



1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Go ahead and open your Bibles to chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians [talking while eating a sandwich] Oh, is there something wrong? Did you want some of this? I'm sorry, I only brought some for myself. Does it bother you that I would eat in front of you in church and not give you any? This is similar to the situation Paul described in chapter eleven, only it was much worse. There the church in Corinth was gathering to eat the Lord's Supper. But their celebration of the Lord's Supper or communion was very different than what we are used to. Let me ask you, how many of you have ever been filled up by eating the Lord's Supper? You would have to grab about 3 hand fulls of wafers or a half loaf of bread to truly fill your stomach during the Lord's Supper. In our form of celebration, the Lord's Supper is not a meal. But for the early church and the church in Corinth it truly was a supper, a full meal which had the bread and cup portions included in the meal.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² 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.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 31 But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. 33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— 34 if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Perhaps the best way to understand it would be our fellowship dinners. If we held a fellowship dinner and at the end of the meal included the bread and cup, this would be very close to what happened back then. They called it a love feast. The problem is that there wasn't much love going around. Paul is disappointed with them. He said in v 17, *I have no praise for you.* When they gathered for the Lord's Supper there were divisions, a lack of love and bitterness of spirit. Look at v 20. *20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22 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.* Some of the church members brought plenty of food and they ate and drank their fill while others were actually going hungry because they didn't have enough food or perhaps no food at all. This is most likely a difference between the wealthier Christians and the poor Christians, so it also became a conflict between different societal classes of people, the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. The poor were not only went without food, but they were also humiliated in the process.

The problem with using church potlucks as an example is that we are so used to sharing our food at such meals. We all bring one or two dishes to pass and everyone eats their fill, usually with food left over. Let's change the traditional potluck somewhat to better approximate what was happening. Instead of bringing dishes to share with all, assume that each family or person brought their own picnic lunch. The Maurers would eat their food over here, the Larringtons would eat their food over there. But over in the corner the Kniprath family didn't have any food. They would just sit and watch the Maurers and Larringtons eating all of their delicious food while their stomachs growled. Kind of like me eating a sandwich in front of you all. They would put up with such humiliation because they were waiting to share in the bread and the cup. They wanted to stay for the worship part where they could honor the Lord Jesus and remember his death on the cross, but while they waited they were humiliated by the so-called Christian brothers and sisters.

Paul says that such things should not be and that they certainly were not celebrating the Lord's Supper. Amen you say to that! We would never do such a thing! You're right, any decent person would not eat what was intended to be a shared meal in front of another person who had nothing to eat. You don't have to be Christian to know that is wrong. I don't need to preach a sermon to tell you that. We may not be guilty of doing that, but there are other ways that we humiliate or dishonor our brothers and sisters in Christ. We'll get to that a little later. But the point Paul will be driving home is the unity of the body of Christ, especially when we are going

to worship through the Lord's Supper.

Paul felt it necessary to remind his readers of the details and importance of the Lord's Supper. He reminds us in v. 26 that, *whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*. What was the purpose of the cross, was it to create Christians or to create the church? It was both! God saves us as individuals. Each person needs to place their faith in Christ. I cannot be saved just because my wife is saved or because my mom or dad was saved. It is an individual commitment. On the other hand, when we are saved, we are saved out of the kingdom of the world and into the kingdom of God. We become the body of Christ.

In this chapter there are two bodies of Christ. You have the actual body of Christ, the one who with his own hands served the last supper and the bread and the cup. The One who a few hours later prayed until he sweat drops of blood. The One who suffered at the hands of his torturers, was humiliated on the cross, died an agonizing death and was raised from the dead 3 days later. This body of Christ is why we come to the communion table. There would be no communion table without it. You have the actual body of Christ, but you also have the metaphorical body of Christ, which is the church. Both of these ideas of the body of Christ are interwoven throughout this passage. So when Paul is disappointed because some Christians are going hungry, he is upset because the body of Christ—the church—is not reflecting the actual body of Christ. It is no accident that immediately following this section on the Lord's Supper, Paul spends three chapters talking about spiritual gifts. He spoke of how we are many parts, but one body. He reminds us in eloquent language that love is the primary characteristic of Christians, of the body of Christ. As important as spiritual gifts are, they fail to have any significance at all unless they are grounded in love for one another. The body of Christ, Jesus, and the body of Christ, the church. The two are inseparable.

It's an old song, but Twila Paris powerfully captures both of these ideas in her song, *How Beautiful*.

How beautiful the hands that served
The wine and the bread
And the sons of the earth.
How beautiful the feet that walked
The long dusty roads
And the hill to the cross.

How beautiful the heart that bled,
That took all my sins
And bore it instead.
How beautiful the tender eyes,
That chose to forgive
And never despise.

And as He laid down His life
We offer this sacrifice,
That we will live just as He died,

Willing to pay the price,
Willing to pay the price.

