



In every culture, meals are an important part of being together. There is something about just sitting down and sharing a meal that brings people together. A group of people can gather and there can be conversation and laughter and even tears but somehow doing it around food enhances the experience.

This was true in the life of Jesus. There's a book called *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*. And it's true, you can! He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:30). He fed the 5,000 with just five loaves and two fish (Luke 9:14). He ate at Mary and Martha's house, telling a frustrated Martha she didn't have to serve a seven-course meal (Luke 10:41-42). He told a story about a man who made a big dinner and invited his friends but they were all too busy so he invited those on the highways and along the hedges (Luke 14:23). He made special preparation to eat his final meal with his 12 disciples in the upper room (Luke 22:8). And after his resurrection he broke bread with two disciples he'd met on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30).

It's no wonder meals played an important part in the early church. Acts 2:46 describes the early Christians as *"breaking bread from house to house...taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart."* One of the big issues in the early church was whether or not Jews and Gentile believers should actually eat together because doing so was a sign of friendship and acceptance.

Despite the importance of eating and drinking together, sometimes a meal goes bad. I don't mean the food but the fellowship. We've all been there. A comment is made that cuts like a knife thrown across the table. Or someone is left out. Maybe someone goes silent and withdraws not from the table but from the conversation. I know couples who avoid eating together because most often it's been a time of conflict and hurt. All kinds of things can go wrong at a meal.

This was the case with the church in Corinth.

### **The Problem.**

**But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and**

**another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you (1 Corinthians 11:17–22).**

Paul writes about them. Back in v. 2 he praised them for holding on to the traditions he'd given them. But here, rather than praise them, he chastises them because in coming together they did more harm than good. There were several problems Paul makes them aware of.

The most obvious thing is there were divisions among them. This isn't the first time we've seen that in this letter. We've seen how they had different cliques that centered around a particular leader. Some said "I am of Paul," others "I am of Apollos." Paul admits some factions are necessary in the sense they reveal who is a genuine believer and who isn't. But what Paul addresses here is different. The divisions he speaks of were between the wealthy and the poor. These divisions showed up when the church came together for worship and particularly at the Lord's Supper.

Understand when the church gathered together in those days they did so in homes and it almost always included a shared meal. Part of that meal would be a celebration of communion or what he calls the Lord's Supper. People would bring their own food to this meal so it would be like a potluck. The minority of wealthy believers had the leisure time and resources to arrive earlier and bring larger quantities and finer food and wine than the rest of the church. The way houses were built back then and the way dinner parties were organized these wealthy folks would have filled the small private dining room first and even started eating. Then the others who came later, who had been working all day and no doubt of less financial means, would have to sit in a separate area called the atrium or courtyard. They couldn't afford to bring a full meal, or a very good one, and wouldn't be able to share with the rest. This wasn't any different than how other organizations in Corinth operated and so the wealthy believers took it for granted that this was how things were; this was the natural order of things.

But Paul says this was wrong. Remember what he said back in chapter 10 about this? He said, *"Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread"* (v. 17). This was an offense against the oneness of the body of Christ. That's why he asks, *"Do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?"* Besides that, it revealed their

selfishness. He says, *“for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.”* There’s a complete lack of consideration for others. All they’re thinking about is themselves. And finally there is a lack of respect and reverence for what they were doing. Some were even getting drunk on the communion wine! Basically, they were treating this like any other meal so Paul just says, “If that’s what you’re going to do, just go home and eat!”

The bottom line in all of this is it wasn’t the Lord’s Supper. They thought it was the Lord’s Supper. They called it that. They wrote in their bulletin that’s what they doing. They went through the motions, but he says in v. 20, *“Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper.”* We can go through the motions of coming to church and singing the songs and shaking hands and hearing the message and even taking the Lord’s Supper and yet it can all be a sham. He even says *“you come together not for the better but for the worse.”* You’re doing more harm than good. We can do all the right things and yet have blind spots that actually undermine and betray the very good things we’re doing.

So in the rest of this paragraph Paul gives us several guidelines to help us avoid making a mess of the Lord’s Supper. In essence he tells us to look in several directions to correct this problem.

