

Mind Your Manners at Christ's Table!

The book of Corinthians is so encouraging because it shows us how to confront our problems—both individually and as a body of believers. The *big* problem with the Corinthians was their selfishness and pride—and it showed up all over the place: Taking each other to court, getting all messed up in immorality, and even bickering over spiritual gifts. But the place where their selfishness was *most obvious* was—*of all places—at the Lord's Table!*

Whenever the Corinthians observed the Lord's Table, they would combine it with a "pot luck" meal (called a Love Feast) which they celebrated in the various house churches or fellowship groups throughout the congregation. In the world of that day—you were either a wealthy landowner or you were a slave. So if you are going to participate in one of these meals and you happened to be a slave—you had no **"luck to pot!"** In fact, you were just barely making it on the food provided by your master. So this Love Feast actually served as a practical way for the wealthier members to provide for the needs of their poorer brothers and sisters. So just try and picture this scene in your mind. It's the Lord's Day and they are planning a Love Feast at 4:00 that afternoon. It's 3:30 and Joe who, happens to be a slave, is getting ready to leave for the meal. But his master has other plans. So Joe is stuck there for another two hours until his latest task is finished. Meanwhile the wealthier members are arriving at Bill's spacious house, greeting each other and checking out his new Jacuzzi. Finally when Bill calls them together to eat—somebody asks—**"Hey, where's Joe?"** And Bill says: **"Ah, he probably got stuck with more overtime. Well I don't know about you guys—but we can't let this food get cold can we? Too bad, Joe."**

And so they start loading *up* their plates and chugging *down* the wine. And by the time Joe and the other slaves show up later that evening, all that's left are empty plates and bottles—and burping, half-intoxicated brothers and sisters! *That is some "Love Feast!"*

I don't need to tell you that this did not go over well with God! In fact, Paul let them know that it was so upsetting to God that He had allowed some serious, even lethal health issues to afflict their congregation.

Now I know what you some of are thinking. "Nothing like that would ever happen in *our* church. Nobody's going to get drunk on Welch's Grape Juice. And even if we used Mogan David—there's not enough alcohol in these thimble-sized cups to intoxicate a hamster, let alone a person. And how do you suppose anyone could anyone gorge himself on one of these little wafers?"

So the problem was not with the Love Feast per se. If that were the problem—Paul would have said—"Just skip the "pot luck" and do the Lord's Table." This passage has less to do with what goes into our *stomachs* and more to do with what is going on in our *hearts*. What really upsets God and messes with His purpose is when we merely *receive* the elements—but *miss* the very meaning that they are intended to illustrate.

Illustration: My wife really enjoys going out to a nice restaurant for our wedding anniversary. But that's not *all* she wants. How do you suppose she'd feel if we were sitting there at a nicely set table—staring at each other—and I begin to say some very *special*

things. Like—“*I can’t believe this. I mean I really can’t believe it. It just seems too good to be true!*” And she says: “*What honey? What’s too good to be true?*” So I say: “*I just can’t believe that Jim Leyland could turn things around so quickly. The Tigers are 1 ½ games up on the White Sox and have the best record in baseball!*” And then she turns around and sees a TV screen tuned to ESPN and realizes that I have been staring at that screen the whole time we have been talking. How do you think she would feel? I wouldn’t be eating steak. I would be wearing it! That is how God feels when sit at *His* table and our *hearts* totally miss what He is after. He takes His table seriously. And so should we.

Have you ever wondered why we call it the *Lord’s Table*? Is there something sacred about the table upon which we place the elements? Not really. “Table” is a figure of speech for a meal. And there is something *very* significant about a meal. Think about it. You don’t just go to a nice restaurant and sit down at a table with a perfect stranger and eat. And you certainly don’t ask the officer who has just cited you for speeding or the boss who has just fired you to go to lunch with you. You eat with *friends*.

