

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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[0:00] You don't need me to tell you this morning about how divided we are in our culture! We were praying a moment ago about conflict across our world. It seems that it's there! at every turn, and we're told that we're more tribal than ever, and lines are more easily drawn than ever, and there are all kinds of groups, and those groups don't get on, and there are all kinds of disagreements. And it seems to be in our culture at the minute that there is something of an appetite for that. We rush to extremes in order that we can divide with those that aren't like us. Divisions are a reality in a fallen world. And of course, the perennial expression of this, the way that we see this, the one division that you see in every culture, wherever you go, is that between rich and poor.

But our passage this morning, 1 Corinthians chapter 11, turn it up, page 958, if you've closed your Bibles, our passage this morning tells us that there is one place that that division does not exist, and that is the kingdom of God. And therefore, there is one place on earth where that division should not exist, and that is the church of God.

How did you become a Christian? If you're a Christian this morning, how did you become a Christian? You might say, well, I grew up in a Christian home, and I don't remember a time when I didn't know and love the Lord Jesus. You might say, well, I attended Holiday Bible Club, and I was a child, and I heard the gospel, and that was the moment for me. You might say, well, a Christian friend invited me to Club 16, or I went to a youth group with a Christian friend, and that was where it began for me. Or when I was at university, someone invited me to the Christian union. That's not what I mean. That's not how you became a Christian. Those are the circumstances by which you came to hear about Jesus and the gospel. I mean, how did you come to put your faith in Him? How did you come to that decisive moment when you decided you weren't going to walk your way any longer? You were going to walk His way. You see, whatever the circumstances, you all came the same way. We, all of us, came the same way.

We came to see our sin, and we came to see our need of a Savior, and we confessed our sin and put our faith in Christ as that Savior. And the reason that all of us did that, whatever the circumstances, whatever was going on around us in terms of the way we felt about things and the way our desires were leading us, the reason that we did that is because God gave us the gift of salvation.

If you were high-born, you didn't come to Christ through your breeding. If you were rich, you didn't buy your way in. If you were poor, but you showed some promise, you didn't get a spiritual bursary. The big issue, strap line. You know the big issue that you see people still to this day selling on the streets? The idea is that if you're poor, you can get involved with the big issue, and they'll give you a job that will help you get on. And their strap line is, it's a hand up, not a hand out. Well, when it comes to the kingdom of God, even that is no good.

[3:34] There is no hand up that will work. We are too lost for a hand up. It's not that someone can help us, and we can do a bit, or God will sort of get us started, and we'll do a bit ourselves, and we'll work our way into His kingdom. Whatever we have, humanly speaking, or whatever we don't have, we need a gift if we're going to get right with God. That's the only way, the gift of God's grace to us in the Lord Jesus. And let me say to you this morning, if you are here and you are looking into Christian things, and we are so encouraged that there are numbers of people coming along week by week, not yet saying that they'd be Christian, but really interested. And we love that you're here.

But if that's you, and you're looking into things, I want to tell you that you cannot get right with God by any other means. You cannot get right with God through anything in yourself, or anything that any other human being can do for you. And I want to say, the moment you come to realize that, it's actually really liberating. You might think that being told that there's nothing you can do yourself to save yourself is actually a reason for despair. It isn't quite the opposite. It is the doorway to hope.

You see, if you can see that you've been living life in God's world on your terms, and you see yourself in need of a Savior, and you see that Jesus Christ is that Savior, and you throw yourself on Him in repentance for your sin and faith in His death and resurrection, you will be reconciled to God. You will be. That's the promise of the Bible. I can stone-cold promise you this morning that you will be reconciled to God. If you see yourself as a sinner in need of a Savior, and Christ as that Savior, and you trust Him, you will be reconciled to God. Eternal life will be yours.

Nothing more, nothing less. It's a wonderful, wonderful thing. salvation is free to all and any who will receive it. And because of this, one of the most important implications of all of this is that we are therefore all equal when it comes to the church of the living God. When you can't earn or achieve your way into something, you're the same as the person next to you, whatever they have or don't have. And there is a unity that flows from that.

