11 - 1 Cor. Check Yourself

1 Cor. 11:17

But in giving you this instruction, I do not praise you, because you meet together, but it results in more harm than good.

Have you ever gone to church or a fellowship, and afterward you wished you didn’t go? This was what Corinthian assembly of saints had become – “more harm than good”. They didn’t start that way. Who would have attended? But, through bad practice growing into bad habits, it became a spiritual negative because of all the distractions.

1 Cor. 11:18,19

For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you, and to some extent, I believe it.

For there must be also factions among you, so that the “approved ones” among you become recognized.

Some church members aspired to be “something special”. They encouraged other members to treat them as “special”, developing a sub-group in the church supporting their desired identity. This was yet another indication of a leadership vacuum. Those who sought “special” status should have been confronted and told, “There’s really only two positions in the body of Christ – head and member in particular. Are you the head? No? Then you’re no more special than all the rest of us members in particular!” Regrettably, some saints let their thinking get out of bounds as they enlisted others into their self-centered fantasy. What’s the problem with this “self-importance” fallacy? It’s distracting from the ones who are truly important – God and Christ. It focuses on the flesh, not the spirit. In chapters 12-14 each saint’s “specialness” will be discussed from a spiritual perspective, not physical. There’s nothing wrong with the desire to “feel special” but it shouldn’t foster division and take the focus off the true special one, Jesus Christ. “Specialness” is connected to spiritual function, not personal identity, as we will see.

1 Cor 11:20,21

So when you assemble together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat,

for when you eat, each one goes ahead with his own supper first, and one is hungry, and another is drunk.

The early church’s custom was to eat the Lord’s supper in his remembrance when they got together. They prayed, broke bread, and remembered the sacrifice of his body and the shedding of his blood for our sins. This highlighted the kind of life Christ called us to - serving others - as he did. Also keep in mind that eating together involved renewing the salt covenant, which adhered them together as family and partners in life.

The Corinthian church messed this custom up. Instead of eating to renew their bond to Christ, to service, and to each other, some ate before attending and some even skipped the group meal. Why? Perhaps because they wanted better food at their homes rather than what the church provided. This is consistent with the kind of thinking that projects that they were “special”. Folks who think that way usually want to eat “special” too.

Some were so selfish that they started chewing as soon as the letter “n” was pronounced in “Amen”. They forget that this was to be a fellowship meal of remembrance and not an “all you can eat buffet”. Some in the church were left no food after the greedy ones were done and went “hungry”. And some came drunk already – ironically ignoring the truth of Christ’s blood being shed, even for the sin of drunkenness. This record of sins makes it clear that Paul describing their get togethers as “results in more harm than good” was spot on.

1 Cor. 11:22

What? Do you not have houses to eat and to drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God, and put to shame those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I praise you in this? I praise you not.

The church in Corith was comprised of upper-class, lower-class and slaves. Some had houses. Some had nothing. Showing up for fellowship drunk or stuffed from supper showed contempt for others in God’s family. No wonder Jesus said:

Matt. 19:23b

“Truly I say to you, how difficult it will be for a rich person to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Rich people are regularly tempted to let their thinking (and flesh) go out of bounds. Why? Because they can! How? Like showing up drunk for fellowship or eating filet mignon prepared by their home chef instead of fellowship hotdogs. And not wanting to ‘break bread’ with the dirty, lower-class saints and slaves, whom they fear might want some of their wealth because of them becoming covenanted spiritual family. What was getting missed? The gospel. Class respect, wine, food, and wealth are all temporary things. The greatest wealth and status are all spiritual, and the saints were being distracted from that by physical things.

1 Cor. 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on 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, after supper, he also took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink, in remembrance of me.”

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

This is real wealth, genuine riches. Righteousness with a loving God and a new body for eternity. How do food, wine, and shekels compare to that? Hardly. And leading people away from the true riches to shallow temporary enticements is almost a crime. Almost?

1 Co 11:27

So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.

What does it mean to partake of the Lord’s supper unworthily? How about when you’re drunk? Or “pigging out”? Or haughtily refuse to eat because of your ‘high standards’? Or avoid partaking in a salt covenant to avoid responsibility for others? How about being purely selfish in a remembrance of selflessness? That is completely unworthy!

1 Cor. 11:28-30

But let a person examine himself, and only in this way let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

For anyone who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not discern the body.

For this cause many among you are weak and sick, and many sleep in death.

The saying goes, “Check yourself before you wreck yourself.” We must ask ourselves, are we remembering the Lord’s sacrifice when we partake of his supper or only mindlessly performing a ritual? Why? Because we must be regularly prompted to serve others or we will return to only serving ourselves, in whatever form that takes – like getting drunk, eating as much as possible, avoiding others we consider ‘below us’, etc.

If we abandon the lessons of the cross, we get consequences. Here “consequences” is figuratively called ‘judgment’. The process of ‘judgement’ is said instead of the result of the process of judgement, which is ‘consequences’. It literally is saying,” For anyone who eats and drinks [without renewing their dedication to service like Christ], eats and drinks con-sequences to himself”. This emphasizes ‘judgment’, which is what Paul was modeling and they were lacking in their thinking about the Lord’s supper (among other things).

