

Supper Fellowship

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray again. Let's ask God for his help. Heavenly Father, as we come before you, as your word is now proclaimed to us, please strengthen us as a church, grow us as a church, correct us where we need correcting, remind us where we need reminding, and restore to us again the great joy knowing who the Lord Jesus is and what he has done.

So Father, may your spirit be at work. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Think of the last time you ate on your own and compare that with when you last shared a meal with someone.

What was the difference? When I eat on my own, which I occasionally do if it's been really busy and I just go and tapau some food to eat on my desk, all I'll be doing would be shoveling some food into my mouth while browsing the day's news or I'll keep working on whatever it is that I'm working on.

But when I've invited others to eat with me, it's different. I'll be talking and catching up with them and it's quite unlikely that I will pull out my phone, browse the news on it all the time, or put on earphones and just listen to a podcast.

Why not? Because if I did that, it would be considered rude within it. It would be alienating to others. It would be signalling to others, I don't want to engage with you.

[1 : 4 0] I don't want to be in fellowship with you. I don't want to do anything with you. For few things symbolise togetherness more than coming together around a table for a meal.

It's why we often mark big events such as a graduation or an anniversary with a big makan. It's a way of expressing commonality or saying that I'm celebrating together with you.

I'm with you together in this, that we belong together. You know, we even have an English phrase, having a seat at the table to describe that sense of being meaningfully involved in a group.

And perhaps that's why one of the primary symbols of the church gathering is the table. More specifically, the Lord's table. If the pulpit, the other primary symbol represents truth and life, revelation and inspiration, then the Lord's table represents hospitality and inclusiveness, generosity and grace.

For your place at the table is no longer determined by your social status, your skin colour, your ethnic grouping, your level of education, your past background.

[3 : 0 2] Everyone is at the table purely because the Lord Jesus has invited them to be there with him. And around that table, you're family.

You're the one new humanity of Ephesians 2 who belong to him and to one another. You might remember that from our first sermon of 2022. And when everyone at the table eats together, it's a wonderful celebration of the gospel.

So, how tragic it would be if our conduct at that table is not in line with the gospel but has more in common with the pride and division of the Tower of Babel.

What a tragedy if the unity represented by the table turns out to be a mere fable. And yet, that was what was happening in the Corinthian church.

And so, in verse 17, Paul says, your meetings do more harm than good. Ouch! That's, like, almost the ultimate insult for a church, isn't it?

[4 : 16] Imagine if a respected Christian leader, maybe Pastor John today, he came and said that to us. That would cut deep. And yet, Paul's words are preserved for us as scripture precisely because that danger of our meetings doing more harm than good is always a danger for any church.

You might remember last week, we saw that our meetings could do harm if our conduct as male and female in that setting is dishonourable. as we'll see next week, it could do great harm if we exercise our spiritual gifts in a way that is self-centred.

And this week, we'll see that it could do great harm if we are thoughtless in the way we eat together. And so, let's prepare our hearts to heed Paul's warnings today, and let's be ready to make sure that whenever we come to participate at the Lord's Table, our reality matches the symbolism.

And to do that, we're going to go through the passage today under three headings. Firstly, we'll see what the surface issue is. Secondly, we'll see what the underlying problem is. And then thirdly, we'll see what the remedy is.

And so firstly, the surface issue, supper, snobbery, supper, snobbery. Now, last week, as Paul was about to tackle the issue of male-female relationships, he starts by saying, verse 2, I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding on to the traditions.

[6 : 03] And so he tries to find something good to praise them for. He says that, oh, it's good that at least you've worked out that there is freedom in Christ, even though you've got to learn and apply that freedom correctly.

But this week, verse 17, he struggles to find anything to praise them for. In the following directives, I have no praise for you.

Oh, wow, this is serious stuff. For as we've seen, your meetings do more harm than good. Now, what might we think of if asked to name what a bad church meeting looks like?

