

# FIXING THE FAMILY FEAST

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

We're a month removed from the holidays, and I'm sure you enjoyed the time you spent with your family.

But family get-togethers can be stressful.

Ask any police officer, and he or she will tell you family fights become more frequent around the holidays.

Researchers say 75% of us have at least one family member that annoys us. And when forced to interact with that person it doesn't always go so well. *Arguments break out... Disagreements occur... Even fights erupt...*

I read of a recent incident in Point Marion, PA.

According to his mother, George is a usually an easy-going guy. But when his daughter-in-law, who was cooking him dinner, served *baked chicken* rather than *fried chicken* it set him off. George thought the chicken was too dry. Apparently, he verbalized his complaint.

The family dinner turned violent when the daughter-in-law picked up a chair and threw it at George.

The fight spilled out onto the sidewalk in front of the house, where neighbors and police finally got involved.

Well, welcome to the dinners hosted by the Church at Corinth! When the Corinthian Christians came together to eat and share a meal the results weren't much better.

Rather than a celebration - rather than a happy convocation - their church-wide pot lucks had become a time of tension, and greed, and quarreling, and division.

This is what Paul addresses in the second half of 1 Corinthians 11... His goal is to *fix their family feast!*

Verse 17, “Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.” Paul has been addressing troubles in the Church at Corinth, and beginning in Chapter 11 he discusses problems involving their public assembly.

Their gatherings were doing more harm than good!

What an awful diagnosis for a church... “It would be better if you folks just closed the doors and disbanded.”

At their get-togethers, they needed to get it together!

Paul gets specific, “For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you...” He spoke of church divisions earlier in his letter. Chapter 1 describes how church members had camped around their favorite teachers. Some said, “I am of Paul...” Others said, “I am of Apollos...”

They had rallied around a style and an emphasis.

But here, these divisions were more fundamental. There were deep social fissures in the fellowship. Part of this stemmed from the world in which they lived...

We think of America today as class conscious - we talk of one-percenters, the middle class, people below the poverty line. Well, the ancient world saw an even greater gap between *the haves* and *the have-nots*...

The early Christians ran society’s gamut... Paul wrote to the Philippians of believers who lived in Caesar’s household -

while we know a large segment of the Church came from the ranks of the slaves.

I'm sure there were merchants and government officials in the Corinthian church with great wealth - as well as, beggars who lived from hand to mouth. These socio-economic divisions created a great gulf... *And sadly these factions were visible even in the church.*

If rich-folk had the love of God they'd give to the poor. If poor-folk had the love of God they wouldn't envy the rich. Yet in Corinth the rich were selfish, and the poor were angry... And it soured their gatherings.

Paul says, "I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." Here Paul adds an interesting note. To a degree he expected "*factions...*"

Well-meaning Christians today often bemoan the fact there's not just one church in every city. *Why do Christians have to divide under this brand and that?*

They see denominations as a really big negative.

But notice, Paul says, "*there must be factions...*" In a sense it's inevitable. The Lord allows what Paul calls "*factions*" in the church, so we can learn to differentiate between *good and bad* - or better yet, *good and best*.

The Church is a big tent. The Body of Christ is made up of many parts. This is essential because people in general come in different stripes and types. Thus, God allows for great latitude in how churches develop and in what they

emphasize... But this doesn't mean all churches are created equal - some excel over others.

And it's because there are many, the best become evident. The cream rises to the top - which benefits all churches, if they're willing to learn from others.

In essence, Paul is saying if every town had only one church, and that one church went astray, it would be the death knell of THE Church in that particular town.

It's this flexibility to have and start new church groups that has allowed orthodox Christianity to survive through the ages - *corrections get made - new movements are born...* Because Christianity is not one, large, monolithic entity, the Church has remained *self-correcting* - or better stated, *Spirit-correcting...*

Remember, the last time there was only one Church in the world, *it was Roman Catholic*. Be thankful God didn't insist on one church! This allowed the Reformers to split from Rome and recapture true Christianity.

God has worked spiritual revival throughout history. He rescues THE Church by starting new churches. When a church grows corrupt, God starts a fresh work.

I'm sure there was at least one *"faction"* in Corinth God could've use to start over if need be - but before He did, He wanted to try and bring all the factions back together. It would be a stronger witness if this Church rallied together and showed love one for another.

And the first step in doing so was to fix the feast!

He addresses how bad the situation was in verse 20, “Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk.” *This is terrible.* If what they were doing wasn’t so *diabolical*, it’d be *comical*.

