

Prayers

Opening prayer

Glory be to You, Lord Jesus, for Your greatness is far beyond our senses. You have come into this world in Sovereign power to bring us the salvation we so desperately need. You have swept through this world in Your Holy Spirit and have cleansed us with gentleness and power. You will lead us gloriously to do the work of the Gospel every day of our lives, and we give You praise and glory for everything You do. Glory be to You, Lord Jesus: ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Listen to the news on your local radio, and pray about the issues that are raised, both local and national. Pray even while the news broadcast is going out.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for countries in turmoil.** *Pray for Libya, and pray for the many different people in that country who are fighting for freedom, but who are still divided amongst themselves. Pray that the military action from outside forces will soon come to an end as its objectives are reached*
- *Give thanks to God for the safety of your home, and pray for those who do not have such safety, for whatever reason*
- *Over the weekend, London has experienced civil unrest amongst young people. Pray for cities in your own country and ask the Lord to work in power there to overcome Satan's grip on those who have become disaffected from society*

Meditation

I rejoice to see Your faithfulness each morning, O my God,
for that is when the pattern of my day is set

I can either let the day be focussed on myself and all I do
on all that lies ahead, on all that must be done

Or I can turn my gaze away self and bring it back to You
You, who sees the bigger picture, more than I can see

You are always waiting there to lead me absolutely
through the feelings and emotions of the day

Where I would merely stumble through my work, unthinkingly
With little sight, little faith, little depth or clarity

O Lord my God, I worship You; all things are in Your hands breadth,
and You set my day quite perfectly within Your span

And though I do not see much further than my hands,
I turn to You to see my day come into focus, gloriously!

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 11:17-22

¹⁷ In giving you these next instructions, however, I cannot praise you, because your meetings do more harm than good! ¹⁸ To begin with, I hear that when you gather together as a church,

there are divisions among you. Now I believe this part of what you say,¹⁹ for there are bound to be factions among you so that what is true may stand out!²⁰ So when you gather together, it is not with the intention of eating the Lord's supper,²¹ because while eating, each of you goes ahead with your own supper! One goes hungry and another gets drunk!²² What! Do you not have homes in which to eat and drink? Do you despise the church of God and humiliate the poor? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? I certainly do not!

Review

After the intensity of yesterday's study, in which we were caught up in the intricate details of women's headwear and the relationship of the sexes, this passage appears more straightforward! However, it serves as an introduction to one of the most important sections of 1 Corinthians, which deals with the 'Lord's Supper' (11:17-34). The bulk of Paul's message about this comes in the next two readings (11:23-26, 11:27-34), but all this is set against the background of our reading today. Here, Paul denounces the Corinthians for coming together to celebrate the Lord's Supper in a dishonourable way, by parading their divisions and, to put it bluntly, by being greedy!

At the beginning of this important section of 1 Corinthians, we must pause to look at the term, 'the Lord's Supper'. Today, Christians use a wide range of terms to describe this meal, which was first celebrated by Jesus Christ (Matt 26:26-28); amongst these are 'Communion', 'the Eucharist', and 'Mass'. In this study, we will use the term 'the Lord's Supper' simply because this is how the meal is described in our passage. Admittedly, this phraseology is not found anywhere else in Scripture, but it is found here in this crucial passage, and using it at least helps us to understand Paul's message to the Corinthian church.

At the beginning, Paul expresses his concern about what was going on in Corinth (11:17), and in particular, the effect of the church's divisions (11:18,19). Indeed, he was furious about the way in which the issue of 'status' had infiltrated the church, and people were clearly segregated when they came together for the Lord's Supper (11:19-21). He was at least content that some within the church stood for what was true; he believed they would stand out among the various groups and factions that made up the church.

Our passage then paints a rather unhappy scenario. The church is gathered for the meal of the 'Lord's Supper', but as Paul says, it is scandalously divided to the point that each group within the church appears to have its own meal (11:21)! Think of what it would mean if people who believed different things in your own church shared communion separately! Paul also says that some had a hearty meal and were getting drunk (11:21)! Moreover, those who were in a position to have plenty were unwilling to share their prosperity with others in the church who had little! Some were going away from the Lord's Supper hungry, and although it is a point Paul could have made if he wanted to, he does not mean 'spiritually' hungry! We must conclude that this meal was not the symbolic one we conduct today, it was celebrated as a substantial meal, more like the Jewish Passover. It was certainly not a small liturgy tacked on to the end of worship.

