

**“The Lord’s Supper”
1 Corinthians 11:17 – 34**

So this morning we come to the spend some time thinking about the Lord’s Supper.

We told in Acts 18 that Paul established the Corinthian Church and stayed for a year and half teaching the new believers.

We know that he stayed in contact with the church via letters – we have 1 and 2 Corinthians; there were probably more – and planned visits.

As an Apostle he comes to them with a heart of pastor wanting to thrive and grow as the people of God.

So he writes 1st Corinthians, which on one hand is letter of encouragement. On the other, it is a *corrective* letter.

And one of Paul’s central concerns is with the celebration of the 'Lord's Supper'.

Depending on the church tradition you’ve been a part of, you may know it by another name: the 'Eucharist' (which means “thanks giving”) or 'Holy Communion' (meaning ‘fellowship’ or ‘communion’ with God) or the Lord’s Supper.

Our reading this morning is the longest and most direct discussion on the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament.

It’s a passage that’s often referenced, at least in part.

I don’t know about you, but when you hear it read and when you read it in context, Paul’s words raises *all sorts* of questions.

What does it mean eat or drink in “an unworthy manner?”

What does it mean that to talk of judgement and discipline when talking about communion?

Who may participate? Who actually can receive communion and who cannot?

Does that include children?

So what is Communion?

Communion is the simple act of worship where the bread and cup are taken by the gathered believers in remembrance and thanksgiving.

We do this in remembering Jesus body was broken and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins; we meet with him in the present through the Holy Spirit, and we look forward to his coming again in glory.

Although there are some differences of expression and understanding it is the one practice that has been down through the centuries.

All Christians around the world trace their practice of the Lord's Supper back to the evening prior to Jesus' horrific death where he shared his final meal with his disciples.

And if there is one verse that has caused anxiety and alarm for quite a number of sincere Christians, it's probably verse 27:

"So then, 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."

Tony Campolo tells of a time when he was young, perhaps six or seven years old sitting with his parents at a Communion service. It was a time he remembered well because he became aware of a young woman in the pew in front of them who was sobbing and shaking. The minister had just finished reading the passage, "Whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, 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 then lowered her head in despair. It was then that Campolo's Sicilian father leaned over her shoulder and, in his broken English, said sternly, "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. At that moment some kind of heavy burden was lifted from her heart and mind.

So what does it mean eat or drink in "an unworthy manner?"

What do you think?

Well for one, communion is not about our own worthiness and righteousness; if so then *none* of us is worthy.

It is where we receive again the Lord's welcome and remember *our* inclusion in *his* life, death and resurrection.

At the Lord's Supper it is Jesus who stands with arms extended, offering forgiveness and newness of life.

In taking the bread and cup we are remembering Jesus self-giving, sacrificial love on our behalf.

Communion is an offer of God's grace with Christ at the centre.

It is Jesus who says "This is *my body*, which is *for you*."

It is Jesus who says, "This cup is the new covenant *in my blood*, for *the forgiveness of sins*. Do this, whenever *you drink it*, in remembrance of me." ¹

There is a place for quiet introspection and confession which leads to the forgiveness of sin.

Yet there is something else going on here.

To help us understand we have reconstruct something of what was happening then.

For one, the whole context of this passage is that the Lord's Supper took place as part of a shared meal.

In other words, what we call communion was celebrated as part of an actual meal eaten by the community of faith in a home, something like a potluck dinner.

So the Lord's Supper was part of bigger meal where regardless of the your social or economic status everyone would share together, with those who had more sharing with those who have less.

However certain abuses were taking place: there were some went ahead with their private suppers, "one person remains hungry and another gets drunk."

How could this happen?

In Corinth of the Paul's time it was a common practice for meals to be hosted in the homes of the wealthier members of society.

In their homes the honoured guests would eat smaller dining room.

¹ Matthew 26:28

This room could accommodate a maximum of nine people who would recline on their sides as they ate.

Other guests would meet in another part of the house called an atrium, which could provide room for another thirty or forty people or even more.

And not only that but the honoured guests received better food and wine. The same happens today on airliners; the first class passengers receive better food and service than others on the same plane.

So in short there were divisions present in Corinth where some believers would go off and eat in an exclusive group or clique in a smaller dining area while other believers ate in the atrium.

This allowed the rich to eat and drink to excess while shaming the poorer believers by leaving them with little or nothing at all.

They were eating and drinking in an unworthy manner.

They weren't discerning or recognising the body of Christ – the believers gathered together to worship; the church.

They were acting selfishly and treating their brothers and sisters in Christ with contempt.

So this explains Paul's outrage: "Your meetings do more harm than good... What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!"

Paul therefore was emphasising that sharing in the Lord's Supper is not an individualistic act.

