

## **Intro**

Oftentimes we're ignorant of how our actions affect the local church. We can make choices that foster division, even when we're blind to what's happening.

It's like the father of three children who chooses not to divide the inheritance equally. Say 70% to one, 20% to another, and 10% to another. He could have good motives. One of the children is really wealthy. They don't really need the inheritance. Maybe one child has a lot of debt. They could really use the money. Maybe one child has five children. They need to save a lot for college educations. Maybe one child lived nearby and helped out more than the other two. Whatever the father's logic, they've forgotten something critical: how this decision will be perceived. One child might be led to conclude that their father cares for another child more. Another child perceives the allotments as unjust. "We're all equally his children." And what ensues? Division among the children. Maybe it's legally disputing the will. Maybe it's breaking off ties because of the pain that the father loved another sibling more. Maybe it's animosity towards the one who received the most. Now that father's gone, shouldn't the primary beneficiary rectify father's error by distributing everything equally?

What's happened is a careless decision caused unnecessary division. If only the father had considered how his decision would be received. Likewise, we encounter an episode in the Corinthian church where careless actions threatened the unity of the local church. This morning we're instructed:

**BIG IDEA: Preserve unity by engaging natural differences in a self-giving manner**

## **READ PASSAGE**

## **PRAY**

## **Body**

### **Point 1: Division is incompatible with the Lord's supper (11:17-22)**

#### **Explanation**

Paul had previously commended the Corinthians for remembering him and maintaining the apostolic traditions (1 Cor 11:2). Now he has to challenge them because division exists.

This is what Paul heard:

*For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. (11:18)*

And Paul tended to believe it:

*for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. (11:19)*

In other words, Paul explains that factions are necessary ("there must be") because the presence of factions allows for genuine ("tried and true" after testing) believers in the body to be recognized. Put another way, division in the church allows for trustworthy, reliable believers to rise up in the middle of chaos. Division can reveal sin and godliness. Verses 20-21 describe the nature of the division:

*When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. <sup>21</sup> For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. (11:20-21)*

Division played out at the Lord's supper. Celebrations of the supper that Paul found illegitimate. Evidently, full meals were being consumed, not just tiny crackers and juice cups. During these meals, some were going hungry while others were getting drunk. Paul rebukes their conduct:

*Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (11:22)*

A certain group in the church was despising the church of God (e.g., getting drunk) and humiliating the poor (e.g., gorging themselves while their poor brothers and sisters watched on with nothing to eat). They should have been coming to celebrate their common identity in Christ. Instead, the poor were reminded of their inferior status. Instead of generosity, the wealthy engaged in self-indulgence. An ironic way to celebrate the self-giving act of Christ. So Paul is outraged.

It would be as if there was a significant socioeconomic disparity in our body. And when we celebrated the Lord's supper we told everyone to bring their own meal. The wealthy would bring lobster, fillet mignon, fruit, chocolate cake, and a \$100 bottle of wine. They would get there early and make an event out of it. By the time it came to remember Christ they were gorged and drunk on wine. On the other hand, the poor arrives with nothing to eat. Starving, they have to sit back and watch while their wealthy brothers and sisters consume a feast. If you were the poor, how would you feel? Envy. Anger. Inferiority. Shame. Worthlessness. This is how the Lord's supper was celebrated in the Corinthian church.

### **Application**

This is so outrageous you probably can't comprehend how these wealthier believers felt comfortable doing this. You probably don't come to the Lord's supper to display your wealth. And you're probably not coming to the Lord's supper drunk. So what can we learn from this? **Unity in Christ should break cultural division.** This is where the Corinthians church went astray. Instead of maintaining the cultural gap between the rich and the poor, the local church should have bridged these socioeconomic differences through their common identity in Christ. Both were sinners. Both needed forgiveness. Both should have been humbled. Both should have been moved by the self-giving nature of Jesus. Unfortunately, the wealthy were not.

The Corinthians failed by maintaining a rich/poor distinction in the local church. They put their divide on display during the Lord's supper. We follow their behavior when we divide ourselves into factions. Say by wealth, by age, by education level, by race, by political convictions, by hobbies, by music preference, by dress convictions, etc. When we do we place our identity in these things. And we don't place our identity in Christ. What should our identity be? Saints. Redeemed sinners in Christ. Christians. And this common identity in Christ should unite us in such a way that the barriers that divide in the world fade away. We don't distinguish among ourselves by rich or poor. No, we see ourselves as God's people. It's a fight for identity. The rich is tempted to pride. Will I locate my identity in my wealth? The poor is tempted to despair. Will I locate my identity in my lack of material things?

