

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34 (31)

### INTRODUCTION

The Lord instituted two ordinances that the church is to follow faithfully. These are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Paul had been faithful in establishing these ordinances in the church at Corinth. But sadly the church at Corinth was abusing the Lord's Supper. Often in the New Testament the Lord's Supper was held at the end of a meal and those meals were fellowship meals, which stressed fellowship and affection among believers.

It seems that this is how the church at Corinth celebrated the Lord's Supper and these meals had turned into gluttonous, drunken events. Paul had no praise for the church in this matter for the church's meetings do more harm than good. So Paul gives the church some directives (v 17) and the word means "commands."

### 1. THE ABUSE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (vs. 18-22)

The word "church" is never used of a building or meeting place in the New Testament but it always refers to believers. So it seems that wherever and whenever the Christians at Corinth came together they ended up fighting and arguing among themselves (v 18). The word translated "divisions" is a Greek word from which we get our English word "schism." It literally means "to tear or cut." So the church at Corinth was cutting itself and tearing itself apart. It seems that the church had great difficulty agreeing on various issues and they did not seem to have a sense of service to one another.

Instead of sharing with one another in fellowship and worship they spent their time in selfish indulgence, arguing and disputing with one another. Perhaps Paul suspected that some of the reports that he heard had been exaggerated and the apostle wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt so he adds the words "and to some extent I believe it" (v 18).

But it is no surprise to find division in the church at Corinth. Paul had to write to them about party loyalties that divided the church (1:10-17 and 3:1-3). Those divisions ended up in quarrels (1:11). But the believers were also divided socially as this passage tells us. Those who were well off brought their food and selfishly ate it before the poorer members arrived.

The poorer members were probably slaves and had chores to do before arriving to worship God. There seems to be no sharing going on, it was very much the case of every man for himself. The reason for their behaviour was selfishness and worldliness they were following their own wills and desires rather than the Lord's. When believers are selfish and worldly then you can be sure that one of the ways that it is seen is through division in the church.

Now Paul was well aware that division couldn't be completely avoided until the Lord returns there will always be disagreements and differences between Christians. This is because there will be Christians who are walking in harmony with the Lord and others who sadly are failing to do so. There will be Christians who display God like characteristics and others who sadly are lacking in these characteristics.

There will be some Christians who will be godly and others who will be worldly and this will be seen in every church. In many ways God uses differences to approve those who are godly by exposing those who are worldly for this is what Paul says in verse 19. It is God's way to use disobedient, selfish and worldly Christians to test his faithful servants in the fire to show His approval of them.

The word "approval" refers to one who has passed the test. The term was used of precious metals tried in the fire and proved to be pure. Therefore Church divisions, ungodly and sinful as they are, are used by the Lord Jesus to prove the worth and value of his faithful and obedient people. Those who are divisive in the church often show the godliness of those who seek unity.

Evil in the church often helps to manifest the good. Trouble in the church creates a situation in which true spiritual strength wisdom and leadership can be seen. Those that God approves are often only seen during times of trial and difficulties and it is seen in the way that they handle those difficulties without prejudice and with openness.

But differences although they do serve the purpose of revealing the approved ones, if differences are not dealt with then it will not be long before real havoc and chaos is seen in the church by dividing the church. Division soon undermines the work of God and faithful godly Christians who seek to gain God's approval. Therefore no difference should be allowed to become a division within the church.

The focus of the differences and division within the church at Corinth is seen in the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper exposes what is going on in people's hearts and under the surface of the church? The Lord's Supper is called "Supper" because it is the word used for the normal evening meal. So the Lord's Supper was a genuine evening meal were the church gathered to eat a meal and to celebrate what Christ did for them through his death and resurrection.

The Lord's Supper was central to the meal but abuses were subtracting from the significance of the Supper. The abuse of this meal was so great that Paul says that although the church thinks it is celebrating the Lord's Supper their abuses are so serious that in truth it is not the Lord's Supper that they are participating in at all (v 20).

For the meal or the supper part of it was not honouring to the Lord at all. Yes they were celebrating the ceremony of the Supper but the reality was missing, they went through the form but the substance was lacking. Paul is saying you might be breaking some bread, passing around the cup and repeating the words of the Supper spoke by Jesus but in reality it is not the Lord's Supper they are celebrating for the Lord has withdrawn from it he has no part in it.

Why? What was the church doing that made the Lord withdraw from the Lord's Supper? Well the poorer believers came to the supper expecting to share in the food brought by their more wealthy brothers but sadly they went away hungry. The wealthier that brought the food and drink were greedy and ate all the food and drank all the wine to the extent that they became drunk.

