

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 AM

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[0 : 00] Father, may the riches of your grace shine through the poverty of my words, so that the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts may be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Maker and our Redeemer. Amen. You may be seated.

I invite you to join me on page 958. We are dropping back in to 1 Corinthians. Do you remember that book?

This is our third time going back to it. It might be our final time. It's a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a very impressive church in a very impressive city. This church is wealthy. They've got great speakers, incredible worship services, full of very clever, gifted, and influential people, but Paul says there's a little problem. You have not been transformed by or conformed to the gospel that you preach. So if I were to give the passage a title this morning, I would say, live what you preach. And it addresses a common problem in the church, to say one thing and to do another, to act in such a way that contradicts the message that we gather to celebrate and proclaim.

Verse 26, for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, referring to the Lord's supper, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again. 1 Corinthians is a letter that focuses on gospel application. Like what does Jesus' death and resurrection mean for our lives? How do we live it out communally and personally? In chapters 1 to 4, Paul addresses the fighting and the biting and the arrogance and the jealousy that's leading to division in the church. And he calls them back to the foot of the cross where gospel unity is to be found. Then in chapters 5 to 7, Paul addresses sexual immorality and the church's complicated response to it. And for him, once again, he calls them back to the cross where gospel purity is to be found. Then in verses 8 to 10, Paul addresses idolatry and the church's rights-based ethics. And he calls them back to the cross where gospel love is to be found. And now as we enter into chapters 11 to 14, Paul addresses issues related to the church's gathering, things that happen when the church comes together for worship and for communion. And he is once again calling the church back to gospel love. It's an astonishing letter, really. It's one of those letters where you read it and you go, is there any area of our life that Paul has not addressed with the gospel of the Lord Jesus?

So today God speaks to us through the words of 1 Corinthians chapter 11, and it's a word of warning to a divided church. And so I'm going to talk about this in terms of the problem in Corinth, in terms of Paul's pastoral directions for them, and then in terms of the power of the cross. So there's a problem in these Corinthian gatherings. It's that the body is divided, and their gatherings, instead of revealing and supporting unity, are actually showing that there's schisms in their midst. So look at verse 17 with me.

[3 : 26] But in the following instructions, I do not commend you, because when you come together, it is not for the better, but for the worse. Verse 18. For in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.

Notice that word divisions. It's the Greek word is schismata. It's the word from which we get the word schism. And it's a startling thing for Paul to say here, because right in the previous chapter, in chapter 10, verse 17, he links the celebration of the Lord's Supper very closely with the unity of the church.

Notice he says, because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

So to gather for the Lord's Supper and to have divisions among you is essentially to contradict the meaning of the Lord's Supper, according to Paul. So what's really interesting here is that what Paul points to, what's really interesting here, though, is that what Paul points to as the cause of this schism.

Notice here, it's not theological or doctrinal divergence or difference. It's sociological. So schisms in the church are rooted in social selfishness.

[4 : 46] So look at verse 20. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal.

One goes hungry, the other gets drunk. What? Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. So what's going on here? It's hard to say, because we don't have all the details and the information.

But I think a couple things are clear. This church gathering was mirroring in some form of public dinner gathering that was common in the Greco-Roman world.

And sometimes there are particular forms of dinner gatherings where people would come together and they'd bring their own food, kind of picnic style. So your social class, how much money you had, could really easily be reflected based on the type of food you brought and how much food you brought to the table.

[5 : 51] Think of the person that goes and gets Carl's Jr. and brings it. Do you guys even have Carl's Jr. here? McDonald's, I don't know. What other American fast food export I can name?

You're welcome, by the way. Yeah, fat burger, fat burger. I brought it with me when I came. And somebody else could get this high-level takeout that cost them \$40 for this one dish.

And that could be reflected there very easily. And here, people debate, is there a chronological issue going on here or is there more a spatial issue? Let me explain. There could be a chronological issue in that some people, namely the wealthy or the in-group, are arriving really early and they're arriving with the finest foods and lots of foods and they're just getting on with having a marvelous feast.

And then you have a bunch of people that are coming later and they're coming with not a whole lot of food or they're missing out on the feast in some extent. You have the day workers, the working class, you have people's servants, you have kind of lesser relatives and acquaintances.

And so the issue is that some are coming and they're just going ahead with their lavish feast and the others are coming and they're being left out or they bring very little to the feast to enjoy. Or it could be more of a spatial issue going on.

[7 : 04] So the architecture of Roman villas in the ancient world, the church often gathered in the houses of wealthy people. And in the architecture of, like, wealthy Roman villas in the ancient world, you had two dining rooms in a sense.

