to St. Mary's Walbury, you'll see at the front on either side, the little fenced off sets of seating where the rich, the lord of the manor, the wealthy people would have been able to gather.

If you go to Powderham church, there's a special seat for the Earl of Devon in whose grounds the Powderham castle is. It used to be that the rich could buy seats in church and you pay pew rent so you've got your front seats.

[15:12] We don't do that anymore. Quite right too. It was a disgrace. But maybe there are less obvious divisions that creep in when we're not looking. Things between old and young, between the single and the married, between those with children and those without.

Maybe between newcomers and the people who have been in church for a long, long time. Maybe there's an unspoken division in how we mix between those with jobs and those unemployed, between those still working and those retired.

What about those who prefer a different style of worship? Are our hearts dividing us from them in different ways? Those divisions are just as ungodly as the ones in Corinth.

Of course in the apartheid era and some of the segregation in the states going back a few decades now, there were divisions in terms of race in church. church, those things should not be present.

We are one in Christ. So if you think about our church family here, if there are certain types of people that you think, I'm not going to sit next to them, someone that you think, well, I don't mind being next to them in the queue for communion but I won't sit and chat with them over coffee because then you need to check your heart.

[16:40] Very similar to the attitude that is there in Corinth and Paul, who comes to a very serious warning at the end of this passage, would say to us, be very careful about sharing bread and wine.

If you have those kind of divisions in your heart, don't come until you've repented of those attitudes. It's a shared family meal. If you're not willing to be part of that family, don't come.

Matthew 5, 23-24, Jesus introduces another division. It's not a corporate one but it is a personal one and he talks there about unforgiveness and pride.

He speaks about someone about to come to the temple to make a sacrifice and says, if you realise you have something against someone, go and deal with it before you come to God.

Don't seek to be reconciled to God before you sought reconciliation with others. Now, we're not making a sacrifice when we come and share bread and wine. We're remembering a sacrifice that Jesus has already made for us.

[17:40] But if there is unforgiveness in our hearts towards someone else in our church family, if there is someone against whom we have a grudge, someone who we won't speak to because something has happened in the past, someone who we point blank refuse to forgive, there is no point in you coming forward and receiving bread and wine until you've tried at least to sort it out.

Of course, it's not always possible to end those divisions. It takes two to be fully reconciled together. But for our own hearts, we should at least have tried, have taken that step forward to be reconciled to them, to be willing to forgive them before we come past.

We can't hold unforgiveness in our hearts and be determined to hold on to it and still receive God's grace ourselves. Let me add one more to this list.

And I think this is not a division between one another or us and individuals. It's a division between us and God. See, as we share bread and wine together, it is a sign of the peace that we have in Christ.

We come. That's why we have our confession first of all, to clear our conscience before the Lord, to remember his forgiveness. And it's then we get invited to sit around his table.

[19:06] So if there is a pattern in our lives of sin for which we refuse to repent, something which we know is wrong and we won't stop it, or something which we know we should do but we are refusing to do, this determined line in the sand, then again Paul would warn us about coming and

presuming on God's grace, taking bread and wine until we are ready to repent.

Now don't mishear me. Please don't think you've got to be absolutely perfect before you can come. Absolutely not. A number of times people have said, if you were wondering why I haven't taken communion today, it's because I've had a terrible week.

I've lost my temper here. I've been caught speeding four times. I've lied at work. I've done all these things and I just feel so terrible about them that I can't take communion.

That's the time you should come. It's the time you should come. You already know when your heart is wrong. You are sorry and repentant. Come and receive those tokens of bread and wine that assure you that you have been forgiven.

Don't turn away from those signs of grace. The Lord's soper is a means of grace for all repentant sinners, no matter what we have done. don't fail to receive that.

[20 : 27] I am saying if you are determined to turn away from what you know God is saying to you, then please think again. Paul has some warnings for us to receive.

If you've had a lousy week but you are in sorrow for your sins, come, eat, drink and receive. And don't come sheepishly, come boldly. Trusting in God's promise.

The meal is not for those outside of Christ who have never come. It's not for those either who are living determinedly in a way that shows a refusal to bow the knee to Jesus. It is there for sinners to strengthen our hearts in the glory of the gospel.

But the warning there in either of those three cases, if there is division among us in terms of the way we think about different groups of people in the church, if there is unforgiveness to another and a grudge there that we won't give up.

If there is sin in our hearts that we will not repent of. Paul gives a start holding, doesn't he? Verses 29 to 32. He says, look around the church, you Corinthians, some of you are sick because you're behaving like this.

[21 : 44] In fact, some of the people who have died have died because they were behaving like this. Wow. Goodness me, that's a bit serious, isn't it? But notice how Paul is at pains to explain that God's treatment of a Christian in this way is not a punishment, but a discipline.

It's a way of bringing them to their senses and encouraging them to repent. And if that sounds harsh, then look how Paul describes the consequences of continuing that unrepentance and wicked behaviour.