The meal was supposed to demonstrate the harmony and unity of the fellowship, which of course was displayed in the actual partaking of the Lord's Supper. But the greedy Christians were making a mockery of the whole thing.

In order to deal with the issue Paul asks some simple questions (v 22). What Paul is saying is that if you intended to selfishly indulge yourself could you not stay at home and do that? Could it be that their actions were deliberately destroying real Christian fellowship because they really despised the church? Could it be that they were simply seeking to embarrass their poorer brothers and sisters in Christ?

Whether that was their intention or not it is clear that that is exactly what was happening as a result of their sinful and selfish actions. Their behaviour could not be justified they were causing untold damage to the cause of Christ and making a mockery of the Lord's Supper. Now the lesson that we must learn is to make sure that we display right attitudes and right motives at the Lord's Supper.

All sin of pride and greed and superiority must be left at home before coming to the Lord's Table. Those attitudes and many others have no place at the table of the Lord and what really matters at the Lord's Supper are our own attitudes, our own motives and our own commitment to Christ and to his church.

## 2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (vs. 23-26)

Paul uses this opportunity to teach and to remind the church at Corinth of the true significance and purpose of the Lord's Supper. It seems that the church at Corinth has forgotten its true purpose. Paul makes it clear that what he is about to teach them is not his own opinion but it is God's revealed word received by Paul from the Lord. Nor is this truth new to the church at Corinth, he is simply reminding them of what he has already taught them, for he received from the Lord and passed it on to the church at Corinth and elsewhere (v 23).

Paul gives the historical setting for the Lord's Supper; it was on the night when he was betrayed (v 23) that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. Now it is worth noting that this most beautiful and meaningful celebration was instituted on the very night when Jesus the Son of God was betrayed by one of his own disciples. In the midst of evil Jesus gives us His good Supper.

What a contrast Judas is doing evil to Christ and His people whereas Jesus Christ is doing good to His people by instituting this Supper.

Now although Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal when he instituted the Lord's Supper Paul does not give any details of that he is simply focusing on the new meal, the new supper instituted by Christ for the benefit of his church. We know that the Passover meal began with a pronouncement of a blessing over the first cup of red wine before passing it on to those present.

There were four cups of wine that were passed round during the meal. After each cup a certain routine was followed. For example after the first cup was drunk bitter herbs were eaten and a message was given on the meaning of the Passover before the singing of Psalms usually Psalm 113-114. After the second cup was passed the sacrificial lamb would be eaten. It was probably the third cup of wine that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. Jesus gave thanks and broke the bread.

The bread represented his body and when we think of the word body Jesus does not mean his physical body only for in Jewish thinking the body represented the whole life. The bread in the Lord's Supper therefore represents the whole life of Jesus given for sinners. It represents all that Jesus was and all that Jesus did. His body was given for you Christian that is what Jesus said (v 24).

Jesus gave his entire life for every Christian here today. He came to this earth, gave us incredible teaching and died and rose again for you Christian, he had you firmly fixed on his mind while he lived and died here on earth. He became a man for you, he spoke the gospel for you he died for you and he rose again for you Christian. All that Jesus was and did was for us who are Christians.

The cup, which during the Passover represented the lamb's blood smeared on the doorposts at the Passover now, represents the shed blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This Lamb of God unlike the repeated sacrifices under the old covenant ratified the new covenant once and for all by the blood of Jesus Christ and Jesus reminds them of this in his institution of the Lord's Supper (v 25).

In the Old Testament when the people of God gathered to celebrate the Passover they were celebrating their deliverance from Egypt to Canaan but now as a result of Christ's death we celebrate the Lord's Supper to remember our deliverance from sin to salvation from death to life.

The Passover remembers the Red Sea and the Exodus but the Lord's Supper remembers the cross and more importantly the Saviour.

We are to celebrate this Lord's Supper in remembrance of Christ and his deliverance of his people through his life, death and resurrection. Of course to the Jew remember means much more than simply bringing something to our mind. To remember is to go back in one's, mind and recapture as much of the reality and significance of the event as we possible can.

To remember Jesus Christ and His sacrifice is to relive with Christ his life, agony, suffering and death as much as is humanly possible. When we partake of the Lord's Supper we are not offering a sacrifice again but we are reliving his once for all sacrifice for us and as a result we should rededicate our lives to him in obedient service. There is no set time or frequently for remembering the Lord's death it is left to each church for it's as often as you eat it (v 26).

As often as we are willing to remember and to proclaim the Lord's death we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is also a reminder of the Lord's return for we are only to celebrate the Lord's Supper until he comes (v 26). So the Lord's Supper helps us to look forward to the day when we will be with him.

The Lord's Supper helps us to keep our lives focused on what truly matters, the eternal world rather than what we often think matters or are fooled into believing really does matter (this world).