You had an inside dining room which was for honored guests and it could fit maybe eight to ten people. There would normally be couches so that those people could recline. It was this image of luxury.

And that's where the finest food would be served and experienced. And then there would be a room that was literally an outside room. It was kind of an atrium. And that could fit a lot more people, like 20 to 30 people, but it would normally be just sitting or standing room.

There was no luxurious couches. And the food that would be served there could be very different. So you get this indoor and outdoor group, this in-group and out-group. Think of Downton Abbey upstairs and downstairs.

And so whichever way you slice the pie, the situation likely reveals a social-economic class distinction that was common in the city of Corinth seeping its way into the gatherings of the church.

[8 : 08] So when the church is gathering, instead of bucking the cultural trends, she is actually reflecting them. And guests of very different rank are served very different dishes and wines of very different quality in likely very different rooms according to their respective dignities and worth.

And so whether the situation is chronological or spatial doesn't matter much because the social message that is communicated is the same. If it's an issue of lack of waiting, it's saying to people, you are not worthy of waiting for.

And it's an issue of two-tiered feasting, one inside, one outside. It's saying to people, there's an in-group and there's an out-group and you're not part of the in-group. The first, in effect, says you are not part of the family because meals communicated family belonging.

And the second says you are second-class members of the family. And I think this is why in verse 22, Paul says to act this way when gathering for the Lord's Supper is to despise the church and humiliate those who have nothing.

It's really hard to conceive of stronger language. The only other time I'm aware of these two words being used together, and there may be other instances, is actually Hebrews chapter 12, verse 2.

[9 : 32] Looking to Jesus, the author and founder of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame or despising the humiliation of the cross.

So despise and humiliate is what the religious leaders and the political leaders did to Jesus when they nailed him to the cross. And despising the humiliation is what Jesus did when he endured the cross for our sake, for the joy set before him.

And so Paul is saying that to partake of the Lord's Supper in such a way that even hints at there being class distinctions in the church is to treat the church of God in the same way that the world treated the Son of God when they nailed him to the cross.

This is why Paul goes on in verse 27 to say, whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty.

It's a legal word meaning liable for judgment. Guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. So Paul introduces this theme of judgment and he doubles down, triples down, quadruples down on it.

[10 : 41] Like I said, it's hard to conceive of stronger language. And it's important for us to remember that Paul is speaking out against schisms in the church revealed in the church's gatherings, schisms caused not by theology or doctrine, but schisms caused by social negligence and personal indulgence.

So why is this such a big deal to Paul? I think it's because these social divisions contradict the reality that according to Paul, getting it from Jesus, the Lord's Supper proclaims.

Namely, the Lord's Supper proclaims that all have fallen short of the glory of God, that none are worthy to gather the crumbs under his table, that everyone comes to the table with nothing to offer, and everyone comes ready to receive from the Lord's hands.

The Lord's Supper proclaims grace upon grace. That's the point of the supper. We are all equally in need of grace, and we are all equally welcome to receive grace.

And so to eat and drink in any way that suggests that we are not on equal footing at the foot of the cross is to eat and drink judgment on ourselves. So what's the way forward for Paul then?

- [11 : 56] He's diagnosed the problem, then pastorally, how do we move forward? If he's diagnosed the illness, what's the road to recovery, and what are the consequences if we don't choose to walk in it?

This is what Paul gives us in verses 27 to 34. He gives us two pastoral directions for partaking of the Lord's Supper. First, he says in verse 28, assess your attitude.

And then he says in verse 33, adjust your action. So assess your attitude, and then adjust your action. So first, assess your attitude as you partake of the Lord's Supper.

Verse 27. Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, note that phrase, will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

Let each person, here it is, examine himself or herself. Then, and so eat of the bread and the drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without, and note this phrase, discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

- [13 : 04] So according to Paul, eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper has implications which no other eating or drinking ever does. So we cannot approach it, as the great wedding liturgy says, lightly or wantonly or unadvisedly or irreverently.

It's a holy and weighty matter in the sight of Almighty God, our Heavenly Father. It's actually quite marvelous. If you take out your little red book and your pews in front of you, for those of you who are new to Anglicanism, this is called the Book of Common Prayer.

prayer. It's to help us all pray together. And on page 88 of this prayer book, there is an exhortation that is given for the church leaders to say to the whole congregation in the seasons of Advent and Lent regarding how they should prepare in order to participate of the Lord's Supper.