Perhaps we might think of church seminars where forced teaching is spread. Perhaps we might think of church gatherings where we encounter so many tech problems that everything just feels chaotic.

but I wonder if any of us would name how we take the Lord's Supper as something that could potentially cause harm. And yet, that is precisely what is driving the strong rebuke here.

[7 : 18] For verse 18, in the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent, I believe it.

So what's going on? Well, let me set the historical context for you. When I worked in KL, I used to help out on and off at a church consisting of Hakkachin refugees from Myanmar.

This church met around 9pm, because most of them were working during the day as waiters or factory workers. And it's the same with the Christians at Corinth.

The Roman working week operated on an eight-day cycle, which means that on a Sunday, there would still be plenty of people working. Most Christians could only come to church after they finished work.

However, there was one group of people who could show up early in church, church, and that was the wealthy. Unlike the rest, they didn't have to work.

[8 : 26] Now, what you need to realise also is that unlike us today, the Lord's Supper was taken in the context of an evening meal. And so this is really dinner time for everybody.

And so the rich would come to church bringing all the good food that their servants at home probably has prepared. And now just imagine the scene before you.

There are nice-looking appetizers, popiah, lobak, umai. There are the main dishes, the ayam panko, the assam fish, and then there's dessert.

Now, the other working-class Christians, the traders, the slaves, who were probably busy preparing their master's dinners, would not yet have arrived. But these wealthier Christians decided, ayah, never mind lah, we makan first.

And so they enjoyed all the good food and drink. And by the time the traders and the slaves arrived, there was nothing left, beyond just the scraps of bread and the mouthfuls of wine that you would probably use for the formal Lord's Supper.

[9 : 41] Now, some scholars suggest a slight variation on this scenario, saying that it's not so much that the rich ate first, but that even when the Christians were together, the rich hoarded all the good food for themselves without sharing, perhaps even eating in a separate room, and getting tipsy on all the alcohol consumed.

Now, regardless of what the exact behaviour was, the result is the same. End of verse 21. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk.

Basically, once again, the Corinthian church would have looked just like the world because their behaviour was indistinguishable from other Roman dinner parties. That's what happened at a typical supper in Corinth.

The rich get all the good food, the poor get sidelined. And so, there was a clear divide. Just like back in 1 Corinthians 1. And this division isn't doctrinal.

Back in chapter 1, it was all about which leader you like most. And here in chapter 11, it's about what social status you possess. And there are hints that that was how some of the Corinthian Christians defended their actions.

[11 : 06] We need some form of social hierarchy, they were saying. And that's why Paul replies the way he does to them, verse 19, with a dose of sarcasm.

No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. Or put another way, Paul is saying, no doubt you guys feel that it's important to make your supper arrangements in such a way to show who is really blessed by God.

Oh yeah, those who eat first must be the ones that God thinks is really important in the kingdom of God. And how convenient, it just happens to be you guys.

But of course, Paul says that's rubbish. The Lord Jesus never made such distinctions. Indeed, he was the one who thought that the last shall be the first, he was the one who said that the little children, that is the ones who are ignored and unseen by ancient society, well let them come to me.

He was the one who scandalously welcomed faithful, humble Gentiles ahead of pious but arrogant Jews. And so the Lord's Table cannot be a place of such worldly distinctions either.

[12 : 33] Indeed, Paul says if there is going to be such supper snobbery going on, then stop calling it the Lord's supper. After all, if you are going to argue that you are merely following what those in society around you does, then I'm going to suggest that you follow through on the logic of your argument and to conclude that what you're eating is also of the world rather than of the Lord.

That's what he's saying in verses 20 and 21. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers.

And if you rich want to have suppers just like the world, then isn't that what your big fancy houses are for, poll us in verse 22. Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?

All you're doing is causing damage by bringing shame and dishonour to those whom God has exalted and honoured in Christ.

And so the surface issue is supper snobbery. It's about unfair discrimination, unjustified exclusion, undisguised partisanship.

[14 : 05] And that is important to understand. Now today, we probably wouldn't believe that we could behave in such an outrageous way. But if there's one thing that the Bible says to us over and over again, it's that it is never a good idea to have an oh, I could never be like them mindset.

rather, God encourages us to have a spirit of humility and to ask, is there any way we are like the Corinthians here, even if unintentionally?