The equality that we have in the church of the living God works its way out in unity. God gives different gifts to different people, but those gifts don't make them better than others. God gives different gifts to different people, and what you have or don't have doesn't make you better or worse than anyone else here this morning.

In Christ, there is equality, and that equality works out in a oneness, a unity in Him. This was something that the Corinthian church had forgotten. 1 Corinthians chapter 11, verse 18, can you see, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.

[6:44] In the church, in the one place where rich and poor are truly equal, this society that is supposed to run counterculture, the language the Bible uses, the city on a hill that is supposed to be marked out by different values to the city of man, in Corinth it is just as divided as the culture around them.

The problem, it comes to the fore when the church celebrates the Lord's Supper, which in Corinth evidently happened in the context of a church meal. Their custom would have been to eat together, and as part of that meal, they would have had bread and wine in remembrance of Christ.

But look at verse 20. Paul says, verse 20, whatever you think you're doing, it's not the Lord's Supper you're eating. Because of the divisions, whatever they're doing, it isn't anything, Paul says, that the Lord Jesus would recognize. Look at verse 21. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, one goes hungry, another gets drunk.

The wealthy in the church, they had control of their schedules, and they could get to church when they wanted. The church may even have met in their homes. That was common in those days. The wealthy people had opened their homes, and the Christians would gather there for worship. The wealthy may have owned the place where the church met, but they certainly had control of their schedules and could meet when they wanted. Other people were poor, maybe even slaves. That was quite likely, and they had to work on the schedule that they were given, which meant that they were not always able to get to church at the same time as others. You finish up your work, you rush to get it all done, and you've got to get to church. It might be the other side of town, and of course, you can't just Uber, so you've got to get there. It takes some time. And the rich had started eating when they arrived, or when people began arriving, and by the time the others made it along, there wasn't any food left, and the ones who'd been there from the start were well down the bottles of wine.

I saw the Lord's Supper, Paul says. And he's rebuking the Corinthians. He's saying, listen, we've been here, haven't we, for a while, among Corinthians. All this talk about them being wise.

[8:58] They love their wisdom. All this talk about, we know that there are no, that idols are nothing. And he's saying to them, all your talk about wisdom, all your talk about understanding idolatry and what false worship is, all of that, do I commend you because of what you're doing with these divisions? Verse 17, I do not commend you. Verse 22, down a bit, shall I commend you? No.

Now, Paul's angry. He's very confronting here. And he is so because division in the church along socioeconomic lines, factions in the church between rich and poor is antithetical to the gospel. And he explains how this is the case. He presses it out. It's certainly the case because of what I said about the ground at the foot of the cross being equal for all of us, whatever we have or don't have.

But he presses that out further, and he gives us two very significant implications. Dividing the body in this way is a problem, point number one, Paul says, because it despises God's church.

It despises God's church. 21, for an eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, one goes hungry, another gets drunk. What? Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise

the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? Paul's rebuke makes it clear that the rich are on view because they're the ones who would be able to afford their own houses, houses to eat and drink in.

[10:32] And it's not hard to imagine how this works. As I've said, you've pulled a shift at your job in Corinth, and you've got everything done, and you want to get to worship, and you've got to get across town. And when you get there, the party's already started. People are all stuck in, and there's nothing for you. And when you arrive, you come through the door. Everybody's having their own conversations, and you're not drawn in. You feel like an outsider. And how does that make you feel? Well, Paul puts it very accurately. He says, you feel humiliated. You feel like you're not welcome. You feel like there's no place for you in this community. That is why you couldn't attach the Lord's name to this meal, because the division shows that you despise His church. It's actually no different to the divided culture that we live in in our day. There are haves, and there are have-nots, and the two don't mix.

And these poor have-nots come in, and the haves, well, they hang about with themselves. They're doing their own thing. They're enjoying the luxury and whatever of what they have, and these people feel on the outside, and they are humiliated.

A while ago, I read a book with the title, *White Working Class, Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*. That's the title. It's not a very good book, and I wouldn't recommend it. However, there was a really interesting phrase. The author talked about what he called, quote, the harsh disdain of the elites.