At the very bottom of page 88, I won't read this whole thing, it's like three pages long. Very bottom of page 88, the last sentence. For as the benefit of the Lord's Supper is great, if with a true and penitent heart and living faith we receive that holy sacrament, and let's skip forward a bit, so is the danger great if we receive the same unworthily.

For then we are guilty of the body and blood of Christ our Savior. Here he's quoting Paul. We eat and drink our own condemnation, not discerning the Lord's body. Judge therefore yourselves, brothers and sisters, that you may not be judged of the Lord.

- [14 : 37] Repent you truly for your sins of the past. Have a lively and steadfast faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And notice this line, And amend your lives and be in perfect charity with all people.

So shall you be meet partakers of those holy mysteries. Notice that last phrase, amend your lives and be in perfect charity with all people.

Because I think that's quite close to the heart of what Paul is actually getting on about here in 1 Corinthians 11. Let me explain. Notice how verses 27 and 29 are parallel statements.

So Paul says, whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner equals guilt. And then verse 29, whoever eats and drinks without discerning the body, judgment.

So what partaking in the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner is the same as partaking of the Lord's supper without discerning the body. Which then raises the question for us, what is the body in this context?

- [15 : 44] Is it Christ's own physical body or is it the church body? And I don't think the two can ultimately be separated. You know, Christ's own physical body laying it down in sacrifice is the foundation of the one church body.

But here I do think it's the latter. I think it's the church body that is Paul's intended emphasis. And the reason for that is he speaks in four couplets in this passage.

Notice he says, eats the bread, drinks the cup. Body, blood. Eat of the bread, drink of the cup. eats, drinks. He speaks in four couplets both times. And then here he speaks in the singular of discerning the body.

Which makes me think that here he is speaking of the one body of Christ that partakes of the one bread. Remember what we saw in chapter 10. And he's speaking of the one body of Christ, as we'll see in chapter 12, that has one spirit, though it is many members.

So, I think that means that when Paul exhorts us to examine ourselves before we partake of the Lord's Supper, I think he is particularly interested that we examine our attitude towards one another when we come together for worship.

[16:57] I think that's the import of that. How am I relating to other people, the people with whom I'm eating and drinking? Am I viewing myself as belonging to them in the body of Christ and them belonging to me?

Is God making me aware of spiritual dynamics in my heart that are contributing to social dynamics in the church that are antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

And for me, as I was thinking about this, it automatically raised things in my own life where I was like, oh yeah, that's a problem. So, what do you do if you discern in your heart an improper attitude towards fellow members in the body of Christ?

That's the question that comes up. I think Jesus' advice is helpful here. If you're a Christian, generally following Jesus' advice is a helpful thing. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses a situation where one Christian is angry with another.

And he says, if you are offering your gift at the altar, so in essence, you're worshipping, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there.

[18:14] Stop your act of worship before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come offer your gift. So, if we're supposed to examine ourselves, kind of do a little spiritual checkup, and something is revealed that is spiritually unhealthy in the body of Christ, then for Paul and for Jesus, it's really simple.

You need to pursue relational healing. It's simple, and as challenging as that. So, what could this look like very practically? I think it might be something like this, like the day before partaking of communion.

You know you're going to partake of the Lord's Supper, or maybe the hour before, or maybe on the drive in. Could I consider if there's anyone in the body of Christ that I am not right with? And could I consider if maybe that requires I give them a call, or I name the reality, or I talk it through with them, or they offer or ask forgiveness?

As I'm considering, are there divisions in the body to which I have contributed? Are there cliques in which I have participated? Are there people I've failed to honor or forgotten?

On multiple occasions, I've had to do this before getting up and leading you in communion. And this leads Paul naturally to his second pastoral directive. He says, first, assess your attitude, and then he says, adjust your action when you partake of the Lord's Supper.

[19:42] You see this in verse 33. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone's hungry, let him eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for judgment.

That wait for is language both of patience and hospitality. In other words, God wants our actions towards one another to reflect the radical hospitality of Christ.

It's interesting. The exact same word can be translated welcome or receive. And Paul actually uses that way in Romans chapter 15, where he says, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.

It's the same verb behind what's translated wait for. And so it recognizes something very essential about being part of the body of Christ. Hospitality requires patience. And patience is a form of hospitality.

It says, you are worth waiting for. It says, you mean something to me. It says, your presence has significance. It says, you are a key part of us.

[20 : 44] And so the illustration that's classic for me is that growing up, my family had certain dinner table rules. And there were lots of them that I transgressed. Like my mom said, I'm not allowed to put my elbows on the table, only my forearms, you know.

Very important things like that. The knife had to be put down before I picked up my fork to get a piece of food, you know, these sorts of things. But one of the important rules was you never start eating until everybody's at the table.