The Lord’s Table is about celebrating *friendship*. And that idea is nothing new. In fact, it goes all the way back to the very beginning when God put Adam and Eve on earth and spread out a Banquet table called the Garden of Eden. And He said: “*Enjoy!*” And they did. Every meal they ate was a feast of fellowship in the presence of God. So what was the *first sin*? *It was about the eating of food that God had forbidden*. When that happened—the fellowship was over and man came under God’s just judgment. But even then, God already had planned a way for that fellowship to be restored. And you already see glimpses of this in the OT.

In book of Exodus, after God has brought Israel out of Egypt and made a covenant with them on Mt. Sinai, He warns the Israelites not to get too close to the mountain lest they be struck dead because *He is holy and they are not*. There is thunder and lightening and the giving of the 10 Commandments and the ratifying of the Mosaic Covenant. Obey me and live. Disobey me and die. It is a frightening experience to be in the presence of infinite holiness. Yet in the middle of all that, it says in Exodus 24:11 about Moses and the elders of Israel: “*...and they beheld God, and they ate and drank!*” What does that mean? Because I am holy, you must not get too close to me or you will die! And yet in the midst of this terrible warning, God invites Moses and the elders to sit down and *eat with Him!* Every time a covenant was made, a sacrifice was slain and all parties ate and drank. These meals pointed out God’s desire for restored fellowship—and the reality that they were not yet paid for because they always had to be accompanied by sacrifices year after year after year.

Centuries later the Lord Jesus sat down at a table and had a meal with His disciples. There he announced that the time had come for *the sacrifice* to be paid. But this time *He* would be the sacrifice! And it would be once-for-all! For that meal was and is the celebration of the *New Covenant*. A covenant that would not only tell us what God was like—but pay the price for our sin and initiate a process that would fully restore us to fellowship with Him. The Lord’s Table more fully and completely than any OT meal signifies and looks forward to a fellowship meal that will be greater than the fellowship of Eden.

For at this meal, those who eat in God's presence are forgiven sinners, forever confirmed in righteousness, *never able to sin again!!!* In I Corinthians 11, Paul is saying that the Lord's Table is a foretaste of that great banquet that is yet to come—the **Marriage Supper of the Lamb!**

But in the closing verses, Paul makes an important application to the Corinthians then—and us today. His point is simply this. The Lord's Table is not a table for two. It's a table as big as our congregation. It's not just "Jesus and me." It certainly involves Him and me. But it includes all my brothers and sisters—regardless of how different we may be. The Corinthians forgot that. They got so focused on their self-indulgence and their socio-economic cliques that they forgot that the Lord's Table was a fellowship with each other as much as it was the with Lord! How do I know that? Just listen to Paul's warning beginning in verse 28: *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.* ²⁹ *For anyone who eats and drinks **without recognizing the body of the Lord** eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

I grew up being taught that I shouldn't take the Lord's Table if there was any unconfessed sin in my life. And while I am sympathetic with the sincere concern behind that instruction—it misses a couple of points. One is that if I have any understanding of sin at all and the implications of the warning in these and the following verses, I probably would never take the Lord's Table. I sin more than I will ever know. What if I forget to confess one of those sins? Am I in danger of God's judgment? That is really not Paul's point here. The truth is, the more I grow, the more I am amazed at how sin permeates my entire being! And it is the ever-increasing knowledge of *that sin* and *God's grace* to me through the sacrifice of Christ that far from keeping me away from the Lord's Table on Communion Sunday—actually invites me to His Table to hear Him say afresh to me—Sit down and eat. We are friends now. I have paid your debt in full. Your Judge is now your **Abba Father!**

The other point that this traditional view misses has to do with the meaning of the word, "body" I just read in verse 29. Again I grew up thinking that it was referring to the **physical body** of Christ. And while it can certainly mean that—the context points us in a different direction. Has not this entire book been about brothers and sisters disregarding other members of the body of Christ. And when Paul gets to the conclusion of his warning here, listen to what he says in verses 30-33:

³⁰ ***That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.*** ³¹ *But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.* ³² *When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.* ³³ ***So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other.***

Do you see what Paul is getting at? Their failure to wait for each other at these Love Feasts mocked the very message of the Lord's Table! Christ's sacrifice was not just about restoring fellowship with God—but with **each other!** We may not have a problem with gorging ourselves or getting drunk at the Lord's Table today, but there is a heart attitude behind the Corinthians behavior that we struggle with every bit as much. And so it is our heart attitude about Christ's body that we must examine and deal with whenever we eat at the Lord's Table.