To discern the body [of Christ] is to recognise Jesus died for those we sit with and sit alongside and whom you and I are joined to by the Holy Spirit.

So we come to the table there is a time of introspection.

A time when we can confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness.

It is also a time where consider our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul is concerned for the way Christians treat each other in the church.

Is there a need for reconciliation? For forgiving and seeking forgiveness?

Some time ago I read about a couple who visited a church on a Communion Sunday.

During the worship service just before communion, they noticed an odd thing happening; the pastor would go to one person in one part of the church and give or her a note. Then he went to another part of the sanctuary and gave another person a note. He did this a number of times.

This couple thought, “Well this is weird” happening during the service of worship.

But later on they learned this: the leaders of the church had had a difficult meeting of the elders meeting a few nights before, and tempers flared a bit and harsh things were said to each other.

The pastor realized that he couldn’t celebrate communion because he wasn’t in right relationship with the elders of the church. The notes were notes of apology.

Leslie Newbegin tells of a visit to the Christian Community in one of the villages of his former district in South India. The Communion service he was leading for them proceeded normally until they reached a point where the members of the congregation were to exchange the Peace with one another.

[When you exchange the peace, you offer your neighbor the love and peace of God you want that person to have and enjoy.]

When he invited them to do so, the liturgical action was rudely interrupted by protesting voices and fingers pointing to two men standing as far away as possible from each other.

“There is no peace here”, the people said, “because these two men have quarrelled over the boundaries of their fields and are going to law against each other. There will be no peace among us until they are reconciled.”

Then the whole congregation left the church and went to the disputed boundaries, and, under the guidance of its leaders, heard the claims of the two antagonists, adjudicated a just settlement and a personal reconciliation between them, and only then returned to the church to share the Peace and the Communion that followed with a reality and joy that can only come when the issues that divide people and lead to bad feeling between them have been honestly faced and effectively dealt with.²

What does it mean when it says, “For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink *judgment on themselves*”?

² Tom Smail, *Windows on the Cross*, (Boston: Cowley, 1996), 13 – 14.

What's your thoughts on this?

It's shocking to our modern ears but it's clear that Paul has prophetic insight into why some of the believers were getting sick and even dying (falling "asleep").

To be clear: there is no one-to-one connection between sickness and some specific sin.

That doesn't rule out the fact that, in some instances, some explicit sickness and even death may be the direct result of a unrepentant, ongoing sin.

Because God doesn't want his people to be condemned with the world, so he may issue temporal judgments to clean up his church.³

Should anyone be barred from receiving Communion?

What's your thoughts on this?

This where we enter into the realm of church discipline.

If someone is involved in egregious, unrepentant sin, then there could be place for saying, this is not for you.

So to be clear: egregious and unrepentant sin.

That includes heresy – such as rejecting his divinity.

It includes living in such a way rejects the teaching of Scripture.

And unrepentant person also risks eating and drinking God's judgement on themselves.

This week I read a story about James, a devout Roman Catholic, who in his university years watched a televised Mass which was attended by a number of high powered United States officials. Among them was a high court judge who scorned the church's teaching and repeatedly pushed for greater liberalisation of abortion laws. As he moved toward the priest James was heard to say, "Don't do it" under his breath. When the host was placed on his tongue he yelled out "No!" He was outraged that the churches clear teaching had been ignored for the sake of convenience.

What about children?

So what about children?

Here's where I'm up to.

Communion has its roots in the Passover meal. The Passover celebrated God's deliverance of Israel from the power of Egypt. To commemorate this the whole

³ Don Carson, *The Lord's Supper*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/the-lord-s-supper-1-corinthians-11-17-31/>

Jewish community would gather to feast in their homes - fathers, mothers, grandparents, son and daughters and, of course, children – no one was excluded. This still happens today.

And children often display a simple but real childlike understanding of what communion is. For younger children there are a number of Bible's such as the beginners Bible that tell story in a simple way.

And parents will know their children best.

Also on a practical note, when we do share in communion together I would strongly suggest that children sit with their parents.

So as we come to the table this morning the final point I want to say is this the Lord's Supper is time when we remember the offer of God's grace with Christ at the centre – where we remember Jesus' self-giving, sacrificial love on our behalf and not our own worthiness – so let's *celebrate*.

And you know we've already seen the giveaway here that this was true of the church in Corinth?

They came together to eat and drink; they were having a feast.

So often we mistake being revenant for being sombre.

They are not the same.

This is not a memorial meal.

You can't have a memorial for someone who is alive!

Revelation chapter 1 verse 18:

“I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever!”

This Jesus who died for us is also fully alive.

We are beneficiaries not only in Jesus' death but also in His resurrection.

And as the Living One he comes to meet with us to remind and strengthen and encourage.

He comes to meet with you... and you... and me at the table today.