I think that's a good way to summarize how many leaders in our culture think and act, treating those that they are supposed to serve with contempt. I think we see it in our own political leadership, even those who have come from a humble background themselves, but they now have places of power. They use that power to create rather than diminish division. But there is no place in God's church for harsh disdain from anyone to anyone else, because to operate in that way is to despise the unity of what God has created, what He has purchased, what He cherishes with a jealous love. The bride of Christ, the church of the living God, is the apple of God's eye. And so, to divide it is to despise what He has done.

I'm glad to say that I think rich and poor, broadly speaking, rub along really pretty well here. The essence of this issue, factions that serve to humiliate those that are on the outside for whatever reason, we should be serious about that warning as a church family.

[13:21] We should see that it is a serious thing to allow these kind of factions to grow. Just because that kind of thing goes on out there, just because factionalism and division and in groups and outside groups is normal in our culture, doesn't mean that when we see that kind of thing perhaps beginning to show its face in the church community that we just shrug and we say, well, it's kind of how it is in the world that we live in. No, we do things differently here.

We don't want to despise God's church. It is a serious thing. The Apostle Paul is turning up the seriousness. And in fact, he doesn't just stop there. This kind of division, he says, despises God's church.

Secondly, also, it forgets God's Son. Point number two, it forgets God's Son. It is ironic, I think, that their sin is, the occasion of their sin is the Lord's Supper, is this table around which we will gather shortly. Because the Lord's Supper is the meal that is all about the very opposite of what it is that they're doing. So, Paul is using the meal to make his point. He could have said to them, look, I've heard reports that there's division among you between rich and poor. Cut it out. Stop it. It despises God's church. He cherishes his bride. Don't divide over these things. You're all one in Christ. But he gives us like a little mini-theology of the Lord's Supper as a way of illustrating the point and developing it theologically for them so they see just how scandalous it is. He uses what have become the words of institution here. Verse 23, for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when 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 also took the cup after supper, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it 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 was something Paul received from the Lord directly. Now, he wasn't present when the Lord Jesus instituted this meal with his disciples. Paul, you remember, became an apostle in an unusual way. He says he is an apostle as one untimely born. He was commissioned by the risen

Christ at their meeting on the Damascus Road. He was different from the other apostles in that regard. But on that Damascus Road event, in that event, in the tutorial that Paul was given about what his ministry would need to include, of all the things that Jesus could have mentioned, he made sure this was part of it. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. This is something that he was told in that event on the Damascus Road. This is how important the Lord's Supper is to the church and to the Christian life. And that's because of what it does, what the meal does, and what it says, what it proclaims, what it does, and what it says. So, when Jesus says, this is my body, this is shorthand for his life, his death, his whole incarnation. And when he says, which is for you, he's saying that in his incarnate life, Jesus had one soul aim. Jesus did not take on a human body because he was bored or because he was curious and he wanted to see what life was like down there on earth. He did it for us.

He did it because we needed him to do it. He did it because without doing it, we would be lost. We would all be lost.

[17 : 38] In John's gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying this, Very truly, I say to you, very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. What he means by that, he's saying he gave his life to give us life.

He gave us, he gave his life to bring us into relationship with God. That is what he means by the cup being the new covenant in his blood. The cup, when he says, this cup is a new covenant in my blood, it is shorthand for the cup and what it contains. It contains the symbol of his blood that ratifies the covenant, the agreement, the new relationship between God and man. We are reconciled to God. When we come to Christ, we are reconciled to God and we are given a new identity. That's what he's talking about. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, 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. He took the cup after supper. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. Jesus is showing us in the supper, a depiction of all that he has come to do for us in order to reconcile us to God.

And he brings us into covenant relationship with God, and that changes our identity. It's like when a man enters the covenant of marriage. He's no longer a bachelor. He's a husband. He receives a new identity. So when we come into covenant with God, we are no longer sinners but forgiven. We are no longer dead but alive. We're no longer orphans but we are adopted into God's family. And as we've said, as I've said a number of times now, this means that we have a unity with all the other members of that family. And the supper, the supper is an expression of that unity that we celebrate in order to keep reminding us of that fact. Back in chapter 10, verse 17, we saw that unity explicitly stated, because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we partake of one bread. The supper is a participation in Christ, and in eating the shared loaf, we are made one. Mystically, spiritually,

God works in that event to make us one. And the supper also is given to remind us of all that Christ has done. But as we take that one loaf together, in eating together, it serves to unify us now.