The word “body” is another figure of speech, Two Meanings. One word is used with two possible and intended meanings. Although the King James and other versions say:

1 Cor. 11:29 KJV

For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

The word “Lord’s” is not in many Greek texts and was perhaps added by copyists. The “body” that we must discern is twofold. #1. We must remember the cost of our salvation. He paid for it with his horribly broken body. #2. We are now part of a ‘body’, an interdependent group of saved ones who have Christ as the ‘head’, like a figurative ‘body’. This will be discussed in chapter 12 magnificently. In this context let’s look at the statement, “For this cause many among you are weak and sick, and many sleep in death.”

Some of the wealthy Corinthian church members were not thinking or acting like they were part of a body. They were operating selfishly and independently. How? Eating early or at home. Avoiding the Lord’s suppers. Avoiding the salt covenant renewals. Avoiding responsibility and participation in other members’ lives. “For this cause many among you are weak and sick, and many sleep in death.”

Corinthian Culture and Homes

To understand the class dynamic of the Corinthian church’s meetings, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor (Professor of New Testament, École Biblique, Israel) suggests the wealthy host would invite the more important guests to dine with him in his triclinium, a formal dining room while the poorer members ate in another room like servants. “[Perhaps] The real problem in the church was treating the shared meal as they would a regular meal, using the meal to reinforce social distinctions as they would in a meal at a Temple. Some argue the design of the Roman dining room contributed to social divisions since it had three tables, a triclinium, and only held nine (elite) people, and (maybe) no women ate at the best tables.”

A diagram of a house

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

This drawing comes from an actual excavated Roman home buried in ash at Pompeii in 79 AD, about thirty years after Paul wrote this epistle. It has the same basic design as ancient upper-class homes excavated by archaeologists in Corinth. See the triclinium room in the center top? That’s what we would call the formal dining room. Let’s say 50-100 people got together for the fellowship meeting. The host and eight others could fit in the triclinium room. The rest had to eat in the garden and atrium.



From Philip Long, Professor, Grace University: “Paul says he heard there are divisions even at these special meals (1 Corinthians 11:18-19). The church host provided food, but people may also have brought their own food and drink to share among people in their own social class, while the poorer members of the congregation shared their own food, or perhaps waited for the leftovers from the wealthy members. The problem Paul is discussing is not foods, but treatment of people!”

“The poor in Corinth did not have kitchens in their homes to prepare food, and if they were slaves, they were dependent on the masters for food. They would not be able to contribute to a common meal, unless they were able to purchase something at the market. The poor and slaves had to work and the meeting began early on Saturday evening. There was no weekend or day off for the poor so they would have no way to purchase food in the event they could afford it.”

“Imagine a church potluck dinner with different tables based on your annual tithing level. The top-tier givers eat from a catered table from a five-star restaurant with an abundance of filet mignon and fresh vegetables, while the lower-level givers get crockpots of meatballs and green bean casseroles; the lowest level get a hot dog and a bag of chips. Most people would be highly offended by this arrangement: if we are all equal in the Body of Christ, why do some people get preferential treatment?”

“From a modern perspective, it is unimaginable that wealthy Christians would overlook the needs of the poor, but **the wealthy in Roman Corinth would take no notice of the poor at all!** One of the main problems in the church is that this social attitude was present when the church gathered for worship.”

Look at the house sketch. The host and his supper-mates didn’t even have to see those in the garden or atrium. That was normal behavior for the classes. The upper class ignored the lower-class and the lower-class tried to be unseen, lest they cause offense and be punished. Keep in mind that there were no human rights for non-citizens, the lower class, or slaves in the Roman empire. Might made right, so you made sure you were in the right to avoid the might!

Can you imagine what the lower-class and slaves looked like after working all day – in the mines, fields and stock pens? There were no locker rooms with showers then. They didn’t have an abundance of clothes, so they wore what they had. What did they smell like? It is understandable from a physical perspective why the upper-class didn’t want to fraternize with the poor, but God called us to fellowship with others – share fully.

From Jared Lowder: “It would make sense that new converts and believers in first century Corinth would still see harsh distinctions between the different social classes of people. Growing up in a culture that would have emphasized that your whole life. To join a new religion that labels everyone as equal would be a very difficult mindset to overcome. Paul’s letter to the Galatians may be addressing some similar things going on when he says that “there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female” (3:28). This could also offer us further evidence and understanding that these distinctions were not fixed in the minds of the Corinthians overnight, but rather, it took time to fully realize what living in Christ meant. Thus, when it came to the Lord’s Supper, it would’ve felt completely normal to share a meal with the upper-class people before the poor and lower-class arrived, but that doesn’t mean it’s right. Just because something was normal and okay to do before becoming a believer, does not mean that it is after conversion. As believers, we are not to “conform to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds” (Romans 12:2).