In all this, Paul constantly speaks of the church as a 'gathering' of God's people (11:18), indeed the word church means 'gathering' (the meaning of the Greek word 'ecclesia'). This significant word is used here because Paul regarded all God's people as one united 'body of Christ' working together; this is something that Paul writes about further on in 1 Corinthians, in chapter 12. Meanwhile, the fact was that the Corinthian church was not gathered in the fullest sense of the word, it was divided, and Paul condemns this. He says that in their divisions, the Corinthians despised the church of God (11:22). This is strong language, and it seems that he wrote in order to shock the Corinthians into repentance. Paul was also horrified at the effect of all this upon those who were most in need (11:21,22). It is not often that we read about the poor in Paul's letters, so his comments here confirm the great Biblical theme of God's love for the poor.

Why is it that the Lord's Supper at Corinth became debased, causing Paul to write in this way? The fact is that in every age, any feature of church life will be debased if God's people allow something of themselves and their own opinions to infiltrate this fundamental tradition of the church. The Lord's Supper is not merely a church tradition that can be manipulated according to cultural or personal preferences. Unlike such things as worship styles, pews, church architecture or church management, the Lord's Supper is something that Jesus has personally handed down to us to celebrate his death and resurrection. It is unique, and at its best, we share it in the simplest way possible consistent with Christ's original intention, and part of this was that His followers share it in unity. Paul therefore told the Corinthians to put their divisions aside so that their worship, and their Lord's Supper, would be acceptable to God.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the text
- Divisions and the church (11:17-19)

- The Lord's Supper in Corinth (11:20,21)
- Paul's outrage (11:22)

Notes on the translation of the text

V18 'Now I believe this part of what you say.'

The Greek has simply '*I believe this part*', and most Bible versions translate this as something like this; '*I believe this in part ...*'. Unfortunately, this makes little sense. If you remember that Paul was writing in response to a list of things put to him, then it makes more sense to translate the verse as I have done, as if Paul is saying that he can understand this point in the report.

V19 'there are bound to be factions among you so that what is true may stand out!'

This is a difficult verse to translate. Some Bible versions have quite different translations because they interpret the Greek phrase '*what is true*' as referring not to doctrine but to people; they say '*those who are approved*', as if amongst the Corinthians there were some who regarded themselves as 'approved'. This would be a rather esoteric point and it is simpler to interpret the Greek as I have done.

V20 'it is not with the intention of eating the Lord's supper'

In Greek, the phrase 'it is not with the intention of ...' is contained within two words 'it is not to ...' (most Bible versions simply say 'it is not to eat the Lord's supper'). However, the phrase strongly implies intention, so I have therefore opted to express this intention within the translation. This has the merit of making Paul's point far more understandable.

Going Deeper

The passage is in fact connected with what Paul said previously (11:1-16). Our deeper study explores this (11:17-19), and there is some confusion amongst scholars about the meaning of verse 19 in particular. The setting for the Lord's Supper is the next subject (11:20,21), and the study is completed with a look at Paul's extraordinary outburst of two exclamations and four questions in verse 22. This whole passage will give us the right perspective for the essential study of our next passage, coming tomorrow.

Divisions and the church (11:17-19)

The beginning of this passage reminds us of verse 2 in chapter 11. Here, Paul says that he commends the Corinthians for maintaining a tradition, and it seems he meant the tradition of joint ministry between men and women that challenged social convention. We should not forget this now that we read Paul defending church 'tradition' here in this passage. There is a tendency today for people to treat almost all aspects of church life as dispensable, but Paul rejects this outright. He presents the Lord's Supper as something vitally important for the life of the church, celebrating the reality of Jesus presence amongst His people, whatever the details of what was said at the meal of what is eaten. This message had been lost, and Paul refused to commend the Corinthian church for bringing the Lord's Supper into disrepute.