It's that same fate that unrepentant sinners face, a final and lost eternity. God's discipline to us is there to bring us to our senses so we do not sleepwalk to a lost eternity.

Well, there are some warnings. There's some deep problems in Corinth. Paul explains what they should be doing instead. And he gives us a warning to you.

But let me finish with some encouragements. See, Paul doesn't want to stop the meeting. He's not saying, well, don't have your communion services after a fellowship meal like this. Get a good liturgy established and do that.

[22 : 55] He's not saying that. He wants things to be put right. That's why he says, if you're famished, eat before you come and then you won't be tempted to be greedy. Wait for everyone and show your unity.

Then no one feels maligned or ashamed and the focus could be on Christ. So three encouragements as we close. When God, here's the first one, when God's family meets together, make sure you're there.

Make sure you're there. We have communion every two weeks. That's a service particularly to come to. But please, please, and I've said this a number of times lately, don't pick and choose the time you come to meet with your family.

Come every week. To pick and choose is a bit, in some ways it's a bit like those rich coming and saying, well I'm coming for what I can get out of this.

Remember those words to President Kennedy who said, do not ask what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country. That should be our attitude when we come to church.

[23 : 56] Don't come to church thinking, what can I get out of it today? Come to church thinking, what can I give? How can I be a blessing to my brothers and sisters? How can I share and grow that unity together?

That's how families grow, closer together by being together. Sometimes in those times when actually we might rather be someone else. But we put the time in, we grow together, we love and

serve and that's where the blessings are for us as Christians.

Number two, try to make sure you cross over those invisible lines. It's easy when you've been a church family established for a while, that there are people you know well, people that you like, you've got friends and we break somehow into tribes and sections and sometimes cliques.

It is a challenge to step past those things. Most of you have got a part of the church where you like to sit, which means generally you end up sitting near the same people. It's true, isn't it?

Yes? You know that. I know that too. So cross over those boundaries. For a family, let's behave like a family. If you're a parent with children, sit near some of the older folk.

[25:08] If you're a couple, sit near people who are single. Don't know whether we've got anyone with PhDs, but if you have, don't look out for the other people with bright academic minds and say, well, I must have some deep conversations.

Get to know your brothers and sisters. Cross boundaries. Build bridges. That was the aim of our hospitality month. To start mixing more, to grow together.

But every Sunday should be like that. That's how we grow together. That's how we witness to the world. When others come in and see, here's the last one. And this is particularly important for today. Remember that it's all about Jesus. And as we gather around the Lord's table, marvel again at the good news of the gospel. Because right there in the middle of this passage are those words of institution that Jesus spoke at the last supper.

This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me. And that promise that we are to keep doing this until he comes again.

[26:17] Because one day he will. Sharing in the bread and wine as we'll do shortly, around the Lord's table is a sign of our unity in Christ as well as our unity to Jesus.

One body, one people, redeemed by one Saviour, called to live for one Lord as we wait for the coming of his kingdom. Eating the bread and drinking the wine is a sign of our unity together, but it's also a sign of a personal unity of each one of us to Jesus.

See, the bread not only reminds us that Jesus' body was broken on the cross, but that he was broken for me. The wine reminds us that Jesus' blood was spilled not just for all he repented, but that he was poured out for me.

As we stand or kneel to receive the bread and wine, it's got to be a personal reception or it is nothing at all. He died that I might live. He suffered for my sins.

The punishment that brought me peace was upon him and by his stripes I am healed. Those thoughts should be going through all our minds as we receive bread and wine today.

[27:27] It's only when we have grasped that, when we've understood the price Jesus paid for us, that we are willing then to live with eternity in our hearts, crossing those boundaries, building unity among us, knowing that the things the world values and treasures are nothing to us because our treasure is in heaven.

God's love and if we eat that Lord's supper, that most holy of meals in an unworthy manner, either with no regard for Christ's physical body because we're still living in unrepentance, or with no concern for his spiritual body, the church, because of what's going on in our hearts and minds towards one another, then we will miss out on those blessings and may end up facing God's stern discipline.

So as we come together to the table in a few moments time, let us eat with soft hearts towards one another. Let's eat with thankful hearts to God for the love of Christ might be seen in us, that he might be seen in our gatherings, and with such powerful witness that others might be drawn in to Jesus so that they too can look forward to sharing in the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Amen. Well, we're going to approach the Lord's table now. As we do so, we're going to do two things.

We're going to stand in a moment and share the peace. Normally, as we share the peace, it's quite a rowdy thing, and that's okay. You can be a bit rowdy today if you really like to, but it may be that you know that there is someone here that you just need to stretch out a hand to today and say, I'm sorry.

[29:13] Peace be with you. Be a good time to do that. So I'll say some words. We'll have that usual response together.

And then on our sheets, there is a beautiful song, Behold the Lamb. As we fix our eyes on Jesus
and all he did for us. Please may may may may may may may may may may may may may may may
Thank you.