

**COVERED DISH – NOT
1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

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Lord's Supper Instructions

Today we come into the presence of God, as we gather at His table for the Lord's Supper. Those who are not members of First Baptist Church who have declared Jesus as Lord and done whatever your tradition would ask you to do, are welcomed to take your place at the Kingdom table today too. It is here at the table that we find the presence of God.

J. Brandon Meeks says that God gives us faint glimpses of Himself along the way. We hear His lordly voice in the sacred words of scripture. There He comforts and chastens us; encourages and exhorts us; wounds us and heals us. We see Christ's own body and blood hidden in the lowly signs of the bread and the fruit of the vine. We recognize His image in the faces of those we meet. And on occasion we are even able to trace the steps of Providence as we reflect upon the tender watchcare of God over our lives. And these emblems of the Lord's own nearness are what the hymn writer called a "foretaste of glory divine."

You see, the Lord's table is an appetizer of eternity.

Today, in the broken body and the spilt blood of our Christ, we find the mystery of the nearness of the God who puts on skin. We find ourselves face-to-face with His crucifixion that, despite our best efforts, we never fully comprehend. We find ourselves in the midst of a God who loves us so dearly that He was willing to die for us.

The church at Corinth was supposed to see the presence of Christ in each other, and they were supposed to find the presence of Christ around the table of communion, in the symbols of the broken body and the spilled blood. But they had turned the Lord's Supper into something God never intended it to be. They had taken the very image of unity at the table of the Christ and made it a sacrilege of disunity and shame upon those who are the least among them.

In verse 2 of chapter 11, Paul says, "I praise you...." Then he goes on to list why he praises them. He praises them for holding the traditions that he delivered to them.

But look how he changes his tone in verse 17

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it.

Paul is being a bit sarcastic when he says, “In part, I believe it.” He believes it fully, as he will show in the verses that follow. He is saying, tongue-in-cheek, “I can’t believe your conduct is as outrageous as I have heard that it is. You can’t possibly be doing what they have reported that you are doing, can you?”

I want to observe things about the Lord’s Supper from this text.

I. The Lord’s table must, first of all, express the community’s unity as the new covenant people of God.

The Lord’s Supper expresses the unity of the church as the people of God. But that’s not what is happening in Corinth. Paul does a play on words. He says, “When you come together” Notice how many times he uses this language. It’s intentional.

Verse 17

When you come together, you come together not for the better, but for the worse.

Verse 18

When you come together as a church, there is division.

Verse 20

Therefore, when you meet together....

All these things ought to be bringing them together.

Look at verse 33

So then, my brethren, when you come together....

Or verse 34

...come together....

It’s a five-fold repetition of the verb “come together.” This verb can mean to assemble, or it can mean to be united. And Paul means both of them here. When you come together, when you

assemble together as a church to worship, you're not really coming together in unity and peace, he says.

The specific problem is stated in verses 20-22

Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.

Let me give you the setting. It was a full meal deal in the first century. It wasn't just a little cup and a piece of bread. There was certainly a time when the bread was taken and the broken body was remembered. And a time when the cup was lifted, and the blood spilt was remembered. But in the setting of celebrating the Lord's Supper, there was a full meal.

Archaeological study of Roman houses show that the dining room would probably accommodate about nine persons in a well-to-do home. The other guests could sit or stand in the atrium, which might provide space for another thirty or forty people. The host at such a celebration of the Lord's Table would, naturally, be among the wealthier members. It is reasonable to assume that the host invited his higher-status friends to eat in the dining room, while lower-status members of the church, such as the freedmen and the slaves, well – they just found a larger place outside.

It wouldn't be unusual for those in the dining room to have much better food while those outside may have had little or no food at all.

Listen to this. Pliny the Younger describes his experience of dining as a guest of a man who boasted of the "elegant economy" of his hospitality. Same time period. Listen to the description of what took place. He is describing the behavior of Romans, and you remember that Corinth, after all, was a Roman colony.

"The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded), and the third for his and our freedmen." (Letters 2.6)

What you have happening at the Lord's Supper is that the rich show up while the laboring folks are still at work. They bring out their picnic baskets, and they eat well and drink well – to the point of being drunk. At the Lord's Supper! They are puffed up and satisfied, while they provide

no food for those who are poor. They have “shamed those who have nothing” (verse 22). “I can’t praise you for this,” Paul says.

They had brought shame on the poor. They had heightened the class distinctions. It’s the covered-dish that wasn’t, because everybody eats their own food. They don’t wait (verse 21). The NIV translates it this way, “For when you eat, each one consumes his own supper.” They are not waiting for anybody else.

