

Take-Aways for Small Group Leaders to Consider

As you prepare to study this text, you must remember the historical context in which this letter was written. Churches were not built yet and the Lord's Supper (aka the Eucharist) would have been a full meal that believers took together. This meal would have symbolized the community's oneness. Sadly, instead of encouraging oneness, the meal had become a time where the lower class Christians were shamed by the upper class Christians.

Richard Hays poignantly describes the scenario,

“This scenario no doubt seems strange to most readers in our time. It is hard for us to imagine how the wealthier Christians could possibly suppose such overt snubbing of the poor to be justified. In the context of first-century Greco-Roman culture, however, the Corinthians probably understood their actions as entirely normal. In order to appreciate this point, we need to know more about the concrete setting of the meal and about the conventions for dinner parties in the Corinthians' cultural environment.

We must bear in mind that the Christian gatherings were held in private homes, not in large public spaces. Archaeological study of Roman houses from this period has shown that the dining room (triclinium) of a typical villa could accommodate only nine persons, who would recline at the table for the meal. Other guests would have to sit or stand in the atrium, which might have provided space for another thirty to forty people. The host of such a gathering would, of course, be one of the wealthier members of the community. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the host's higher-status friends would be invited to dine in the triclinium, while lower status members of the church (such as freedmen and slaves) would be placed in the larger space outside.

Furthermore, under such conditions it was unusual for the higher status guests in the dining room to be served better food and wine than the other guests- just as first-class passengers on an airliner receive much better food and service than others on the same plane. A number of surviving texts from this period testify to this custom among the Romans. For example, Pliny the Younger describes his experience of dining as a guest of a man who boasted of the 'elegant economy' of his hospitality: *'the best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded), and the third for his and our freedmen.'* (Letters 2.6)

This is the sort of hospitality that was being provided to the church by the wealthier Corinthian Christians. They may have considered themselves patrons of the community because they were hosting the gatherings, but they were continuing to observe status distinctions in the fare that was served. Indeed, verses 21-22 suggest that, while consuming their own meals, they may have provided no food at all for 'those who have nothing'.¹

Verses 11:27-28

- These verses have often been taken out of context to mean that the Lord's supper is a call for self-examination and a call for intense introspection. This, however, is a mistaken interpretation in this context. In this letter Paul is addressing the affluent Corinthians who are consuming their own food and therefore shaming the poorer Christians. Thus, to eat the meal "unworthily" means to eat food in such a manner that causes division. Therefore, Paul's call for "self-examination" in v. 28 is not an invitation to probe into one's innermost thought life but to instead examine how one's actions at the Lord's Supper is affecting the body of Christ, one's own brothers and sisters.²

¹ Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians, Interpretation Series*, 195-196

² Hays, 200

CONVERSATION GUIDE

1. Take 5-10 minutes to discuss this week's sermon, *Remember Who You Are*, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

INTRO TO THE TEXT

Paul is once again reprimanding the Corinthian church; they just can't seem to get it right. The reprimand at hand concerns the Lord's Supper. Instead of treating it as a holy meal celebrating the new covenant of God's people in unity with one another, the people have turned it into a party fest for the wealthy. They have chosen to overindulge themselves on food and wine, and, to make matters worse, the rich have left out the poor when partaking in these binge fests. Paul is outraged and cannot believe that the people have once again segregated themselves, this time on the basis of social status.

READ 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

ANALYZE THE TEXT

1. In verses 17-22, what is Paul's main concern about the Corinthians' conduct?
2. Read v. 23-26. Beyond our pastors saying them before communion, what is the significance of these verses?
3. Discuss v. 27. What does Paul mean based on surrounding verses? [Read the Take-away section for help].
4. What do we learn about God in contrast to man in this passage?

A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER

We must remember upon that when Paul refers to the Lord's Supper at Corinth, he is not talking about a ritual celebrated in a church; there would not have been formal church buildings. Instead, our Christian brothers and sisters would have met in homes (aka house churches) to worship and share a full meal together to remember Christ's sacrifice on the cross (see Take-away's page for more info).

Three-fold message of this section:

1. The Lord's Supper (Eucharist) must first express the community's unity as the new covenant people of God. Division and conflicts are not what Christ died for; instead, the cross represents

2. a new order and a new unity amongst Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. Note, Paul is NOT calling for radical economic equality in this passage. In fact, he tells the rich that within their own walls, they can behave according to the norms of their social status and eat whatever they want. Instead, he calls for equality among people as they meet and fellowship together as a representation of Christ's work of unity and equality on the cross.
3. The Lord's Supper focuses the church's memory on the death of Jesus who freely gave his life for all people. The sharing of the bread and cup is a public proclamation that we accept this gift. Thus, sharing of a meal signifies that we will live sacrificially, pursuing others' interests above our own, just as Christ exemplified through the cross.
4. The Lord's supper is an occasion for us to ponder God's judgment. Remember, in this section of scripture, "judgment" is not about every little sin we have committed (see take-away section). Instead "judgment" is based on ignoring the poorer brothers and sisters in the church: aka not caring for the least of these who are part of our own spiritual family.

APPLY

1. How have you felt unity and/or tension among all social classes at FPC when we have fellowshiped together? How can we begin to break any mentioned barriers?
2. Have you ever thought of the Lord's Supper as not merely a private act of piety but also a time to come together over a common meal? Explain.
3. The invitation to the table calls us to live in love and charity with our neighbors [specifically our Christian neighbors]. How can we, as a community, work towards loving poorer brothers and sisters within our own community as well as the big "C" church community across Houston and the world?

MEMORIZE 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

FURTHER READING: Richard Hays, *First Corinthians, Interpretation series*.