### The Solution.

#### Look back

The first thing he says is look back. He goes back and recounts the tradition of the Lord’s Supper instituted and passed down by the Lord Jesus himself on the night of his betrayal.

**For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which 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.” In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (verses 23–25).**

Sometimes we forget what Jesus was doing that night was reinterpreting the Jewish Passover meal. For Jews this was the night of nights. It was the night when around a meal they relived the drama of their redemption from bitter slavery in Egypt. God delivered them when the blood of the sacrificial lamb was smeared across their doorpost. Later, the angel of death passed over their house and their firstborn was spared. They had to leave in a hurry, before the bread could rise. To commemorate that event, they ate a meal together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs and sweet wine. It’s like each generation traveled back in time to be there so they could say, “I, too, came out of Egypt. That story isn’t just about them; it’s about me.” At one point in the meal, the host would break the bread and say, “This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness.” Jesus substitutes

those words with his own, “This is my body which is for you...” During the meal four cups of wine would be offered. Most likely with the third cup Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood...” In the Bible, when God made a covenant with his people, it was ratified with a blood sacrifice. Jesus says, “I’m that sacrifice.”

When we take communion we look back and remember and re-live the events of our own redemption through Christ. You know that old black spiritual, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” In the Lord’s Supper we go back and we’re there and we understand what he did for us; we were there.

#### Look out

The second thing he says is to look out. Look at v. 26.

**For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.**

I know a lot of people who would never dare preach. It’s just not their thing. But did you know that each time you take the Lord’s Supper you’re preaching? That’s what he says here. You’re proclaiming the Lord’s death. I think we all know sometimes the most powerful and memorable messages are those which contain no words at all. A handshake at the end of a business deal. A president getting out of his limo and mingling freely with the crowd. A black woman in 1955 refusing to give up her seat for a white passenger. A father and son embracing after years of estrangement. All these are symbolic acts that preach loudly. And when we take the Lord’s Supper we’re preaching. We’re proclaiming his death on the cross; his broken body and his shed blood are for you and for me; they are the way out of slavery to sin and death and the devil. The first pastor I worked for would never preach a sermon on communion Sunday because he said he wanted to “let the table preach.” That’s not such a bad idea. There have even been times throughout church history when the church stopped preaching the true gospel. Somehow it got lost underneath bad theology or mistaken priorities. But the great thing is the church has never stopped taking communion and so without even knowing it, they kept on preaching the gospel. You don’t have to say a word; doing it says it all!

#### Look ahead

In this same verse there is a third thing. Not only do we look back and look out but we look forward. He says we do this “until he comes.” Each time we take communion we remind ourselves he’s coming back. When he comes back, he’ll bring us home. And when he brings us home we’ll share together in a banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb, when his bride, the perfected church, will be joined to him forever. Jesus actually spoke of this at the Last Supper when he promised his disciples they would one day eat and drink at his table in his kingdom (Lk 22:30).

We live in such tumultuous times, don’t we? Earthquakes, wars, famine, crime, nuclear waste. It’s easy to get fearful or depressed or just cynical. But when we come to communion we’re invited to lift up our heads and remember our redemption draws nigh. It invites us to see our present salvation as the first installment of a complete salvation from all that oppresses us. In this act, we proclaim our God reigns. There ought to be a strong note of joy in the Lord’s Supper. This is not a funeral service; it’s a dress rehearsal for the marriage supper of the lamb! I’m told that at the end of Communion the early believers would cry out together “Maranatha!” It means “O Lord, come!” What a fitting cry of aspiration from we who long to be forever with our Lord. At the Lord’s Table, we look forward.

#### Look in

**Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly (verses 27–29).**

The fourth place we look is within. When Paul talks about eating in an unworthy manner he doesn’t mean **we** are unworthy, but rather we eat in a way that’s unworthy. This is what the Corinthians were doing when they selfishly disregarded their needy brothers and sisters in Christ. This is an offense against the body and blood of our Lord. It’s like if someone denigrates the American flag; that’s an offense against our country.

So Paul says examine yourself before you eat. This should be a time of self examination, confession and repentance. There is a sense in which we’re all unworthy of this table, right? This is a sinner’s feast. This is where the lost celebrate being found. This isn’t a warning to those who know their sin and seek forgiveness but those who are blind to their sin denigrate that which is sacred.