Believers pushed each other aside to get to the food first. They cut in line. They ate and drank too much.

The Corinthians could’ve called themselves “**Drunk Church.**” They crashed communion, drunk as a skunk!

There’s actually, more to this story...

In the early church, believers, both rich and poor, gathered on the first day of the week for a church-wide pot-luck. Sunday was still a work-day in the pagan world, so they met in the evening after business hours.

They called their feast the **agape-feast** or **love-feast**.

“**Agape**” is the Greek word for *God’s love*. The same love the Corinthian Christians supposedly shared with each other. Yet, the Corinthians were guilty of *sloppy agape* at best. There wasn’t a lot of love at their feast.

The agape-feast was a *communal meal* followed by a *communion service*. But the way the Corinthians behaved at their meal betrayed the idea of communion.

After the greed, and selfishness, and rudeness how could they call it, “*the Lord’s Supper.*” “*Their supper*” maybe. “*A selfish supper*” yes! But if you’d dusted it for fingerprints, the Lord’s wouldn’t be anywhere near it.

There was nothing loving about their feast. When the church members met they fought for first dibs on the food. They drank too much wine. It was a free-for-all.

Imagine, the rich-Christians assigning their slaves extra chores so they could get to the feast first.

They rigged the agape-feast so they could eat what they wanted, with whom they wanted. The lower class Christians got the leftover *casserole* and *conversation*.

This was *appalling* to *Paul*... The feasts in the pagan temple to the gods of Bacchus or Aphrodite usually included drinking to excess and gorging oneself with food. In a sense these new Christians had simply carried over their pagan practices into church-life.

Paul scolds them, “**What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? 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 do not praise you.**”

They could pig out and get sauced on their own.

If all they wanted was to hang out with friends and enjoy some barbecue, they should’ve stayed at home.

The Christians at Corinth needed to realized the church’s get-togethers were far more than a meal!

When the church sponsored a pot-luck it was an opportunity to show the community their love and caring. In Christ, everyone has been elevated to the same status. These meals were a showcase to their neighbors that a social revolution had begun in Christ.

If they wanted the world to see the rich get richer and the poor get poorer they could've pointed them to any other aspect of pagan life in the ancient world.

But the church had a unique mission! The church is an oasis in the desert where everyone gets treated with the same compassion, and love, and care regardless of their social standing or economic ability.

I'll be honest, this is what bugs me a bit about our get-togethers. It's true of our One-derful Sundays, our Wednesday meals, even our other fellowships...

On Wednesday nights if we have pulled pork and banana pudding and charge \$3 a plate we get a mob.

But if it's Little Caesars for \$3 a slice you'd think we had a bomb scare... Apparently, the menu and cost are determining factors for whether people come or not...

*Where's our vision? Our understanding of the bigger picture?* When the church gathers it's never about the food, but the fellowship. The food is an excuse to gather. We're *coming and paying* to break bread together, to express our love, to enhance our unity, to be encouraged... not just to feed our face and family.

Can we call what we do a *love-feast* - or is it just a cook out, or a pot-luck?... Remember, the Corinthians were doing more harm than good when they gathered.

They were making a mockery of worship.

Their fellowship with each other was a farce.

Their agape-feast was a sham! And Paul needs to fix their family feast... In fact, that's what he does next...



Verse 23 is what every pastor should be able to say when he stands up to preach! **“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you...”** What *I give to people* should be what *I get from God...*

A pastor who just rants... and spouts off his own opinions... and delves into his own conjectures... isn't worth his space in the parking lot - let alone a free bagel in the Brook. He's a discredit to the uniform.

Before I enter this pulpit, I need to get on my face before the Lord, and seek His word for the morning. So I can say, **“*what I receive from (Him), I deliver to you...*”**

And here's what Paul delivers, **“That the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke *it* and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”** The first apostles had been there personally. They heard Jesus utter the words firsthand; then recorded them in the Gospels.

Paul was not part of that group. He heard about that night later... *either by reading the Gospels, or by talking to an apostle who was there, or maybe Jesus gave Paul a personal revelation of what He said.*

How it was delivered we don't know. But that it came directly from Jesus, Paul had no doubt. Now he wants the Corinthians to eavesdrop in on those sacred words.



Paul provides us the setting, *“on the same night in which He was betrayed...”* That speaks volumes... *The Lord's wounds were fresh, His heart was heavy.*

And that was just the beginning, before the night was done, He was bruised and beaten. The Roman executioners pluck out His beard, and crowned Him with thorns, and readied His body for a crucifixion.

