

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

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Claustrophobic. I feel like I'm suffocating. There is only one inch of space, and that's if I sit up straight and he doesn't recline his seat. The worse part of a far-away mission trip for me is the two day, ten hours each day airplane travel. The standard seat has 31 inches on British Airways. I have long legs, and by the time I slump just a hair after the eighth hour in flight and the person in front of me leans his chair back, I have to turn myself sideways just to not eat my knees. And I realize some of you are taller than I.

Misery is manifold when you realize your seat is in the middle of a five-seat section. You share and fight over the armrest with the person on the left and the right. And just as I am long legged, I usually sit between two people who are big boned. And, just to tell you the truth, you feel like you're going to die! Every minute becomes an hour. Every hour becomes a day. And I think the plane will never, ever land. And, of course, tomorrow you wake up and face the same thing all over again.

Miserable. The guy beside you is snoring. I never can sleep. Take sleeping aids – fight them off. They turn out the lights – I turn mine on. And somewhere in the night, if I'm lucky enough to have an aisle seat, I slip my leg out into the aisle to stretch it out. It feels so good to have one leg stretched out when, all of a sudden, the cart comes by and runs over my feet – feet that are, by now, swollen. I never really realized it, but when you're in a plane for a long time you swell up like a pinto bean in water. If you take your shoes off you might not be able to get them back on.

Of course, what I've just described is coach class. For an economy class ticket on British Airways, just this week I was quoted a price, flying from Dallas/Fort Worth to London Gatwick, of \$1,211.

But don't despair. There are other opportunities, other ways to fly.

**Unlike the 31 inches allotted to coach class characters, there is the first class. You won't have 31 inches. Rather, you'll have six feet and six inches. A lay down bed. In first class, you won't be eating peanuts. You'll have individual service, with a "specially trained crew," claims britishairways.com. You will receive "discreet yet attentive service, ensuring that your personal needs are taken care of."**

**There is an extensive menu. The crew will prepare your meal to order and serve it at a time that best suits you. No waiting for the cattle call. Menus range from a five course gourmet meal, designed by the British Airways Culinary Council, to light snack and traditional comfort food. And don't worry – up there in first class are the finest wines, champagnes, and spirits, served to you at any time during the flight, along with soft drinks, espresso or**

**cappuccino. Moreover, British Airways has joined forces with the world-renown luxury health resort, Chiva-Som, to create award winning spa cuisine for passengers traveling in first class.**

**This first class cabin is described as a haven of calm, comfort, and refinement. You have personal space – the space you need, they advertise, to escape and relax. In fact, it’s all been inspired by British interior designer, Kelly Hoppen. You’ll find in first class only the highest quality fabrics and materials to provide a modern and stylish feel.**

**Your own personal space can allow you to sleep, work, eat, and relax. There is even a visitor’s seat available to allow you to conduct private business meetings or enjoy a dinner for two. There’s room for two of you in first class.**

**But it’s not going to be a \$1,200 ticket like coach class. This ticket came up, same day on the web, priced at \$14,500. ([www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com))**

Seemed odd to me that they described first class, in which I have never flown, as escaping and relaxing. You may escape and relax in first class, but back there where I fly, I feel like I’m caged and stressed.

Well, we have the same problem in Corinth. Some of the Christians are flying first class and some of them are flying coach. And, of all places, the class divisions are being intensified at the one time, during the one event, when the body is supposed to express unity like never before – during the Lord’s Supper. During the agape feast, they are having division according to class codes.

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 say three 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.

And in Corinth, just like first class passengers on British Airways receive a five-course dinner and those in the back of the plane receive preheated TV dinners that taste almost as bad as they smell, 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 other 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.

There was a church member who occasionally invited me to a Dallas Cowboys game (in the old stadium). It's something I looked forward to very much. But even more than the game, I looked forward to dining in the end zone five star restaurant. When you arrive, you certainly have to show membership to get in (and he has such). Our table was right up against the glass and overlooked the playing field. You're up there with the big wigs. Last time we were up there, Nate Newton was dining. Your party's name is engraved upon the menu. You can choose between shrimp (which is presented on ice sculptures) or the carving of prime rib. There are salads galore. There is chicken, beef, fish – you name it, they have it. All that you want. Pasta. Even the mashed potatoes are shaped through pastry bags as fleur-de-lis. The dessert table is to die for.

One year, when I was sitting in the end zone facility, devouring my prime rib and having my plate loaded, literally, with four desserts, I looked out the window which overlooked the field, and there was a guy in the cheap seats – in the end zone seats – eating a corn dog on a stick. And I thought to myself, “Poor guy, if he only knew what was on the other side of this glass.”

That's the way it was in Corinth. The fat cats were eating like I once ate at the Dallas football game, while others were going away hungry. 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.

How do I know that Jesus is the Christ? When John the Baptist asked this question, Jesus replied, "The poor have the gospel preached to them." The God of the Old Testament was the God of the widow, the God of the orphan, the God of the alien, the stranger, the God of the poor, the outcast.

We, the covenant people, are bound together by responsibilities to God and responsibilities to one another. You and I have responsibilities to God. But in this covenant community called First Baptist Church, we have responsibilities to each other. And the character of this covenant we have with each other is represented in the unity of the common meal.

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 unity 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."

One Labor Day weekend, we had a covered-dish at First Baptist that wasn't. We had hundreds of you show up, and the instructions from Robby, our minister of education, were to bring your own food and eat your own food. Other than the sharing of the desserts, everybody spread out their own picnic blanket, everybody took out their own food and ate their own stuff. It was a covered-dish that wasn't.

It was a great idea. It was simpler in some ways, and people could get what they wanted. But we planned to have a sack of hamburgers, because every time we have a picnic folks come by who have no food and want to join us. I can't sit and enjoy my meal on my blanket if they have nothing. So, I think we had a sack of a dozen Whoppers ready for anybody who came by who didn't have something to eat. In the end, a visit was made to the park and all of the burgers were passed out.

You have to always think about those who don't have. And the Laotians among us had better theology because they brought trays and trays of food to share.

## **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."

The Lord's Supper is about memory. Next month, we are going to gather on Good Friday evening to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a church family. Be here. Powerful. We are going to remember. Don't forget the cross.

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.

But at the same time, we don't want to come to the table in a way that brings dishonor to the poorer members of the community.

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. It doesn't matter what kind of car you drive. Doesn't matter what your W-2 says. What matters is that Jesus Christ is your Lord.

I close with words from the pen of our Lord's brother.

James 2:1-6a

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.

For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes,

and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit there in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,"

have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

But you have dishonored the poor man.