

Proper Manners at the Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-26

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Today I want to talk with you about proper manners at the Lord's Supper. Many of us can relate to this kind of experience from junior high: You walk into the cafeteria for lunch and are immediately confronted with the complex but defined social strata of the student body. Over on one side of the room are the cool kids. They may be cool for any number of reasons: their athletic ability, their good looks, their money and cool clothes, whatever. They are at the top of the food chain, the haves to our have-nots, the winners of the DNA lottery, the bold and the beautiful.

For most of us, as we walked in, we looked at them but clearly did not rise to the cool level to sit at their table. In another section of the cafeteria, was what my school called the Grits. These were the kids who had a certain coolness because they didn't want to be cool. That was their own pursuit of a kind of cool, non-cool, which to them, was very cool. They were countercultural. They were dangerous. Their looks and attitudes were all about making it clear that they were rebelling against societal expectations and norms. They had an aura of anger, or at the very least, they knew how to kill you and were likely carrying some homemade device that would easily do the trick. Rumors circulated about the nefarious activities they were often involved in. Between those two groups were the hoi polloi, the bourgeois, the forgettable and non-noteworthy average Joes and Janes. Not cool enough to sit on the one side and not non-cool enough to sit on the other side. Looking around this room today, I am pretty sure many of you sat mostly in the middle of the cafeteria; along with all the other members of the band, chess club, and the student council treasurer.

Long before we could define a sociological strata or the tragedy of a caste system, we felt them and conformed to them, and resented them, but could do absolutely nothing to change them. We also know the feeling of being looked down upon; the sense of pretension from others who view themselves as better or higher or more significant than us. That is the world we live in.

What would it mean if those same dynamics were evident in the church? What if partaking in the Lord's Supper felt kind of like that junior high cafeteria? Rich over here. Poor over there. Leaders in this area. Hoi Polloi in another. Of all the problems in the church at Corinth, why would snobbery at the Lord's Supper make Paul the most upset? This happens all the time, doesn't it? What is there about the Lord's Supper that, inspired by the Holy Spirit, generates some of the harshest language in the whole Bible?

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. (1 Corinthians 11:17-22)

The city of Corinth was a microcosm of our own culture. There were huge disparities in wealth and social status. There were wealthy merchants from around the world and slaves who were viewed as possessions while having none. The Church at Corinth reflected the disparities of the Corinthian culture. There were some rich, some middle class, and many poor. Can that create attitude problems in a church? After 11 chapters, are any of us surprised at anything going on in this church? Surely they couldn't find a way to mess up the Lord's Supper, could they?

First of all, the Lord's Supper is one of two ordinances given to us by the Apostles, the other being baptism. Both of them are symbolic and both of them are extremely significant. The Lord's Supper was established by Jesus with His disciples in the Upper Room the night before His crucifixion. This is recorded by all four gospels in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and John 13. Jesus used the Jewish Passover meal celebration to show how He was about to fulfill all that Passover symbolized and established a new Passover, a new feast, a new remembrance, using the simple elements of bread and wine. The bread symbolizing His body broken on the cross and the cup symbolizing His blood. He told them, "Do this in remembrance of me."

The Early Church's Agape Feast

To understand the problem, we have to know a little bit about the first century practice of the Lord's Supper. We see a glimpse in the early church's practice of the Lord's Supper in Acts 2, *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.* (Acts 2:46-47a)

The breaking of bread is the remembrance service Jesus commanded. But it wasn't just bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper, they also ate social meals together, *They received their food with glad and generous hearts.* A common meal, eaten together, concluded with the Lord's Supper.

This common meal evolved into what was known as the Agape Meal, or love feast. For the whole first century at least, the Lord's Supper was taken as a part of a meal Christians ate together. This would serve two functions; one was the obvious function of satisfying hunger. The other was to promote a sense of brotherhood and the familial ties of Christian love. There is something about eating a meal with people that mysteriously connects you. It's a shared experience. Shared time. Shared food and drink. It's talking about matters of life and faith and ministry over that meal, and of course, it's also fun.

This week, I was at a meal with several couples from our church and tried out a few of my standard jokes on them. One went over well. One I had to explain, which probably turned out funnier because it was such a failure. These are special times for Christians. Eating and drinking and fellowshiping are rich and wonderful Christian experiences and we should all be actively initiating these times with one another.

Let me walk you through the Agape Meal in the first century. There would be a known time and place for the meal. We tend to assume 21st century church norms. They met at the church building, right? They did it during a worship service, right? There were no church buildings and they had the Lord's Supper during a meal, not a service. So where did they meet? They met in the homes of the wealthier members. The Mediterranean climate allowed for portions of wealthier homes to be inside and also outside; more like Florida homes than ours. The interior portion of the home had a *Triclinium*, essentially a dining room. These

rooms were too small for everyone, so these meals were in the outdoor courtyard sections of the homes.

The Agape Meal was essentially a church potluck, or as they call them in southern Indiana, pitch-ins. Everyone who could, would bring dishes of food for the meal. This obviously meant that the richer members brought more and the poor members less or none at all. The food would be assembled and distributed, a meal was eaten together, and then they would conclude with the Lord's Supper. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? You would think it would be hard to mess that up. Most churches can pull off a potluck. Certainly Corinth could get the Agape meal right, couldn't they? No.

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. (Verse 17)

Their gatherings were doing more harm than good. Really, how can you mess up the Lord's Supper so bad that it would be better not to do it at all? In verse 20 Paul says, *When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.* Did you get that? There is a way to take the Lord's Supper without actually taking the Lord's Supper. By that I take it to mean that there is no spiritual benefit to it, Jesus doesn't show up, and it's merely a ritual empty of any power.