The beauty of the local church is a people united in Christ in such a way that their common identity in Christ overrides their differences in the world. A healthy local church is composed of a diverse group of people that reflects the diversity of their local region. A local church that unites in Christ, despite their cultural differences, is a compelling community to the world. Today we're experiencing racial divide in America. What I'm telling you is that God is pleased to break racial barriers in the local church, just like God acted to break socioeconomic barriers in Corinth.

### **Point 2: Taking the Lord's supper carelessly brings judgment (11:23-32)**

## Explanation

Now Paul provides positive instruction. Verses 23-26 explain the meaning of the Lord's supper. The supper came from Jesus and the Corinthians were previously instructed on it (11:23). Unfortunately, the supper was misused. When we take the bread and drink the cup we are remembering what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus gave up his body for us (11:24), that is, for our sins. And Jesus' blood ratified the new covenant (11:25). Then Paul explains what we are actually doing when we celebrate the Lord's supper:

*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.* (11:26)

So the Lord's supper is both remembrance and proclamation. Unfortunately, the Corinthians weren't proclaiming Christ's death when they celebrated the supper. They were proclaiming their wealth and getting drunk. They were proclaiming self-indulgence and pride.

In verses 27-29, Paul warns about the dangers of abusing the Lord's supper. The supper can be taken in an unworthy manner that results in guilt (11:27). So self-examination is necessary before partaking of the elements (11:28). Verse 29 explains the necessity of self-examination:

*For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.* (11:29)

Verses 30-32 explain the results of taking the supper unworthily:

*many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.* (11:30)

This was avoidable. If they would have judged themselves prior to taking the supper, they wouldn't have been judged with illness and death (11:31). But God's judgment on the church was redemptive. God's intent was "so that we may not be condemned along with the world (11:32)." In other words, God disciplines his children so that they will repent. God's discipline is an act of love, for our good, and a measure intended for our holiness (Heb 12:6-11).

How does God's discipline prevent us from being condemned along with the rest of the world when Christ returns? Perhaps discipline is a means God uses to keep us from falling away. Discipline corrects us, resulting in repentance and a season of spiritual revival in our lives. Or maybe there were unbelievers in the Corinthian church. And God was afflicting them so that they might repent and be saved from the wrath to come. In this scenario, sickness would be a grace leading to salvation.

## Application

I'm sure we've all wrestled with the meaning of unworthy here. Maybe we've asked ourselves, "am I taking the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner?"

Unworthy in immediate context means taking the Lord's supper in a divisive fashion with indifference to our brothers and sisters. The Lord's supper is intended to reflect the fact that we, the Palermo Christian Church, are one local church body united in Christ:

**1 Corinthians 10:16-17** The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Taking the Lord's supper in the Corinthian way turns Christ's sacrifice on its head. Christ went to the cross to give himself for us. Some in the Corinthian church were using the supper to dishonor their poorer brethren, which created division. So we take the supper unworthily when we are spreading division in the local church. The severity of the punishment God handed out teaches us **a principle**: God takes the unity of his bride (the

church) seriously. God will send sickness and death if necessary to preserve local church unity. I'm not teaching God responds in this exact way to every occurrence of division. But it's one corrective measure he may employ.

Unworthy in the immediate context also means taking the Lord's supper in a drunken state (11:21). This is turning the Lord's supper on its head. Christ's sacrifice was self-giving whereas the Corinthians are using the supper for self-indulgence. A broader principle could be taking the Lord's supper in a cavalier and careless fashion. Another **general principle** emerges: God takes the Lord's supper seriously. It can't be treated frivolously.

So, at the very least, taking the supper unworthily means spreading division in the local church or being under the influence of inhibiting substances. Maybe there's **another principle**? Don't take the Lord's supper in a way that contradicts the self-giving sacrifice of Christ. The Corinthians violated Christ's self-giving sacrifice by humiliating the poor and by engaging in self-indulgence.

Before partaking of the Lord's supper we need to do two things: examine ourselves and discern the body (= evaluate or judge correctly what the bread represents). We examine ourselves by asking the question: have I correctly grasped Christ's body broken on the cross and its implications for my life? At the very least, unbelievers must abstain. A person who maintains their rejection of Christ hasn't correctly evaluated Christ's sacrifice. And they're living an unexamined, unrepentant life. Believers taking the bread should comprehend Christ's self-giving work on the cross and their implied need to give of themselves in the local church. It is appropriate to confess failure to be self-giving to God during the Lord's supper. Ongoing unrepentant divisiveness in the local church appears to be grounds for abstaining.