And not only was Jesus faced with this daunting task of bearing the sins of the world, He went there knowing even His friends had betrayed and forsaken Him.

It was a sober, somber, serious night to say the least. How the Corinthians managed to turn it into a sloshy, gluttonous, boozy brawl, Paul could not imagine.

Once a little boy took part in his first communion.

As he looked at the tiny wafer and tiny cup he asked his dad to explain what it meant. Dad whispered, *“Son, this was Jesus' last supper.”* The little guy was puzzled.

He said, *“They sure didn't give Him much, did they?”*

Actually, what we take as the bread and cup was a small portion of a larger feast... Jews would gather on the night of the Passover to remember their salvation from Egypt. *Unleavened bread spoke of faith. Their forefathers left Egypt before the bread had time to rise.*

*And the cup spoke of their pardon.* The blood of a sacrificed lamb was spread on the header and doorposts of every Hebrew entryway. So when the Death Angel saw blood he *“passed over”* the house.

Today, Jesus is our *Passover*. When His blood is applied to our hearts, God's judgment passes over us.

At His Last Supper Jesus took the ancient symbols and assigned them new meaning. What for centuries had spoken of the body and blood of a sacrificed lamb, now represented His body and blood sacrificed for us!

And notice carefully what Paul recounts of that night, *or you might miss something wonderful...* Realize, Jesus knew what He was about to endure, when we're told, "*He took bread, and when He had given thanks...*"

*Did you hear that?* He knew the serious suffering this would cause Him, *and He did what?* "*He gave thanks!*"

Jesus was thankful for the cross; for He knew it meant our salvation. This is the point of Hebrews 12:2, "*for the joy that was set before Him, He endure the cross, despising the shame...*" For the joy of seeing you forgiven, and changed, and His... He endured!

And imagine being there, watching the Lord's own fingers break the bread as easily and as deliberately as the Romans would tear His body the next day.

In the upper room the bread was passed from person to person, each disciple tearing off a piece. It all spoke of their collaboration in the crime. Truth is, we're all guilty of breaking His body. He died for each of us.

Even as we hold the shredded bread today, let it be red-handed proof that none of us are innocent!

And hear the words that fell from the lips of our Lord, *“Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”* Over the years, the Roman Catholic Church has contrived a heresy known as *transubstantiation* - that the bread instantly, and magically changes into the literal flesh of our Lord.

Tragically, this means Jesus is crucified every time the mass is observed. He’s sacrificed again and again.

And if the sacrifice is repeated over and over, implied is that it's insufficient... *God forbid!* This is why three times in the book of Hebrews the writer says Jesus was sacrificed *“once for all”* for the sins of the world!

According to Catholic dogma when the priest repeats the words of Jesus - in Latin it’s *“hoc est corpus meum”* or *“This is my body”* - at that moment the magic occurs.

But that’s obviously not what Jesus meant. *How could it be?* The bread couldn’t be His body, if His body was standing there holding the bread in its hands.

Over the years, the detractors of transubstantiation took the priest’s incantation *“hoc est corpus”* and contracted it and turned it into a derogatory phrase, *“hocus pocus”* - a magical formula. Anything fanciful or not grounded in reality, is just a lot of *hocus pocus*.

It’s clear what Jesus meant when He said, *“This is My body.”* Listen to Him, *“do this in remembrance of Me.”* The composition of the bread doesn’t get altered either actually or spiritually. It’s a memory device.

We eat the bread *“in remembrance...”* It conjures up our memories both of that Passover night so long ago, and times in our life when we’ve received from Jesus.

Communion is like *a spiritual souvenir*. On my many trips to Israel I’ve brought home remembrances. One year I collected rocks from each site we visited. I had a heavy suitcase on the return. It was loaded with rocks.

Today, it’s not that those souvenirs have any innate value. In a sense they’re no different than the rocks in my yard. But their value is in the memories they hold.

And this is what makes the Lord’s Supper so special.

If the Corinthians had only wanted to eat bread and drink wine they could’ve done it at home. But in coming to the Lord’s Table *the bread* and *the cup* take on a different meaning. They conjure up sacred memories.

And verse 25, *“In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”* Notice, it’s the *bread* and *cup*, not *bread and wine*. Even though I am sure Jesus and His disciples drank wine the night of the Passover...

Traditionally, the Passover Seder involved wine.