How to Take the Lord's Supper Without Taking the Lord's Supper

With divisiveness – 11:18-19

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

The Greek word for divisions is *schismata*... sound like an English word you know? Schism. Faction. Division. There is irony in the language. *When you come together, I hear you are not really together.* Ever been together with people when you can tell you're not really together? You're in the same room but not of the same mind or heart? You are near each other in proximity, but relationally you are miles apart. Sound like your last family reunion?

And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. (Verse 19) Not all division is bad. Sometimes conflict is necessary to show who is acting in the Spirit and who is in the flesh. The word genuine here means "approved." Approved by God. Jesus said that by their fruit you shall know them. The story of church history is one of strain and conflict, much of it doctrinal, but also ecclesiastical and relational. Some of it was necessary to reveal those who were approved by God and those who were not.

Schismata. Division. They were together but they weren't together any more than a junior high cafeteria is together or unified. Why is Paul so upset that a church or individual Christians would take the Lord's Supper with *schismata*?

It has to do with what the Lord's Supper means. *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (Verse 26)* What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper? It means the gospel. It means the redemptive story of Jesus' passion. It means the unity of the one body of Christ with the Risen Christ. To come to the table with *schismata* is to say one thing *spiritually* AND say the opposite of that *relationally*. There is one table. One Lord. One body. One bread. One cup. The Lord's Supper is sometimes called communion because we are spiritually communing with our Lord AND we

are communing with one another. At least we are supposed to. It is about love, not hate. Forgiveness, not grudges. My sin, not everyone else's. Humility, not pride.

A *schismata* church can't have the Lord's Supper because Jesus doesn't show up for a lie. Paul is going to say later that this kind of partaking in an unworthy manner has caused some of them to be ill and even some of them to die (verse 30). God takes the Table and our attitude at it very seriously. If we understood this, fewer of us would actually partake when the communion trays are passed. As an example, how many Christian married couples partake in communion sitting next to each other but their relationship is anything but unified? It would be better to let it pass.

The Lord's Supper is a spiritual meal and a spiritual checkup. It's a reminder of how things are between me and God and how they ought to be between me and others. I have not always fulfilled this myself. Some time ago I was actually leading communion and in the tenderness of holding the cup and bread, I thought of a relationship that was broken and I had done little to repair it. My conscience was stirred and after the service I ran them down as they were leaving in their car. I am very glad I did. The Lord's Supper is such a precious gift to the church. Our partaking is spiritually saying that we affirm that we are one with Christ and to the degree we can, one with each other. If that is not the case, don't partake. Do what you can to make peace, and then participate.

With snobbery - The actual problem in Corinth

Here was the real issue. Remember how I told you the rich hosted the events and brought most of the food? Look at verse 21: *For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.* Here is what was happening. The rich were bringing their food for the Agape Meal. Before the others (the poorer folk) would arrive, they were going through the potluck line and filling their plates and bellies. They were likely sitting privately in the triclinium while the rest of the church gathered in the courtyard looking at the special people at the cool table. Does this sound like junior high cafeteria? They were hoarding and gorging while the rest of the church was hungry and thirsty. For many in the church, this was likely the only decent meal they had all week. Yet the rich, who ate well every day, had no regard for them.

One goes hungry, another gets drunk – he's showing the disparity. One has so little, another has so much. How did the others feel? Humiliated (Verse 22). It humiliated them and created a *schismata* within the church. Paul calls it "despising" the church of God.

I don't know if you've ever flown in first class. I have a few times, but I've never paid for it. Sometimes they overbook and you get an upgrade. I have to admit, it's very nice. In those rare moments in first class, something happens, especially as the rest of the passengers file by to their seats in the back. Inside the thought is there, *Yep, that's right, I'm in first class! Move along people. Don't stare. I know you wish you were me but you're not.* What's so sad is that I don't deserve to be there! It's like a miracle when it happens.

Who of us deserves a seat at the Lord's Supper? You can't buy your way there. You can't earn your way there. You can't talk your way there. A seat at the Lord's Table is a gift of God's grace; the ticket price is infinite righteousness. Anybody got that? Every time I take the bread and the cup it is a reminder that my place at this table was paid for by Christ and provided for me by His generosity. Are there first class seats in the church? No. The Lord's Supper refreshes that truth in our hearts and keeps the celebration alive in the congregation. *For as often as you eat of this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes.* (Verse 26).

It's about Him and what He did for us.

- *Jesus' generosity* – He became poor to make others rich (2 Corinthians 8:9)
- *Jesus' humility* – He made Himself nothing (Philippians 2:7)
- *Jesus' sacrifice* – By His wounds we are healed (1 Peter 2:24)
- *Jesus' love for his neighbor* (Mark 1:31)

All of this is from Him which levels all the normal social categories. As it is said, *The ground is level at the cross. Or There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28) There's no way any of us can think we're any more deserving of the spiritual benefits of the gospel than anyone else, which keeps us from looking our noses down on anyone else and thinking we're sitting at the cool table. There's no place for wealth snobbery in the church. There are other forms of it. Denominational snobbery. "Me, I'm a Presbyterian. That's right." Or theological snobbery, "My system is better than yours, therefore I am better than you." Or how about local church snobbery? "Where do I go? Bethel Church. That's right."

What do we have that we have not received? The gospel of Jesus humbles us as we view ourselves as sinners saved by grace, and opens our hearts to our fellow believers who are sinners just like us, which positions us to forgive one another, serve one another, love one another, and let them through the potluck line first.

If there's anything that proves that to us, it is when we take the bread representing His body broken and the cup representing His blood shed, and personalize the truth they represent by eating and drinking. The Lord's Supper calls us to display the truth that we eat in the bread and drink with the cup. Relational unity. Gospel oneness. Christian charity. Those are proper manners when we eat supper at the Lord's Table.

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