A word of caution. There are no perfect partakers. In case your conscience is overly sensitive, the supper is for sinners. Repentant sinners. Paul isn't saying you can't take the supper if you haven't eliminated all sin from your life. That would prevent all of us from participating. The Lord's supper is for sinners who've recognized their sin and repented. Sinners who've recognized that their only hope is a Savior who gave of himself on the cross, taking their place and taking their punishment. Sinners who know they're righteous not because of what they've done, but because Christ's righteousness is imputed (credited to their account) to them through faith.

Discipline can be avoided. Respect the Lord's supper. Work against division. Be self-giving like Jesus.

## **To Unbelievers**

I want to highlight a few things for you. First, the Lord's supper implies we have a sin problem. We're all separated from God because of our sins. Second, the Lord's supper reveals the nature of Jesus: he's self-giving. If you're real with yourself you know your heart. You know your sin. You know you've rejected God's law. But what I'm sharing today is that Jesus is merciful to sinful rebels. This is why he went to the cross. Jesus calls us to repent of our sins and trust in his payment for sinners, not in ourselves.

## **Point 3: Consider each other (11:33-34)**

### **Explanation**

Paul reaches his conclusion on the matter:

*So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another- <sup>34</sup> if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home- so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. (11:33-34)*

Public gatherings were likely on Sunday evenings since legalized days off didn't exist in the Roman empire. So the wealthy arrived early with plenty of food while the poorer brethren worked all day and got there late. Instead of waiting to share pot luck style, the wealthy gorged themselves before their poorer brethren arrived, leaving nothing left for the poor to eat.

Paul corrects this with two measures. First, at public meals eat at the same time (“wait for one another”). Implied is share your food. Wealthy believers, don’t gorge yourselves before your poorer brethren arrive. Instead, offer what you have for their enjoyment. Second, if you’re hungry, do your eating at home. This is directed at the wealthy. If you’re wealthy and want to enjoy an elaborate meal, do it at home. Don’t bring your private meals to congregational gatherings and thereby shame the poor who don’t enjoy the wealth you have.

### **Application**

We share the same temptation to seek our own happiness at the expense of others. At the very least, the wealthy were ignorant of how their self-indulgence affected the poor brethren among them. At worst, the rich were intentionally seeking to humiliate the poor among them. In our fallen human nature we’re tempted to feel good about ourselves because we’re not like that person. I look better, I drive a better car, I’m more educated, I have a better job, I have better kids, I have more toys. What is it for you? In other words, we feel good about ourselves because we’re better than someone else.

### **Illustration**

It’s like the school bully who beats up the smaller kid. Why do they do it? To feel tough. To feel superior. To feel good about themselves. Why does the bully hatefully tease another child? To feel good about themselves. At least I’m better than that kid.

In the local church, another attitude should prevail. One in which we intentionally consider each other. Instead of using other people to feel good about ourselves, the Christian way, the Jesus way, is compassion and self-giving.

In our sin, Jesus saw us as we were. Pitiful, miserable sinners. Ruined by our choices. Ruined by our slavery to sin. In our miserable state, he had compassion. And his compassion led him to act. He gave of himself for our good. He went to the cross to rescue us from our sins. His self-sacrifice brought us pardon. This is what the Lord’s supper pictures. Jesus also sacrificed himself to give us power to fight sin.

Listen to this new covenant promise:

**Ezekiel 36:26-27** And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

The new covenant teaches us that we can’t do this by ourselves. The good news is that God is working in us to produce the unity he desires. There’s reason for hope! Division can be overcome. When we resist the Spirit within us, the Father disciplines us for our spiritual good. God cares about unity in the church. And he tells us, “consider each other.” How much better would the Corinthian church have been if the wealthy followed Jesus’ example and considered the plight of their poorer brothers?

As we navigate the Coronavirus, and other societal pressures, we need to ask this question: how can we give of ourselves for the good of our brothers and sisters? How can we give of ourselves to eliminate barriers between us?

Ideas:

- 1) Join a small group composed of people who aren’t just like you
- 2) Invite someone over for dinner who isn’t just like you
- 3) Remind one another of your common experience in Christ, your common devotion to him, your common love for the gospel, etc.

## Conclusion

The father was within his rights to distribute the inheritance as he desired. But his decision created division. It was the right of the wealthy to eat food they could afford. But their actions created division. Again, we see the principle: give up your rights for the good of community. Paul called the wealthy to sharing instead of self-indulgence. In the Lord's supper we remember and proclaim Christ's self-giving act. Christ's self-giving act inspires us to follow his lead. **Preserve unity by engaging natural differences in a self-giving manner.** The wealthy Corinthians needed to consider their poor brothers and eliminate barriers.

**Division is incompatible with the Lord's supper.** It doesn't reflect our unity in Christ. **Taking the Lord's supper carelessly brings judgment.** God takes the unity of his bride seriously. **Consider each other.** Eliminate barriers. Avoid discipline.