At the root of their sinful behavior was pride and selfishness—and that shows up in other ways. Remember how Paul started out in this section? In verse 18, he writes: ***“In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you....”*** Divisions. We know them as cliques. We usually don’t recognize a clique unless we happen to be on the outside of one. But if you are like me, you find it easier to hang out with some people rather than others. People who *look* like you, *dress* like you, *think* like you, *talk* like you, vote like you, worship like you, and get excited about certain things like you do. And if they don’t, you may give them a smile on Sunday or ask how they are doing—but that is as far as it goes.

The wealthy believers looked down on their brothers and sisters in Christ who were slaves. But do you do ever look down on others? No—of course you don’t. You just scratch them off your list of people to talk to or eat out with or have in your home.

- We can’t eat out with so-and-so. Why they raise their hands in the church service! It’s obvious they are not our kind!
- I’d never have the so-and so’s over again. Remember when we had them over last time and little Jimmy threw up on our new Lazy-Boy Recliner. And then he took those purple crayons and marked up our Living Room wall. *I could have slapped his mother for just sitting there and watching him!* Scratch them off.
- Oh I can’t believe who so-and-so voted for governor? He may as well have voted for the anti-christ. Scratch him off.
- Or how about this one? I went to see the DaVinci Code because I wanted to be able to interact with my neighbors about the issues it raised. You did ***what?*** You went and threw your money away on that trashy movie?! Well I will have you know I boycotted the DaVinci Code. In fact, I even carried a protest sign at one of the local theatres. Well you’re ***stupid*** for protesting it. Oh yeh, well you’re ***worldly*** for going to see it! And we could go on and on with examples like these.

Paul says that Jesus instituted the Lord’s Table to remind us not only of His death for us—but the common bond we have with people who are in so many other ways *different* from us. Take all the differences we have right here in this Worship Center this morning. Log them in a notebook and you would run out of pages or ink or both. We are so different in so many ways And yet those of us who know Christ as Savior have One Big thing in common. Do you know what that is? ***We all deserve to go to hell!***

Did you know that is what the Gospel is all about? It’s God saying let’s take a bunch of people who on auto-pilot are hateful, mean, and selfish. And let’s make sure they come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds. People with Ph.Ds and people who never finished high school. Let’s mix up some union guys with some management guys. And let’s throw in some lawyers and doctors. And some engineers along with those high-paid professionals who tell engineers what to do. And while we are at it—let’s mix some families that do home-schooling with families that send their kids to public schools and private schools and Christian schools. Are you getting the picture? So how can you get such a diverse bunch to love on each other and really care about each other? The answer is found in what the Lord’s Table is all about. A group of people *who are different in so many ways—yet are united by one thing. We are Christ’s body!!*

So where is your heart this morning? Are you *discerning* what God is doing *in* and *through* His body to show His wisdom and power and grace and love? Do you long to see our Savior glorified before a watching world as we live out what we could never do apart from the power of the cross? If there is an unresolved issue with another brother—maybe someone in your immediate family that you have mistreated in some way this week—will you commit to resolving it as soon as possible?

Paul says: Examine your attitude toward Christ's body as you participate in this meal. And as God's Spirit convicts you of any attitudes or issues—remember that Christ died for those sins too. Pour out your heart to Him this morning—by confessing your sin to a Savior who is bigger than all your sin. And enjoy fellowshiping with Him and each other at His Table. With that in mind, let us now receive the cup.