Are there any ways in which we have let the patterns of the world influence us? I was trying to think this week of how I personally might be guilty of being like a Corinthian.

Perhaps I might subconsciously treat Christians who have a deeper theological knowledge as somehow having God's approval more than those who don't possess such knowledge.

Or perhaps I could assume that those with more charismatic personalities, those who look outwardly more gifted, will be more likely to bring God's blessing to our church than those more socially outward or who just don't seem to be as gifted.

[15 : 30] Or perhaps I could unfairly compare two people in two very different situations, say a single person who is financially well-off, who has no health issues to speak of, with a single mother.

who has chronic pain issues, who also needs to look after an aging parent, and to think better of the former, because this person just looks a bit more committed to church.

Perhaps you can think of other ways, but whatever it is, supper snobbery definitely can still be alive and well in our church today.

It just takes different forms. and so we need to be alert to it. So the surface issue is supper snobbery.

But secondly, the underlying problem is the gospel gap, the gospel gap. verse 23, verse 23, Now, if you've attended our church for some time, then verses 23 to 26 would be very familiar to you.

[16 : 43] It's the words I always recite whenever we take the Lord's supper together. But let me just draw your attention to a little word you might have missed whenever I say those words.

verse 23, verse 23. For. Now, that's what we call a linking word.

What does a linking word do? It links what comes after with what comes before. Paul is about to give us the meaning of the Lord's supper.

But why does he do so? Why does he feel the need to give us the meaning at this point? Well, that linking word tells us. He's saying, I'm going to tell you what the Lord's supper is all about precisely because you guys are behaving in such a way that completely goes against its meaning.

I have to show you this so that you guys get what you are doing cannot be tolerated. I'm going to expose a gospel gap. That is, a gap between what you say you believe and how you actually behave.

[18 : 06] And that's why we have verses 23 to 26. So what is the Lord's supper all about? It is first and foremost about the gospel.

Paul reminds us of what Jesus said as he took the bread and cup in verses 24 and 25. This is my body which is for you.

This cup is the new covenant in my blood. And so Jesus is linking this supper with the events of the crucifixion. But in what way are they linked?

Well, you might not realise this but those four words this is my body has generated some of the most controversy throughout the entire history of Christianity.

Because what does Jesus mean by those words? For Roman Catholics, as I mentioned briefly two weeks ago, this is to be taken literally.

[19 : 14] The official Roman Catholic view is that the elements of the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ when the priest pronounces the right words.

Now, it will still look like bread and wine, but the substance of the bread changes so that it's no longer bread any longer. But the body of Christ, which makes present again the sacrifice of the cross.

And this view is known as transubstantiation. Now, that's a big word that you can drop into your lunchtime conversations afterwards. Is that what Jesus means when he says those words?

Roman Catholics insist so because they say we need to take Jesus literally. otherwise, we are not taking him seriously. But let's make two observations, one from the text and one more generally.

And let's take the general point first. Suppose I'm standing next to my wife and I say, this is my wife. That would be me being very literal.

[20 : 27] real. But what if I showed you a photo of my wife instead and I said, this is my wife. I just said the exact same phrase.

But if you didn't believe that I'm married to the photograph of my wife, does that mean you are not taking my words seriously? Of course not.

You know what I mean given the context. And so you can take my use of the phrase this is seriously without having to take it in a very wooden literal way.

Now to the text. In verse 25, Jesus says, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. And to my knowledge, no one argues that this cup is literally the new covenant.

Here Jesus simply means that as he shares his blood on the cross, he brings in the new covenant where forgiveness of sin is made available and there will be transformation of hearts.

[21 : 38] And so if we are not talking in a very wooden literal manner here, but in a figurative sense in verse 25, then there is no reason why verse 24, which is in parallel with verse 25, cannot be taken in a figurative sense either.

