

## 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34 The Lord's Supper

### The Lord's Supper

[17](#) In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. [18](#) In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. [19](#) No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. [20](#) When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, [21](#) for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. [22](#) Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not! [23](#) For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night 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, after supper he took the cup, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me. [26](#) For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. [27](#) Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. [28](#) A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. [29](#) For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. [30](#) That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. [31](#) But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. [32](#) When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. [33](#) So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. [34](#) If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.

...and when I come I will give further directions, Paul writes to the church people in Corinth. His whole letter to them is full of instructions.

What on earth was going on there?

Paul had founded the church in Corinth about 20 years after Jesus' death. Even though Paul travelled on to other places, a lively exchange of information continued. Paul sent Timothy with letters and teachings. Chloe's people and others reported back when they arrived from Corinth and met Paul in Ephesus and other places.

In Paul's letter, as well as this strong reminder of the words which Jesus spoke at his last meal with his disciples, we read of abuses of the Lord's Supper, of partaking while being unworthy. All this talk about abuse and unworthiness is a bit tricky, unclear, even frightening. And I think we need to take a closer look at the congregation in Corinth in the 50's of the first century in order to understand...

Paul talks about divisions, about harm, about some doing just what pleases them individually, about others going hungry, and others being drunk...

What a mess!

Your meetings do more harm than good, Paul writes, as he addresses problems in this young community.

Christian congregations in the 1<sup>st</sup> century liked to eat together. They gathered regularly, maybe once a week, maybe twice. They had a real meal that was followed by sharing the bread and the wine, the elements of the Last Supper. But it was not working out in Corinth. It was all pretty chaotic.

They were all trying to grab food and drink for themselves, afraid that there would not be enough for everybody to get what they wanted. Those who could come early would eat all that was there and get drunk, while others got nothing at all.

Paul is disgusted.

He reminds the Corinthians of what the Lord's Supper is really about. (v 23-26). And then he says, "therefore whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning..." and so on.

The crucial question is what this "unworthy manner" is.

Paul refers to the rich people in the congregation coming early, bringing a lot and eating a lot, and not sharing with the poor, who often came much later because they had to work longer hours. So when the poor came, the tables were already empty and half of the folk drunk.

This is what Paul clearly labels 'unworthy'.

In the church in Corinth many very different people came together. There were huge social and cultural differences, very different national and religious backgrounds, and it wasn't always easy to find common ground, grow close to each other, and regard each other as sisters and brothers.

Some church members had been rich for generations, some had been very fortunate in business, some had climbed up the career ladder pretty fast, others had just been released from slavery, were day labourers or unemployed folk with many hungry mouths to feed, others were still slaves and lived under brutal and inhuman conditions...

All those and many more met in this growing church and had to find a way of accepting, respecting and supporting each other in a way that pleases God and shows genuine Christian love. ...that leaves no one hungry, that pays mutual respect to all people and the meal they share and that allows everybody to partake in communion.

In Paul's eyes, 'unworthy' is any behaviour that excludes, overlooks, or disregards others... And here we are at the point where we can build a bridge from Corinth then to Peace Church today.

When we celebrate communion, we express our acceptance for each other, our appreciation of each other, and the equality that is given to us when we see each other with Jesus' eyes.

When Jesus invites us to share his meal in holy communion, he holds us all together - world wide. He accepts, he values, and he loves us all the same.

To share a meal in New Testament times meant that you were prepared, both host and guest, to be associated with each other.

That is actually, if you can recall other Biblical stories, why Pharisees were very careful about who they invited to their meals. They would never want to be associated with tax-gatherers and sinners.

With Jesus it was different.

He had even invited himself to Zacchaeus' table.

When Jesus sat and ate with people, all were welcome to his table, especially those who knew their own weakness and sinfulness.

But more than that. If you shared a meal, you were linked not only with the host who invited you, but with all the others who were there.

That seemed to be the sore point in the church in Corinth. Some thought they were better than others. Some thought they deserved more than others.

When we come to the Lord's Table, we are accepting Jesus' invitation and affirming our love for him and our loyalty to him, but we are also declaring that we accept one another as fellow guests at the table, for that is what Jesus calls us to do: Love God and love one another.

This is what should make every church a peace church. This is what was missing in Corinth. This is what did more harm than good.