Tony Campolo tells a story from his childhood when he was sitting with his parents in church at a communion service. He became aware of a young woman sitting in front of them who was sobbing and shaking. The pastor had just finished reading the passage of Scripture: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” As the communion plate with its small pieces of bread was passed to the crying woman, she waved it away and lowered her head in despair. It was then his Sicilian father leaned over her shoulder and said in broken English, “Take it, girl! It was meant for you. Do you hear me?” She raised her head and nodded, and then she took the bread and ate it. Tony writes, “I knew that at that moment some kind of heavy burden was lifted from her heart and mind. Since then, I’ve always known

a church that could offer communion to hurting people was a special gift from God.”

In some ways, those are the only people truly worthy of this table; those who look inside and see their sin and confess it and then eat and drink as a way of saying, “I accept this costly gift of forgiveness. His body was broken and his blood poured out for me.” That’s what Paul means when he talks about “judging the body rightly.” We do that by recognizing Christ’s body, symbolized in the bread and wine, was given for us. We believe it and eat and drink.

#### Look up

The fifth place to look is to look up. In v. 29 Paul mentioned how we could *“eat judgment on ourselves”* if we’re not careful. What does that mean? He explains in verses 30–32.

**For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.**

This may seem bizarre to us but some of the Corinthians were sick and some had even died and this was God’s judgment. Notice the purpose of that judgment is positive and redemptive. It’s God’s discipline. It’s the Father taking out the paddle on his children. He doesn’t do it to destroy them but to save them. But they could have avoided this if they judged themselves rightly in the first place.

Now just because someone is sick or dies doesn’t mean they were in sin and God was disciplining them for that. We know that from the book of Job. Job experienced terrible suffering. His friends came along and said, “Job, you must have messed up somewhere. Repent of your sin.” But the opening of the book reveals his suffering had nothing to do with sin. God allowed it as a test. And Job learned a great deal from that experience. At the end of the book he confesses, *“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you”* (Job 42:5).

Not all suffering and sickness results from sin and judgment, but some does. So whenever we’re sick we should look up and ask the question. “Lord, what are you saying to me through this? Is there an area of my life that I need to pay attention to?” James talks about this. He says, *“Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed...”* (Jms 5:14–16). OLook around

**So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come**

**together for judgment The remaining matters I will arrange when I come (verses 33–34).**

Finally the last thing he says is to look around. When Paul says wait for one another he's most likely talking to the wealthier people who arrived at the meal first and saying wait until everyone arrives before you eat. Don't just dig right in. Be considerate of your brothers and sisters. It's interesting the word he uses for "wait" can also mean "welcome." Welcome one another. Look out for one another. If you brought a nice meal, share it with those who couldn't afford it.

When we take communion today, we normally don't do it in the context of a meal. If anyone came to get filled up on the communion elements today, sorry to disappoint you. It's like the little girl who came to church one Sunday with her parents to the regular adult service. When communion was served, she turned to her mother and whispered loudly, "The snack in children's church is much better. And we get a lot more juice." But nevertheless, in the spirit of this passage, we wait until everyone is served and then we eat and drink. And even more importantly, we take a Special Needs offering and that money is used to help those with physical needs among us.

**Conclusion**

When we look in these six different directions, the Lord touches us in a unique way through this meal. It's like the well-known

painting of the Vietnam Memorial in which a young widow and her daughter are standing at the wall, reaching up and touching the name of the husband and father who died. The reflection in the polished granite isn't of the mother and daughter, but of the husband and father reaching out his hand to touch theirs. That's the Lord's Supper. We arrive at the table and reach out our hands to take this bread and wine. In response to our act of faith, the living Jesus reaches out and touches us.

This morning when you take communion, look back and remember his broken body and shed blood for you. Look outward and proclaim the Lord's death. Look forward with joy and anticipate the marriage supper of the Lamb. Look within and examine yourself and use this as a time to confess and repent of known sin. Look up and ask if the Lord has been getting your attention through an illness. And look around and remember this is a family meal. Wait for one another and welcome one another.

*\*My thanks to Michael Green's book, To Corinth With Love, for his outline of 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, which I adapted for this sermon.*

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*