The church’s common meal, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, ought to represent the covenant unity of the people of God. And they’ve made it a moment of disunity. And, worse of all, they’ve shamed the poor. If you know anything about the Old and New Testament, God is the God of the poor. You don’t shame the poor.

Put bluntly, by showing contempt for the poor, for those who have nothing, they were acting as though the death of Jesus had not changed the conditions of their relationships to each other. And the truth of the matter is that in Christ Jesus all of our relationships are changed to each other. We don’t value each other based upon our income statements. We value each other based upon who we are in Christ Jesus.

This disunity of the Corinthians was a hollow parody of the Lord’s Supper. Paul said, “Stop, stop. Open up your picnic baskets and share your food with those who have nothing.”

II. The Lord’s Supper focuses on the church’s memory of the death of Jesus.

When Jesus gave thanks (verse 24), He said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” And the cup also (verse 25), “This is my blood, the new covenant; do this in remembrance of Me.” And in verse 26, “For when you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.”

Jesus’ death was not an accident. It was not a tragic mistake of the judicial system. Jesus freely gave himself up to death for us. By sharing the bread and the cup, we signify acceptance of the incalculably great gift of God. As Richard Hays has said, “To know Jesus rightly is to know Him through the Eucharistic story.” You’ve got to know Jesus through the story of the cross.

III. The Lord’s Supper is an occasion to ponder God’s judgment.

They were shaming the poor. And this was taken seriously enough that Paul says in verses 27-30, 33, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread

and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.... So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.”

We have used this scripture as a passage of introspection, and that’s not a completely inappropriate use of the passage. But in the context of the passage, in the setting of what is happening socially between the haves and the have-nots, you have to be completely honest about what the passage is about. Paul’s call to self-scrutiny in verse 29 concerns how they are “discerning the body.” “Discerning the body” means recognizing the community of believers for what it really is – the one body of Christ, the unified body of Christ. And those who are acting selfishly are focusing on their own spirituality and exercising their own social privileges while remaining heedless to those who share with them in the new covenant inaugurated by the Lord’s death. Therefore, by mistreating the members of the church the Corinthians repeat the sort of sin that made the death of Christ necessary, and they are courting disaster.

Rather than finding grace at the Lord’s table, those who are bringing disunity to the church and those who are shaming the poor are falling sick, some falling dead. There is not another reference about what is taking place here. But I can tell you that it is a sign of God’s displeasure and discipline for the way they are treating the poor.

If you don’t think that’s the context, look at verse 30, “For this reason” Given the fact that some of you need to repent from the way you are treating the poor, you are weak and sick. No more covered-dishes that aren’t. Verse 33 – wait on each other!

We’re uncomfortable with this judgment as part of the Lord’s Supper. That’s just because we’re uncomfortable with the idea of judgment anyway. But that doesn’t take it away. You can’t stay away from the Lord’s table because you feel like it is there that your life is laid bare before God. Your life is laid bare before God anyway. And we come to the table not as perfect people, but, rather, people receiving grace.

This passage tells us a lot about what a church is supposed to be – people encircling the cross, hand-in-hand, heart-in-heart, with kingdom values.

Here at the table, we find mystery for all men not just the rich, nor just the poor, but for all who would say Jesus is Lord. It is here, amongst the mysteries of Jesus, that we find the table to which He calls all who call Him “Christ.”

Though the ways of God lie beyond the reach of reason, they may be grasped by belief. Mystery bids us (Meeks says), like Job, to put our hands over our mouths. To bow our faces toward the ground. To worship the God whose ways are past finding out.

Herein lies the grand paradox: though the mystery of Christ is such that we can never trace its breadth, or scale its heights, or plumb its depth; it is just here that we come to know that which may be known of God. Even in God's hiddenness, His glory is revealed. By gazing into the mystery of Christ as He is in our midst, we are made privy to the...majesty of Christ.

When Abraham was called upon to sacrifice his son, Isaac, his well-beloved son was spared the awful task. God provided a substitute. But on this occasion, at Calvary, now God's well-beloved Son will not be spared because He is the substitute. His garments are gambled away, His face is beaten and bruised. There is no voice from heaven declaring how proud He is, because God has forsaken His Son because of your sin and my sin. In the oddest and strangest mystery, true glory comes in the shape of a cross. (J. Brandon Meeks)

If you are here today and you know Jesus as Lord, you know His body was broken for you and His blood was shed for you, we invite you to the table.

On that night, Jesus took the bread and said (here in 1 Corinthians 11:24), "This is My body which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." (take bread)

In the same way, He took the cup also 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." (drink cup)