So what is the Lord's Supper all about? It is first and foremost calling our attention to the events of the cross, the breaking of Christ's body, the shedding of his blood.

But it's not just about the events, significance. This is my body which is for you.

What am I doing on that cross, Jesus says? I'm being pierced for your transgressions.

This is me giving up my superior status, taking on human nature, becoming like a slave, enduring poverty, being executed like a criminal, all for the sake of those who have abandoned me, who left me thirsty and hungry, who are my worst enemies.

[23 : 14] This is me doing this for you so you will be pardoned of your sin, so you will be cleansed of your impurities, so you can have your hopeless future exchange for a hopeful one.

This is the meaning of the Lord's Supper. This is what bonds us together as one. And that's what Paul also said back in 10 verse 16 to 17.

And every time you take this, you are to remember this. Jesus' command here. And this remembrance, the commentator F.F.

Bruce says, is more than a mental exercise. It involves a realisation of what is remembered. As you take the Lord's Supper, you don't just recall facts, you recognise its significance.

You realise that what Jesus did for you then transforms the way you do things today. And that's why verse 26, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

[24 : 44] You see, why did Jesus give us the Lord's Supper? Because as the Old Testament frequently shows us, we are a very forgetful people. we forget who God is, how he has redeemed us, how hugely significant it is that God has done that.

And so the significance of the Gospel must be proclaimed again and again. It is proclaimed in the very act of taking the Lord's Supper itself, such that the Lord's Supper is sometimes called the Gospel in visible form.

And it is proclaimed when the Lord's Supper is accompanied by actual words of explanation, so that it never becomes a meaningless ritual, which no one can understand.

That's what I aim to do every time we take the Lord's Supper together. And notice, this proclamation is primarily to Christians.

After all, that is who is meant to gather around the Lord's table. we must never make the mistake of thinking that the Gospel is only for non-Christians. For what happens when the Gospel no longer takes centre stage for a Christian?

[26 : 03] We become like the Corinthian Church. And that's why Paul wants to remind them that the Lord's Supper is all about the Gospel. For if they grasp the Gospel, they would understand that dividing according to the social class is the opposite of what Jesus stood for.

If they grasp the Gospel, they will understand that God's approval comes through faith in Christ alone, not through how successful we look. If they grasp the Gospel, they would understand that we put the interest of others and not ourselves first, and so they would wait for their brothers and sisters to share dinner with them.

There would be no Gospel gap between what they profess and how they act if they truly understood the significance of the Lord's Supper and how it should shape them.

And so my brothers and sisters, do you grasp the Gospel not just as a statement of fact but as an earth-shaking announcement that impacts your subsequent actions?

Perhaps you once did, but right now there's a gap in your memory and you've forgotten Christ, causing you to begin to forget how to act as his followers.

[27 : 35] verse. And maybe today you're beginning to recognize the underlying problem, the Gospel gap. But what should be done then?

That brings us to our third and final heading for today. Thirdly, the remedy, earnest examination, earnest examination. Look at verse 27.

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

Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. Now, before we proceed, let's clear up a common misunderstanding of these words.

Let's say you're a Christian and you're really trusting in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. And you read verse 27 and you think, oh gosh, I know my own heart.

[28 : 43] I know I'm not pure. I know that I've acted badly. I'm so unworthy. In fact, today I'm not worthy to take the Lord's Supper. I indeed have forgotten Jesus, so I better pass.

Wait till I make myself more worthy. My brothers and sisters, that is not what Paul is talking about here.

Remember, the Lord's Supper above all proclaims the Gospel. And the Gospel is good news precisely because Jesus died for us when we were still unworthy.

The Gospel is good news because it says that we can't make ourselves worthy, but there is one who can. As the evangelist Billy Graham once so wonderfully put it, the Gospel shows us our nakedness and provides us with garments of purity.

It shows us our poverty and pours into our lives the wealth of heaven. It shows us our sins and points us to the Saviour.

[29 : 53] The Lord's Supper is precisely for unworthy sinners like you and I. And so my brothers and sisters, if you feel unworthy the next time we take the Lord's Supper, well, don't hesitate to remember Jesus and eat and drink with joy.

