

Unworthy Eating and Drinking
1 Corinthians 11:20-34

Turn to 1 Cor 11 please. What is unworthy eating and drinking? What's the difference between unworthy eating and drinking, and worthy eating and drinking?

Before we get 1 Cor 11, I want to make two requests of those who lead our Lord's Supper every Sunday, requests about the actual eating and drinking. One, could the leader have an empty chair ready near the front, facing the front, and sit on that chair to eat and drink? That would be better than standing at the front facing us and eating and drinking. Sit for a couple of minutes and eat and drink with us.

Two, please give more time for eating and drinking, before we read the closing prayer. I don't want to rush my eating and drinking, and I am rarely finished when the praying begins. Let's not rush that part, people. We're not swallowing a pill. We're at the Lord's Table, my brothers and sisters. The whole thing is so quick as it is. Let's slow down. Thank you.

We get a lot done in 75 minutes in our Sunday worship. And we don't want to rush things and squeeze them in. That is no way to act when we are together before the Throne. That means, as a general rule, keep it simple.

These have nothing to do with 1 Cor 11, except that they are both about the Lord's Supper.

Meeting on the Lord's Day in Corinth

In the Roman world, Sunday was a regular working day. The churches met Sunday after work, because Sunday was the first day of the week, and the Lord rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Every Sunday was Easter celebration.

And a community meal was always a part of this, and it will have been something like our potluck. So they had a meal together, and in some way the Lord's Supper was bound up with this meal, and they will also have had what we call a "church service" in that evening.

There will have been people in every church that were barely getting enough food day to day. If people like that can have one real good meal a week, and can count on taking home some leftovers, that would be a big help. It would be an important part of how the poorer people managed, and how the wealthier ones could help the poor ones on a regular basis.

These poorer people would bring very little to the church meal, and that would be understood by the church as a whole. It was supposed to work like that.

What Was Wrong with The Corinthian Supper? 1 Cor 11:20-22, 33-34

Vv 20-22 *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. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes 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 praise you? Certainly not in this matter!*

Vv33-34 *So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.*

What was wrong? 7 points: (1) You're not eating the Lord's Supper, it's just your own supper.
(2) One person stays hungry and another has too much.
(3) Could you not eat or drink in your home?
(4) In your eating, you despise the church of God.
(5) You humiliate those who have nothing.
(6) Verse 33 – So when you gather to eat, wait for one another.
(7) If you're too hungry to wait, eat at home, so you don't bring judgement on yourselves.

It's not hard to figure out. The wealthier people could get off work earlier, and they were the ones who brought almost all of the food. They were there by 5 or 5:30 (guessing). The poorer people, the slaves and the minimum wage workers, didn't get off work until 7. And many of them lived hand to mouth, so they could bring next to nothing to this meal.

The wealthier people got hungry with all that good food, and they got tired of waiting, so they basically ate it all up. When the poor people got there later, there was little left, they did not even get a decent meal out of it, and went home hungry.

Unworthy Eating and Drinking – 1 Cor 11:27-29

Picture this: you're watching a group of people eating bread and drinking wine. They take some bread in their hands, put it in their mouth, chew it and swallow. They take a cup in their hands, put it to their mouth, take a drink, swallow, and put the cup down.

And what you just saw is insulting, it is offensive. It disrespectful eating and drinking. What are they insulting and offending? They are insulting and offending the meal, the body of the Lord and the blood of the Lord. The way they are eating and drinking is unworthy of the food and the meal. It's unworthy of the Lord, and of his body and blood.

How exactly are they insulting and offending the Lord's body and blood? By only caring about their own supper. By some eating and drinking when others are going hungry. It is unworthy eating and drinking because they despise the church body, because they shame the church's poor.

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. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, the church, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

I skipped out the famous verses entirely, “I received from the Lord what I passed on to you, that on the night he was betrayed he took bread,” etc. Paul writes that out so they will understand the importance of this meal. Their selfish way of eating and drinking is unworthy of the Lord’s body and blood.

Examine yourselves as you eat and drink, make sure your eating and drinking shows respect to the Lord, which means respect for the your church, the body of Christ.

It’s not clear how the potluck meal and the Lord’s Supper part were related to each other. Paul says, “in the same way, after supper he took the cup.” So at least the cup in memory of the Lord happened after the meal, even though they had been drinking wine during the meal.