How beautiful the radiant Bride
Who waits for her Groom
With His light in her eyes.
How beautiful when humble hearts give
The fruit of pure lives,
So that others may live.

How beautiful the feet that bring
The sound of good news
And the love of the King.
How beautiful the hands that serve
The wine and the bread
And the sons of the earth.

How beautiful, how beautiful,
How beautiful is the body of Christ.

Through the Lord's Supper we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. What does it mean to proclaim the Lord's death? Is it just that we remember what he did for us? Is it to be a solemn memorial service where we shed tears for the one who died? For a moment forget about your traditional understandings of the communion table and think about it this way. The gospel is a love story. It is not the story of our love for God, but the story of his love for us. The communion table is how we open the pages to that love story and learn anew of Jesus' love for us. It is an intimate love, a passionate love that transcends our understanding and sets the perfect standard for the meaning of love.

We are still broken and scarred from our sin. Did you sin this past week? Did you fail this past week? We all did, so we run to the Lord's table to receive grace and mercy. We run to the table to remind ourselves of this great and awesome love story. We run to the table because we know that in this life our scars and our pain may never go away. While we remain in these mortal bodies some of the pain and consequences of our past sin will remain. Some of the hurt that others have caused us will linger. This life will always have pain, so we run to the table for mercy and grace. We run to the table until the Lord comes or until we breathe our last.

Paul wants us to run to the table, but he has a strong warning for all who do so. Notice how the tone changes again in v 27. We are warned not to eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner. We are told that we must examine ourselves deeply to look for traces of this unworthiness. Paul said that some in the church in Corinth who took the Lord's Supper callously were now sick and some had even died as a result of their lack of self-examination. Now here is our dilemma. If the Lord's Supper is a love story and we are to run to his table because of our brokenness, why are we told that we must rid ourselves of that same brokenness **before** we come to the table?

The reason for this dilemma is a misunderstanding of this passage. I don't think what this means is that we are supposed to sit and ponder every last sin and confess it before we take communion lest we get sick and die. When applied this way it is a great scare tactic. "Come on down for communion as we meditate on God's love for us—but watch out lest God strike you dead for your sin!" That's a good way to get people to confess and historically this passage has been used in just this way—as a scare tactic. We fear that we might take the bread and the cup in an unworthy manner as Paul warns in v.27. What does it mean to take communion in a worthy manner? Is anyone worthy? No, none of us are worthy to take communion, we are full of sin, that is why we run to the table—for the ongoing process of sanctification in our lives. We again receive and respond to God's mercy.

So if we are not supposed to confess every known sin, what is the purpose of this dire warning? I think the key lies in v.29, *For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself.* To take communion without recognizing the body of the Lord. Which body is Paul talking about? Remember in this passage there is the actual body of Christ and there is the metaphorical body of Christ—the church. Which is Paul referring to in v. 29? I think Paul is referring to the body of Christ as the church. I say this for two reasons. First, the context of this passage of Scripture is the conflict in the church in Corinth. Paul did not write this section in order to explain the elements of communion. He assumed they already knew that. He wrote this section of the letter because they were not showing love to one another at the Lord's Supper. The body of Christ the church was being humiliated through their callous treatment and neglect for their poor brethren.

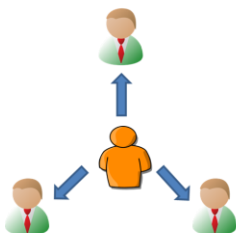
The second reason I think this is the body of Christ the church is found in 1 Cor 10:16-17. *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.* The bread is called the body of Christ and then the bread or loaf is further defined as the body of Christ the church. Therefore, I think that the warning in v. 29 is a failure to recognize the body of Christ around us at the table, meaning that we are not concerned about our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So we have come full circle from the start and you might be thinking, I see your point about the body of Christ the church, I always share my food at potluck, I would never let someone go hungry! This is where we need to take the principle from the passage and apply it more broadly.

RELATIONAL TRIAD

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.
(Matt 18:15)

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. (Gal. 6:1)



If you...remember that your brother has something against you...first be reconciled to your brother.
(Matt 5:23-24)

Is there a broken relationship between you and another Christian? If there is and you come to the communion table, with one hand you are celebrating the love of Christ for you and the

love that is supposed to be present in the body of Christ, but with the other hand you are denying both of these truths by your actions. This is what it means to partake in an unworthy manner—to ignore the lack of love and broken relationships among fellow believers. At my former church I was sitting waiting for the communion plates to pass by and I was convicted that I should not partake that day. You see I had a current conflict with the senior pastor, the very one serving the communion elements. I could not in good conscience knowingly take communion under such circumstances. I let the plate pass by, but more importantly, first thing Monday morning I was in his office to reconcile the conflict. The need to be in communion with God motivated me to be in better communion with my Christian brother. Does it matter if you caused the offense or were the one offended? It does not matter. Both parties have the responsibility to reconcile.

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