Continuing in your old ways of thinking pre-conversion isn’t just against our calling as believers, but it is also damaging our fellow brothers and sisters. Although Paul doesn’t go in detail too much about how the current practice of the Lord’s Supper is affecting others, I’m sure the lower-class was feeling segregated and neglected when they aren’t able to participate with the rest of their brothers and sisters in Christ.”

If the upper-class saints were ignoring their lower-class and slave brothers and sisters (as was the habit of the Roman wealthy), they didn’t know when one of them was sick or injured, so they couldn’t help. “For this cause many among you are weak and sick, and many sleep in death.” When the wealthy ignored the “rabble” in the garden or atrium, they were “not discerning the body”, in other words, the body of Christ - the church.

1 Cor. 11:31

But if we were examining ourselves, we would not be being judged.

Perhaps it could be understood: “If we were truly looking at the remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice for us, we would not have the consequences we are experiencing.” What consequences? Like brothers and sisters getting sick and dying. Like divisions in the church. Like the wealthy being insulated from the spiritual contributions of the “unwashed”, which label still is used today. Let’s say the upper-class had a group they fellowshipped with of about 9 saints. They were missing the spiritual contributions – prophesy, prayers, love, healing, revelation, etc. from 90% of the local church. That’s serious consequences. What did they get in exchange? More food, money and false self-respect. That’s a spiritually unwise trade off!

1 Cor. 11:32

But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord, so that we will not be condemned with the world.

How are we “judged”? In this context it refers to our self-examination and the Lord’s working through others (like Paul) to bring discipline to our flesh so that our life’s work will not share the fate of the world, which will be destruction. In other words, “Check yourselves – with Christ’s example of service for all – before you wreck yourself – your future rewards, your fellowship group, and your earthly life.”

1 Cor. 11:33

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

Wait for the dirty, stinky slave saints to come in from the mines. If the sight and smells are so bad, how about setting up a bath in the atrium and making some clean fellowship clothes available? How about treating your brothers and sisters like … brothers and sisters! If the bath and re-clothing take an extra hour, so what? Wait for them. They are worth it!

When saints are allowed to operate confidently with respect, the spiritual blessings from the Christ within each of us flows. THAT’S a fellowship – a full sharing!

1 Cor. 11:34

If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that when you meet together it will not result in judgment. And the remaining matters I will set in order when I come.

Let’s assume that the hard, loving correction in this section was successful like it was similarly successful for the incestuous couple. Let’s say that after receiving and reading this epistle, the main upper-class host of the fellowship meetings took the reproof to heart. He realized that his view of leadership was wrong because it was based on his past experience. All the leaders he had seen were selfish (like Caesar and the governor who allowed Sosthenes to be beaten.) They used their position as an opportunity to be served, not to serve others. He realized that he was not more special than the dirtiest, slave believer with more tattoos than teeth. And he also came to gather that even though it didn’t look like it, even his slave brothers and sisters had something spiritually that the rest of the body (including him) needed. Despite all appearances, there was the spirit of Christ in those smelly souls. So, as God inspired and he realized, “Let’s change the outside to reflect the inside!”

Let’s say, at the next church meeting something revolutionary occurred. In the days before it, he explained his new thinking and plan to his household and other upper-class friends. Then, at the beginning of the next fellowship meeting, instead of just praying as before, he announced new guidelines for the meeting. He and the other upper-class men dragged out the three couches from the triclinium room and brought them out to the atrium and garden. Then he had the food served with the same portions to everybody and a table for seconds. He further announced that since Christ’s sacrifice ‘cleansed us from our sins” that everyone could have the opportunity to be cleaned up after work in the atrium pool and put on clean tunics over their clothes “just as Christ clothed us in righteousness”.

Can you imagine the joy and wonder? The liberation! With the saints’ confidence skyrocketing, the spirit of God would have been exhilarating. The masters of those slave saints wouldn’t have been too pleased at him for allowing their slaves to get “uppity”, but welcome to Christianity! Jesus said he came to bring a sword. Welcome to the revolution!

Matt. 10:34,41-42

“Do not assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Whoever receives a prophet because they are a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever receives a righteous person because they are a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward.

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink because they are a disciple, truly I say to you, he will absolutely not lose his reward.”

What about if the disciple or righteous man works hard and sweats like a dog? And smells like the inside of an old car trunk in summer? Jesus says, “Give them some water – physically and spiritually.” This is what Jesus did when hanging out with the tax collectors and prostitutes. Thank God, because that outreach yielded Matthew, who wrote the verses above and Mary Magdeline. First, we cut up our own heart with the sword of the spirit, then we slice up the world. Expect some hacking back. The devil always fights as he loses.

Is it hitting you? Christianity is ushering in human rights as a reflection of God’s love and Christ’s sacrifice. These records in the Corinthian epistles are the first statement of this, well before the Magna Carta or Declaration of Independence. The freedom and equality so many of us enjoy today started right there. In a house in Corinth. Where new Christians struggled to change their thinking and habits according to what Christ did for them and now, what Christ was in them. Wealth, class, or gender didn’t make them special. Besides God’s love, the next chapter will begin to explain what does make each of us special.