And she was vigilant about this. You wait until you feast. And I think for her, it said something about the significance of the meals, but not just the meals, the significance of the relationships that we built and we had at the meal.

You belong to one body. And so you wait for every member of that body before you feast. Because it's a feast for all. And so I had myself thinking this week, what could this look like for us at St. John's Vancouver?

And I started thinking of my own leading of communion services and I realized, oh, there's times where I start leading us in the post-communion prayers before every single person has received the bread and the wine.

[21 : 59] I thought to myself, maybe I can just wait an extra 60 seconds to acknowledge the fact that we are one body. There's another practice that I would commend to you because I know there's some of you that get antsy when you're waiting for everybody to take communion for about 15 to 20 minutes.

You're sitting there going, when is this ever going to end? You know, I've got places to be and things to do. And I just want to recommend to you that maybe one way of inhabiting that space of waiting while you're waiting for others to come up for communion is you could just watch the people who go up to receive communion and then ask the Lord, is there anything that you want me to pray for them as they go up?

Is there something going on in their life, Lord? Is there a way in which you want them to receive your grace in a specific way in their life as they go forward?

And would you bring that to mind? And I'm sure you would know people whose kids have gone astray and you know there's a lot of shame and hurt in that and you need to pray for them in that. I know you would see people who have cancer and diagnoses and face the real threat of death and you need to pray for them for perseverance in the hope of the living Lord Jesus.

I know you'll see people who are struggling in marriages and are struggling in relationships or struggling in singleness and you know that they need to feel and experience the power of God's grace as sufficient for them in their lives.

[23 : 22] And so maybe part of the act of waiting is praying that they would receive God's grace in the ways that they personally need it. Because I think what Paul is saying is that how we partake of the Lord's Supper reveals if we understand the heart of the Christian faith that is proclaimed at the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is about our Lord's self-sacrificial death for us. And I think Paul is saying it's forgetfulness of the cross that leads to divisions in the church.

Corinth teaches the church to take. Jesus teaches the church to give. Corinth teaches the church self-indulgence and Jesus encourages self-sacrifice.

And I think this is what makes sense of the tricky little verse 19. Look at tricky verse 19. For there must be factions among you or divisions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

I think Paul is saying something to the effect that the genuineness of our Christian faith is in some way revealed in the way that we relate in the church body especially when there are divisions.

[24 : 36] Especially when we gather together for worship. So Paul gives us two pastoral directives in response to the problem of divisions at the Lord's Supper. The first is assess. The second is act.

It's simple. Paul doesn't want this to be an anxiety-ridden rocket science sort of thing. He says, step one, discern the body and step two, do what builds up the body.

Step one, examine self. Step two, act for the other. And notice here how the gospel reverses the pattern of the world. The pattern of the world says examine others and act for self.

And Paul says examine self, act for others. And this is the beauty and the necessity and the majesty of the gospel. is that as Paul brings us to the heart of it, it's the blood of Christ's body alone that has the power to dissolve the divisions within his church body.

The hymn, Nothing But the Blood of Jesus gets the message right. And I think this is where I want to end in the last minute with you. If we stake our lives on anything else, if we gain our sense of worth and value from anyone else, if we distinguish ourselves from one another based on something else other than the cross of Jesus Christ, then it shows that the cross of Jesus has been sidelined in our lives.

[25 : 57] And the only answer to the cross being sidelined is to return back to the cross as the only source of salvation. And I think this is why the judgment theme is so significant in our passage.

It's because judgment comes where the cross has been sidelined. Because the cross is precisely Jesus taking judgment in our place. So walk away from the cross and we starve ourselves of grace and we bring judgment on ourselves.

Stay close to the cross and we get to feast on the grace that Jesus' judgment on our behalf purchased for us. That's why Paul draws us to the Lord's words himself.

This is my body, says Jesus, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Notice how personal that is. And then again, this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.

Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. Notice how personal that is. Jesus is saying he and he alone has the power to release us from the selfishness of sin and that he and he alone has the power to build the church body up into a community that has no division where greater honor is given to those who lack it and where all the members have the same care for one another.

[27 : 18] See, I think the seriousness with which God treats the Lord's Supper reflects the seriousness with which he loves the church and the seriousness with which he honors his son's sacrifice on its behalf.

So, my brothers and sisters, as we journey towards the table, it is our holy privilege. Do not approach lightly. Or irreverently.

Or wantonly. Or ill-advisedly. But approach knowing that the Lord has given his life for you. And there is grace upon grace to be received for all.

This I speak to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.