[20 : 47] That's why we have this meal regularly, because we need it. But it is also why you will hear whoever it is that presides at the table extend an invitation to eat and drink widely. Just as anyone at the beginning, just as anyone, regardless of their nationality, their social standing, their financial status or education, whatever metric of superiority you choose, just because anybody can come to Christ, none of those things prevent someone from coming to Him. So, they don't prevent anyone from coming to the table. If you are trusting in Christ for salvation, if you've demonstrated that in your baptism, and you aren't persisting in high-handed sin the way the Corinthians were, you're invited to the table. You're compelled. You're entreated to come and eat. And when we do this, do you see what Paul says our eating and drinking says? Look at verse 26. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. When we sit around the table of the Lord, and we take the bread and the wine, we communicate something. We proclaim the power of the cross of

Christ to defeat our sin, every sin. If you're here this morning and you're thinking to yourself, I have sinned my way out of God's favor, and there's no hope for me, that's not the case.

As we come to the table, have it remind you that everything that Christ did is sufficient to cover every sin that you could commit. And if you're repentant, He will have you.

That's what we proclaim, the power of the cross of Christ to defeat our sin. We also proclaim the power of the cross of Christ to create a new people. We look around this room and we see people that would have nothing in common apart from the fact that we're in Christ together. Some of us would never have met. Some of us would never have connected because we're so different. And yet, we're one in Christ because of what He has done. We proclaim that at the table. A world that is looking for answers to conflict. A culture that is desperate to find an answer to the division that it just keeps digging deeper into. We proclaim the one place that that can be sorted out when we gather around this table. And we proclaim the cross of Christ to defeat, not just defeat our sin, not just create a new people, but also to reconcile enemies.

In fact, what we do is we proclaim a message that establishes a whole new world. That's what the power of the cross of Christ can do, and that's what we proclaim when we eat and drink at the table. We don't just remember an event from history. We don't just close our eyes and try and think of something that happened as a historic event on a hill outside Jerusalem all those years ago.

[23:48] No. We embody what that actually achieved. We have fellowship with Christ by His Spirit as we eat and drink, and we have fellowship with one another, and we do that as equals. We stand only in the grace of God. The Corinthians' behavior did none of this. They got it all wrong. They sat down at the Lord's table and presumably said the words that speak of all of this grace and mercy that comes from Christ and the unity that He creates, and then they took the bread and they took the wine in a way that just kept up the divisions. It's no exaggeration to say that they've completely forgotten the point of the supper. They've completely forgotten Christ. And Paul says the first step out of this, verse 28, is to examine ourselves.

So examine yourself this morning. Are you harboring superiority in your heart? When we come together on a Sunday, are you looking down on those who aren't like you?

Maybe because they don't measure up as you expect them to or because they just do things differently to you. If that's the case, if you feel those instincts getting traction in your heart, you've forgotten Christ. That's what Paul says. He's unflinching. This Corinthian-style division despises God's church, and it forgets God's Son. Paul, however, then doesn't stop there. He pushes us further into an implication of ignoring his warning. He's saying, listen, get rid of these divisions. If we have them there, and the seeds of these divisions, if we know that they're there in our hearts, if we're looking for a breather from this, it isn't coming. Verse 27, he says, this kind of behavior also invites God's judgment. Invites God's judgment that couldn't be more sobering.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. How you approach the Lord's Supper says a lot about what you think about Christ.

[26:20] And if you eat in the way that Paul describes as an unworthy manner, you are guilty of sinning against his body and blood. The symbols of bread and wine are so closely associated with Christ that to mistreat them is to mistreat him. So, the question is, what is eating in an unworthy manner? Well, he doesn't mean, let me say this, he doesn't mean that taking the supper, if you have sinned in the past week, is eating in an unworthy manner. Quite the opposite. That's actually why we would eat.