He has given you a righteousness not your own. So what does Paul mean here when he talks about an unworthy manner?

Well, remember the context. What were the Corinthians doing? They were practicing supper snobbery. They were dishonouring their brothers and sisters in Christ by their divisive behaviour.

That's what was unworthy. And so the first question to ask before taking the Lord's Supper is this. Am I doing anything that is sinfully excluding my brother or sister?

Is there a rupture in a relationship that I need to repair with a fellow Christian? Someone I need to ask forgiveness from? Perhaps even as I'm speaking now, the Holy Spirit is bringing a face to your mind.

[31 : 13] Someone you disdain, someone you want banished from your presence, someone you have cancelled to use contemporary terminology.

Maybe you and that person are even sitting at opposite ends of the hall today. There is an unjustified division of some sort, not a 1 Corinthians 5 kind, but a 1 Corinthians 11 kind.

God's word says, earnestly examine yourselves and go sort it out. For otherwise, verse 29, those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Discerning the body of Christ here doesn't mean imagining the bread and wine literally become the body of Christ, but it's Paul's way of referring to the church. And his solemn warning is, if you take the Lord's Supper without recognising how the Lord's table should bring the entire church together, but you engage in some form of supper snobbery instead, you bring condemnation upon yourselves.

Verse 30 underscores that warning. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. Wow! This is serious.

[32 : 51] Now, the New Testament teaches that sickness is not necessarily a result of sin. John 9 makes that clear. But the Bible doesn't go the entire way, the other way, sorry, entirely, and say that sickness is never a result of sin.

Because here is one instance where it is. This is how seriously the Bible takes our eating together. Do it wrongly, and the consequences can be catastrophic.

And so verse 31 Paul says, apply the remedy, earnestly examine yourselves. Be honest. And if you experience the Lord's discipline, don't ignore it.

Verse 32 is God's way of rescuing you from final condemnation. Instead, verses 33 to 34, aim to eat together.

Aim for the table to truly be a table of reconciliation, a sign of togetherness, testimony to the gospel of Christ.

[34 : 05] And just on a side note, I think 1 Corinthians 11 shows us that the Lord's Supper properly belongs to the church, not to individual households. It is something we do together as a church, not something to be practiced privately.

So earnestly examine yourselves. We often have a moment of silence before we take the Lord's Supper for us to do that. But actually, the best time to do it is not then, but even before you come on a Sunday.

And while the first question to ask should be those related to supper snobbery, it is also good to engage in prayerful self-examination more generally. Are they things that we need to repent of?

And so do that and bring your fears and your doubts and your mourning over sin to the Lord's table and find full assurance there.

For the Lord's Supper proclaims to repenting Christians, you belong to Jesus. And so to use some of the language from Christians from centuries ago, feed on him by faith.

[35 : 28] Trust in his merits, rejoice in his love, give thanks for his grace, live as reconciled believers, then look forward.

In verse 26, we discover that the Lord's Supper in this present form is not forever. It's until Jesus comes. For the one whose death we remember is not dead today but living.

He is here with us in spirit and one day he will be with us face to face. And when Jesus comes, no one will ever have to go hungry or thirsty ever again and will really have a supper to remember then.

And if we take the message of 1 Corinthians 11 verse 17 to 34 to heart and we leave it to the full, the gospel will indeed be proclaimed both in word and deed, both to Christians and to the non-Christians watching.

So beware supper snobbery, earnestly examine yourselves and close the gospel gap so that the bread of life whom we proclaim and the table manners we present are really the one and the same.

[36 : 57] Go to Jesus today. And what I'm going to do now is I'm just going to invite Daniel and the band back up and I'm not going to lead us in prayer but I'm going to encourage you now maybe just to spend a bit of time with God himself.

Maybe there's something you need to do business with with him. Maybe the Lord will bring to your mind somebody whom you need to go and reconcile with.

And if that's so then don't ignore the leading of the Holy Spirit.