I think the commemorative part happened afterward, once everyone was there, but there was not enough left for a proper meal. It seems the poor did get some bread and wine. But it is not clear. In any case, the general meal and the memorial meal are closely tied to each other. As in our usual communion meal on the first Sunday of the month.

The Mistake: Unworthy Believers

In the more pietistic part of our Christian background, “unworthy” was about the person eating, not they way they ate and drank. So we had to examine ourselves to make sure we had been living in a worthy way, before we could eat and drink.

If we had not been living worthy lives, if there was sin, it was better to not eat and drink at all, than to eat and drink judgement on ourselves. This is a terrible teaching, as if we have to be worthy of the sacrifice of Christ before we can celebrate it. But I was taught this, and I’ve had a believer beside me refuse bread and cup because he had done bad things that week.

Believers with sensitive consciences dreaded the Lord’s Supper because of course they were unworthy, and we felt guilty afterward because we ate and drank unworthily, and had just brought judgement on ourselves.

I have a commentary on 1 Corinthians that was published 125 years ago, and it says plainly what I taught here today. And that writer was not doing anything new. What you’ve heard here today has been common knowledge for a long time among those who studied 1 Corinthians. But our Christian tradition does not value that kind of study, so this sad error goes on year after year.

And our enemy, the accuser, knows very well what 1 Corinthians 11 is really about. But if he can mislead us and deceive us, if he accuse us and make us squirm with guilt and fear, he will do so, and he does.

The Lord's Judgement 1 Cor 11:30-32

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

The Corinthian church was hands down the most misbehaving church in the NT. If there was a church like that in Kleefeld, down the road from us, we would probably want to break off all ties with them, and not associate with them at all. We would probably not want to have church in the park with a church like that.

They were divided into cliques, they had sexual immorality ongoing in the church, but they let it go, they were cheating each other in business, and suing each other in court, some of them were attending meals in celebration of pagan gods, some of them denied the resurrection, they thought the gift of tongues was the only gift that mattered, and so on.

Did those things mean they should not have the Lord's Supper? Not at all. Did any of those things bring the Lord's discipline on them? No. Only one thing brought the Lord's discipline on them, and that was how they treated each other at the Lord's Supper, those points we began with.

Never Avoid the Lord's Supper because You are a Sinner

Never. In Matthew's account of the Last Supper, Jesus takes the cup and says, "Drink this, all of you, this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Drink this, all of you. Why? Because you need this covenant, and you need your sins forgiven."

The Lord's Supper is a great place to repent and receive forgiveness. Drink the cup of forgiveness! None of us is worthy, ever, and that is the very reason we eat and drink. We read these words sometimes:

"Let us come to His table!

Not because we are strong, but because we are weak.

Let us come, not because our goodness gives us the right to come,

But because we need help and mercy.

Let us come because Jesus loved us, and gave himself for us.

Let us come because he invites us to eat and drink, and he offers us himself.

He wants to meet us at this table. Come."

I don't know who wrote that, but I'm sure it intends to correct the kind of teaching I grew up with. Never avoid the Lord's Supper because you are a sinner.

What Troubles the Lord?

What one thing did the Corinthians do that brought the Lord's discipline on them? They pursued their own desires and appetites without concern for their church body, not caring about the good of the whole congregation. They actually did that a lot, but what took the cake, as far as the Lord was concerned, was when they did it at his meal, in memory of his death. That was the last straw.

What if the Lord cares less about our private spiritual successes and failures than we thought, and he cared more about our relationship to our congregation than we thought? We find that hard to believe, but it could be true.

One way or the other, we are all sinners. And that's why we eat the bread, the body that was given for us, and that's why we drink the covenant cup, the cup of forgiveness. Thank you Lord. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you for the people long ago who studied 1 Corinthians carefully enough to figure out what eating unworthily was about. Thank you for your Spirit, who led them to write it down, and get it published. Thank you for these books that freed me and others from some unhappy teaching.

Lord, keep our eyes on our whole congregation, and not on our own desires and appetites. I need help here, as do we all. We are not better than they were. Thank you for the right things that happen among us; may they increase.

Thank you for the bread and the cup, Lord, thank you for feeding us with yourself. Lead us with your Spirit in how we actually observe this, so that our celebration honours you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.