The Lord's Supper is a meal for sinners who know that they need it. The bread and wine preach that to us every time we come to the table. If you're a sinner and you know that you need a Savior, this is a meal for you. Verse 29 actually explains what it means to eat and drink in this unworthy way. Have a look.

Verse 29, it is when we come to the table without discerning the body. Which body? The body of Christ, that he has just mentioned in verse 24, referring to the significance of the meal. Is that it? Or the church community as the body of Christ. Which is it? Well, I think going back to chapter 10, verse 17, it's both. Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. What he means is failing to discern the body is failing to realize the reality and the significance of Christ's death for us. And failing to grasp that this completely transforms how we view other people. Status and background no longer have any currency. We are all equals brought around the same table of the same Lord. The Corinthians missed this, and so ate and drank in an unworthy manner.

They said, he says, they should therefore, 28, examine themselves. Verse 31, they should judge themselves so as not to invite God's judgment, because God hates this kind of behavior. If we don't have any thought towards the significance of Christ's body given for us physically, and if we don't have any thought for Christ's body that that death has brought together in the family of the church, he's saying, if you have a high hand towards that, anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. I don't want us to miss how serious this is.

It's uncomfortable. But look at verse 30. Some of the Corinthians, verse 30, that is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. Some of the Corinthians are sick, and some have even died because of the way they've abused the Lord's Supper. Paul's saying, if you abuse the Supper, it can kill you. Oh, we don't really believe that. Is he serious?

[29:14] Just a quick word, by the way, to those with a tender conscience. Paul is not saying that everyone who is sick or has died is harboring unconfessed sin or behaving in this way. Just be clear. You shouldn't draw a line between your cancer diagnosis or your bout of the flu and a particular sin that you need to root out. But he is saying this, that the way that we come to the table and the health of the relationships we have with one another in the life of the church does matter. It is really serious.

It matters so much that God will discipline us, verse 32, in order that we don't persist in unrepentance and get condemned. This is such a fascinating thing to me. Think of all the things that we've seen are jacked up about the life of the Corinthian church as we've gone through.

Think about it. And yet, Paul doesn't say this about any of them. All of their sexual immorality, all of their pride, all of their confusion about theology as it relates to idols and things like that. Paul doesn't say anything as serious as this about any of that. What that must tell us is that this is how much our unity and our relationships matter to God. This is how much our unity and our relationships and the life of the church are so closely tied to what God has done in order to reconcile us. So, how do we avoid these problems? Well, in Corinth, Paul told in verse 33 to wait for one another. That's a relief. We're okay because, you know, we all drink even right at the same time.

No. As I've said as we've gone through, our main goal should be to make sure that our unity in Christ is visible in our relationships across the church. Examine ourselves to make sure that our love for one another is demonstrated across social strata because we really are all one in Christ Jesus.

This will be costly. True Christian love always is costly, but it is worth it because it won't just enrich our lives as we love and serve others who are different from us, but will also please God.

[31:27] And in our culture that is riven by division, when we show them, when we live out a community of people, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, united by this meal and this Christ, we proclaim a gospel that is the greatest need of the hour. In these days where talk of God and Jesus and Christianity is back on the agenda, but it isn't altogether clear what people mean when they use those words. It will be our diverse unity lived out together that shows off a gospel that makes a difference in the world and actually truly transforms people's lives.

I can tell you from where I'm standing this morning, this is a beautiful picture. We are a diverse group here, and we enjoy a remarkable unity in our life together, and it is a blessing that I or we as elders can't say what the apostle says of the Corinthian church here about IPC Ealing.

Despite all the differences that we have, despite all the backgrounds that we come from, all the cultures, all the reasons for division, there is genuine unity among us. As we come to the table now, let us be clear that this is only because of the work of Christ. Only Christ can do that, and let us enjoy that. Let us therefore eat and drink and celebrate that. What a gift, what a blessing that it is.

And as we eat and drink, let us deepen our bonds again as we eat and drink with Him, participating in the Lord Jesus together, expressing the epicenter of our unity as we come to the table.

Let us enjoy it. Let us celebrate. Before we do that, let us sing.