And Paul would have loved to see the people there recognise themselves as joined together in God's peace, no matter how different they are.

Holy Communion can link people in the most surprising and healing ways. And it is there to overcome our differences, rather than establish and emphasize them. Holy Communion links us historically with all those who have shared this sacrament over the centuries.

Bread and wine were shared before a single word of the Gospel had been written. The command "Do this in remembrance of me" has been obeyed from the last supper to this very moment.

We are the latest link in a chain of living memory that goes back in unbroken line through all the mists of time, through all the centuries, to Jesus himself in that upper room.

We are linked with all the saints and martyrs and great Christian men and women who have ever lived; all the people we have known and loved who have shared this sacrament but have gone on ahead of us; and with the countless millions of ordinary folk like ourselves who feel full of faith one minute, and aching with doubts the next; strong in goodness & love one minute, and the next weak & selfish. Getting things gloriously right today and horribly wrong tomorrow...

All those people, and we too, are invited to the table, re-living the memory of Jesus saying: "This is my body broken for you." ...spoken in almost all churches at least once a month.

Those words connect us, make us one, and help us feel at home.

Bread and cup can be understood without words.

They can overcome language barriers and social and cultural differences.

When they are taken in a worthy manner, bread and cup are instruments of peace.

If Jesus had never said those words "Do this in remembrance of me", and if he had not been raised from the dead, we would not be here this morning. This shows our deep roots in him...

And this makes this sacrament for me, and I hope for you, something of immense comfort and strength and reassurance.

Holy Communion reaches back, and in a sense reaches in, to the very heart of God. And it also reaches out.

We are reaching out as we remember all the countries we come from and all the places where people may celebrate communion today.

And what is even more:

For us to have bread and wine to share, the ground had to be prepared, wheat and vines had to be planted and cared for, harvested and processed; transported and sold.

Countless people whose names we shall never know have all been involved in making this bread and this grape juice available for us this morning.

We cannot take bread and wine without also being concerned for the earth from which they have come and the people who made them available.

And what is true for this sacrament symbolizes what is right for all we have and all we use... to live our lives in a worthy manner...

It is part of our Christian calling to be concerned about the conditions in which people live and work, and to have a special concern for the poor with little or no work and for those who go hungry.

The sacrament of communion calls us to reach out to the vulnerable and the needy of our world, to those for whom life is harsh through famine, disaster, oppression, disease.

We may not feel we can do very much, but the miracle of the great feeding was that God could take the 5 loaves and 2 fish that were offered and feed the multitude. With this miracle in our mind, we are called to bring what we can : God can use it beyond our wildest dreams.

And our common ground among the churches worldwide can give us courage and strength to follow God's call and to share... who we are and what we have.

We have so much to give, believe me – this is what counts, and not our little personal feelings of fear, hesitation or inadequacy.

Communion reaches back, it reaches out, and it also reaches forward.

“I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom”, Jesus says.

So from early days Christians have seen this sacrament as a foretaste of the kingdom of God and as an affirmation of the power of God that can transform people.

The prayer after communion which we speak today says:

**“In gratitude, in deep gratitude for this moment, this meal, these people we give ourselves to you.**

**Take us out to live as changed people**

**because we have shared the living bread and cannot remain the same.**

**Ask much of us, expect much from us,**

**enable much by us, encourage many through us.**

**So, Lord, may we live to your glory,**

**both as inhabitants of earth and citizens of heaven.”**

We can do it, dear friends. We can live down on earth with our hands reaching into heaven, and that will help us and many others to work and live and love, full of hope.

Be assured that the one who broke bread in the upper room is still with us, and in the miracle of grace waits ahead of us to welcome us, to feed us and to make us feel at home.

He expects much from us, and he needs our help to show the world that the following is true: let me share with you a famous South African affirmation of faith...

**Christ has come to turn the world upside down:  
to humble the powerful and to lift up the lowly.**

**Christ has come to turn the tables:  
to topple vain idols and to stand with the poor.**

**Christ has come to proclaim God's kingdom:  
to feed the hungry,  
to give sight to the blind,  
to strengthen the weary,  
to set the prisoners free.**

**Christ has come to turn the world upside down:  
to overthrow the present order  
with a revolution of love.**

Amen.