But in the Gospels, *and here*, it says *“cup”* not *“wine.”* It’s as if God knew there would be occasions when it was best to drink juice not wine - or there would be believers who couldn’t afford wine, only juice.

In specifying “*cup*” over “*wine*,” Jesus gave His followers some useful latitude. The Lord’s Supper is to unify us, not further divide us over secondary issues.

Once, a pastor’s son wanted to know why his daddy was late coming home from church. His mom told him, “*Son, Dad stopped by the hospital. He’s giving blood.*”

At first, the little boy’s eyes got wide at the thought of his dad losing blood - then came a sigh of relief, “*Oh, but we know that’s just grape juice, don’t we, Mom?*”

When it comes to communion whether it’s wine, or it’s juice, or it’s cool-aid for that matter what’s important are the memories it stirs up... He spilt His blood for us.

And Jesus was careful to note the blood He shed sealed a “*new covenant.*” A covenant is an agreement. It’s the terms of a relationship. This is what His blood bought - a new relationship between you and God...

One no longer based on your performance, but upon His work on the cross, and your faith in its sufficiency.

Over the centuries various views have sought to explain the significance of communion, but to me its deepest meaning is revealed in 1 Corinthians 10...

Paul was explaining worship in the pagan temple.

Though the idol is nothing, and the meat sacrificed to it is just meat, when you come to the altar of an idol to participate in an idolatrous practice you’re inviting the demons behind that idolatry to come out and play.

And in a similar way, when we come to the Lord's Table there is a Spirit - the Holy Spirit - on the spiritual side of the Table waiting to greet us and work in us.

Communion is a unique opportunity to commune with Jesus - and receive from His Spirit what we need.

There is a 1993 painting by artist, Danny Day, titled, "Daddy's Girl." A widow and orphan visit the Vietnam Memorial on the mall in Washington DC. They're pointing at a name engraved in the polished granite.

And there's a reflection in the stone. But it's not of the little girl and her mom. It's of the husband and the father who's reaching out to his little girl and wife.

This is how we should think of communion. As we reach to touch the bread and cup, in the spiritual realm our Savior is reaching back to us. *Let Him touch you as only He can, and bring healing and forgiveness to you.*

Verse 26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup..." Notice, Jesus doesn't tell us "how often," just "as often." He leaves it up to each person, each group, and His Spirit to determine its frequency.

But Jesus does say, "as often as you eat" not "as seldom..." Implied is that communion is a practice we should welcome, and greet with great expectation.

He tells us, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." I like an old quote I once heard, "The world drinks to forget, but the Christian drinks to remember."



Communion is to be a perpetual remembrance.

Until the trumpet sounds we should remember and proclaim to the world the liberating truth of the cross.

That's **the significance of communion**, but in verse 27 Paul explains **the seriousness of communion**.

He writes, "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." And this was a verse that struck horror in my heart as a child growing up in church. It made me dread communion.

Our church and it's pastor's interpretation of verse 27 totally robbed me of my enjoyment of communion.

We were taught unless you were "**worthy**" you shouldn't take the bread and the cup. "**Worthy**" is a *adjective describing a noun* - that meant I needed to be worthy of the sacrifice of Jesus! That's impossible!

None of us are worthy of the work of Christ. If we could be worthy, Jesus would've never had to die.

Read carefully the OKJV, and it says, "**worthily.**" It's an adverb describing *how a person eats*, not a adjective describing *the eater...* The NKJV hits the nail on the head, "**whoever eats... in an unworthy manner.**"

In my childhood church unless you were a flawless Christian, or put yourself through a rigorous self-examination, and confessed all your sin on the spot - you would never want to participate in communion...



And here's why, "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 in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many *are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*" Again, I read that as a scare tactic. If I took communion without first *searching my heart and cleaning out my life* I'd get sick... or die!

*I personally never wanted to take that chance!*

Once more, here was the problem - somebody skipped grammar class, *we mistook an adverb for an adjective*. It's not that I need to be worthy to take communion, I just need to take it in a worthy manner.

If I'd just beat out a brother for the last sandwich, or cut to the head of the dessert line, or gorged myself on barbecue, or even sipped chardonnay until I was a little tipsy... If that's how I behaved at *the communal meal*; then I had no business at *the communion table*.

On our best day, no one is worthy of the body and blood of Jesus, but we can come humbly and grateful, joyful and expectant. Let's come in a worthy manner!