### 3. HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE LORD'S SUPPER (vs. 27-34)

Paul returns now to warn the Christians at Corinth of the danger of participating in the Lord's Supper in unworthy manner and Paul wishes to instruct the Christians how to prepare for the Lord's Supper. To come to the Lord's Supper and participate in an unworthy manner (v 27) can be done in a number of ways. People can participate in a ritualistic way without thought and without even attempting to engage with God. It's easy to go through the routine without treating it seriously or without giving any attention to it at all.

Others partake unworthy because they come to the Supper with bitter and resentful hearts. Perhaps there is bitterness or even hatred towards another Christian, or perhaps there is a sin in our hearts that we simply refuse to let go off and repent off. Paul warns the Corinthians dangers of partaking in an unworthy manner because to do so is to bring guilt upon the offender.

They will be sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. To partake of the Lord's Supper is to dishonour the one to whom the Supper points too. It's like someone standing and spitting on the Union Jack flag. They are not just trampling on a piece of cloth but are trampling on the country that the flag represents. So it is with anyone who partakes of the Lord's Supper knowing that there is something wrong in their life and is unwilling to do anything about it.

That is to bring guilt upon oneself because we are treating the Lord whom the Supper represents with great contempt. We are guilty of treating with great indifference the person of Jesus Christ.

Therefore how should we prepare for the Lord's Supper? We should examine ourselves (v 28). Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we should give ourselves a thorough self-examination. We should look honestly at our hearts with the help of God's Spirit. We should look for sin in our actions, our attitudes and our motives. Is there anything wrong with our attitude and motive towards the Lord?

What about God's people, are there problems that need to be sorted? What about God's word have we been disobeying God's word deliberately yet pretending that we are obedient servants of

Christ? It is no surprise therefore that the Lord's Supper often has a purifying affect upon people as sin is confessed and put right.

The person who comes without self-examination, and therefore with the wrong attitude, is in danger of bringing judgement upon himself (vs. 29). Judgement here means discipline and that discipline comes because the unworthy person does not "recognise the body of the Lord" (v 29). This phrase is a difficult expression. The word translated "recognise" means "to discern or distinguish" and in the context means to fail to recognise the importance and significance of the Supper from every other meal. To come unprepared (without examination) to the Supper is to treat it lightly just like another evening meal. The discipline is further explained for us in verse 30.

In Corinth some who abused the Lord's Supper fell ill and some even died. That is how seriously God takes the Lord's Supper and unworthy participation in it. God did that to the Corinthians as an example to the church of future generations so that we will not commit the same sins that these Corinthian believers committed.

Therefore how do we prepare for the Lord's Supper so that we are not guilty of such contempt and thereby invite the judgement of the Lord? The answer lies in judging ourselves before the Lord does (v 31). We are not very good at this in our British society. Judging ourselves involves being completely honest with ourselves as far as spiritual things are concerned.

It means accessing where we are spiritually, confessing our sins, our wrong attitudes and our wrong opinions and motives. We need the Lord's help here but we also need to be willing to spend time before the Lord seeking his grace searching our hearts and looking at every aspect of our lives in order to assess our spiritual temperature before the Lord. We must always remember that whatever we find we have a faithful and gracious God who forgives us all our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

We should judge ourselves otherwise the Lord might do it for us. When the Lord judges us and finds sin he disciplines us and his reason for doing so is to save our soul (v 32). The Lord disciplines those he loves and he does it for our good. He always wants us to turn from our sins and to start behaving, as we should. He disciplines us because he wants to encourage us to choose holiness rather than sin.

For the alternative is unthinkable. To leave us in our sin and rebellion is to leave us like unbelievers and that would ultimately lead to condemnation with the world. So when we know the Lord's hand of discipline we can think that the Lord is being hard or harsh towards us.

But we must understand that He is being extremely loving and kind and is disciplining us because he cares for us and loves us and does not want us to go back into the world for that will lead to condemnation. Discipline is actually a sign that you belong to God. If you never know the hand of the Lord in discipline then you should worry for is that a sign that you are an unbeliever?

Paul gives some final practical instructions in verses 33-34. After they have dealt with their sins through self-examination and judging then they should begin to treat each other rightly. They should be conscious of each other and not partake of the Lord's Supper for their own selfish ends. In doing so they will meet for the benefit of the whole church instead of meeting for judgement, which is what has been happening up to this point in Corinth (v 34).

There are other points that Paul will give instructions about at a later date but for now let us heed these words and by not abusing the Lord's Supper. We do this by understanding it's true purpose and significance and by preparing our hearts through self-examination and right judgements. If we do that then all who partake will benefit from the Lord's Supper and it will be a blessing to us in strengthening our faith.

AMEN