I love Lee Eclov's description of how we should take communion... "Maybe some morning, instead of solemnly passing these trays, we should dance for joy.

Maybe we should sing every born-again song we know. Maybe we should tell our "homecoming" stories and laugh like people who no longer fear death.

Maybe we should ask if anyone wants seconds and hold our little cups high to toast lost sisters found and dead brothers alive." I say, *we certainly should!...*

Hebrew scholar, John Duncan, taught Oriental languages at New College in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Once, during a communion service he was feeling so miserable, so personally unworthy, he let the bread and cup pass by him. He refused to take communion.

That's when he noticed a young lady who did the same. Her hands trembled. She refused to take from the trays, and instead broke down in tears. Her sins had caught up to her... The sight of the tortured young girl seemed to shock Duncan back to his right mind...

Half the church heard Duncan whisper, "Take it, lassie, take it. It's meant for sinners." And with that the Hebrew scholar and a wayward girl became one, equal in Christ - at the Lord's Table. And I love that approach to communion, "Take it, please! It's meant for sinners."

This is what the Church at Corinth had forgotten.

Communion is about celebrating the Savior, and reminding ourselves of our common denominator. It's not about acting selfishly, and feeding our factions.

Notice again, the last line in verse 29, "not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep (or are dead)."

The Greek word translated “*sleep*” in verse 29 is the word from which we get our English word “*cemetery*.” “*Cemetery*” literally means “*the sleeping place*.”

And it could mean that if these Corinthians continue to abuse “*the Lord’s body*” - that is, *His Church* - by their selfish and sinful displays at the communal meal; then God will have to get their attention! He might just have to put them on their back, to get them to look up.

Or, if these rowdy believers refuse to get it together on Earth, He might arrange an early exit to Heaven!

That’s a possible interpretation, but there’s another...

Notice the phrase, “*not discerning the Lord’s body*.” Isaiah 53:5 tells us, “*by His stripes we are healed*”

It was the sacrifice of Christ’s body that paid for our healing, and our forgiveness. The idea here might be, if we run roughshod over the meaning of communion, and don't realize His broken body and shed blood were also meant for our healing - then we'll miss out on the opportunity for wellness, and remain sick... even die.

That's why there were church members in Corinth who were weak and sick. There was healing in Christ, but the Corinthians had failed to appropriate it because of their bad attitude toward communion.

Verse 31, “*For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged*.” Alan Redpath told the story of two boys who were left at home while their parents went with him to a special meeting at their church.

When he and his hosts returned home, they found a note from the boys, “Dear Mom and Dad, we broke your vase. We are very sorry. We have put ourselves to bed without any supper. Signed Jimmy and Johnny.”

Redpath asks the question, “What did this Dad do? Drag the kids out of bed and give them a spanking? No!” In light of this verse, Redpath concludes, “They had judged themselves and judgment was disarmed.”

And this is what happens if we repent of our bad attitudes and misbehavior. There’s no need for God to discipline us if we’re proactive and repent on our own.

Verse 32, “But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.” If you know Christ - *then I know this about you* - you’re here on this Earth to be a witness!

And if you’re not one. If you’re causing more harm than good; then like any good father, God, will seek to correct you, and save you from condemnation.

The chapter closes, “Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.” Put the other guy first, even if it means you have to wait in line.

And if you’re so famished that you have to eat right now, he tells you, “But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home (or if you’re wife isn’t cooking, go to the Waffle House before church), lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.”

There were other issues to be addressed, but Paul had dealt with the most pressing... The need to love each other and treat the Lord's Supper with respect.

Recently, I ran across a list of the World's Most Expensive Foods... There's a \$100 hot dog at the Dougiedog in Vancouver. It's infused with 100 year old wine, topped with Lobster, and cooked in truffle oil...

Or the \$350 steak at Old Homestead in NYC...

Or a \$750 cupcake topped with edible gold flakes and vanilla caviar at Sweet Surrender in Las Vegas...

And of course, the \$1000 pizza served at Nino's Bellissima in NYC. It's topped with lobster and caviar.

But there isn't a dish more valuable, or more costly, than what's being served today at the Lord's Table...

The body of Jesus was broken. His blood was spilled. And before either happened, He took a piece of bread and tore it... He took a cup and poured out its contents... And amazingly, He was thankful for both!

Then He ordered us to remember - really remember.

Today, He's no longer on the cross. He's on the throne... and He's coming back. In the meantime, we're to remember why we love Him... why we follow Him... and why we're committed to doing it together!