Verse 18 brings back into view the problem of divisions within the church that dominated the early part of 1 Corinthians. In the first four chapters, Paul writes extensively about the divisions (Greek 'schismata' – see 1 Cor 1:10) within the church. Largely, this showed itself in a 'party spirit' at Corinth with people meeting together but splitting off according to the apostles they favoured. Here, in verse 19, Paul speaks about 'factions' created by these divisions, a word far more poignant than any used so far. The Greek for 'factions' is 'hairesis', meaning 'religious party', 'false party', or 'false teaching'. If you read the word aloud, you will find that it is the word we know in English as 'heresy'. It would be many decades before the church began to define church doctrine and tradition, and the word heresy was of course used to define the opposite to tradition. We do not use this word much today, but perhaps it is one we should be willing to consider using, in an attempt to be clear about the traditions and teaching of the church.

Returning to this passage, Paul had obviously heard a report about what happened in Corinth when the church celebrated the Lord's Supper. By saying '*... and I believe this part of what you say, (11:18)*' Paul indicates that he was inclined to believe what he had been told because it corroborated what he had heard about the divisions within the church. Verse 19 is a difficult verse, and I quote below a standard translation of this from the NIV alongside my own translation, so that you can compare the two.

For there are bound to be factions among you so that what is truly stand out! (11:19, translation above)

No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. (11:19 – NIV)

If you read the NIV version, you will see that this suggests that Paul welcomed some kind of division if it showed the difference between who was Godly and who was not. My version suggests something quite different, which is that Paul was welcoming at least the fact that the divisions allowed the truth to stand out. Though Paul is not suddenly simply accepting the fact of divisions in the church, it is just that his desire for the truth to be known is greater than his concern about divisions. This is a very difficult verse to translate, as I have mentioned above, but there is no phrase 'God's approval' within the Greek text, this is an assumption made by the NIV, and there is no difficulty in translating the verse in the way I suggest.

The Lord's Supper in Corinth (11:20,21)

In the wealthier regions of Corinth, such as the part of the city called 'Craneion', a number of Roman villas are preserved to this day, dating from the first century. These grand dwellings have large rooms attached that were used for communal meals to celebrate the gods, and it is likely that wealthier Christians offered such rooms for the Christian community to celebrate in the shared 'Lord's Supper'. Typically, a large couch or 'triclinium' was set at the head of the room, capable of seating 9 reclining guests, or perhaps 12 seated. Other benches or stone seats around the room were capable of seating between 30 and 50 guests, with any overflow accommodated in an adjacent, partly covered courtyard called an 'atrium'. The church in the early part of the first century had no buildings, and was dependent upon the generosity of its wealthier members for the use of such rooms, given the importance attached to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It also seems that in the celebratory meal, all were expected to bring food, and it was shared. This would have been a natural consequence of what we read in Acts 2:46 and 4:32f.

Perhaps in this setting, the hosts invited their own friends (from the wealthy of the city) to share the triclinium with them at the head of the feast. Perhaps ordinary folks arrived after those who had leisure had already occupied the best seats, or perhaps those who were slaves arrived late and with no personal contribution to the meal. Whatever actually happened, Paul does not say, and we can easily imagine the kind of human behaviour that would turn such an event into a fractious melee, psychologically, if not physically.

It seems that everything Paul says in this passage of Scripture mitigates against celebrating the Lord's Supper in the form of a great feast. To do so would make the celebration contradict the teachings of Jesus about care for the poor (Matt 5:1f.), servanthood (Matt 19:27f.), and sharing (John 13:1f.). A grand meal was certainly no suitable setting for a celebration of the Lord's death and resurrection! Perhaps we have made the Lord's Supper into such a ritualised event, by sharing minute pieces of bread and tiny drinking sips of wine, that we are now unable to learn the real lessons of sharing and caring a full meal would enforce. When I first taught at Bible College, all meals were shared at table, and the students had to wait on each other, by rota. When a new Principal took office, this was all changed to a 'cafeteria style' service, and on hearing about it, the old Principal dryly remarked; 'the students will forget how to serve each other!' He was not a New Testament scholar, but it was a remark typical of the theology of Paul.

Paul's outrage (11:22)

The scene hardly bears thinking about, with drunkenness and poverty side by side at the Lord's Supper when the celebratory meal was intended to be an appealing expression of true Christian love and sharing! However, we should perhaps be careful, for Paul may have been exaggerating to make a point, or at least, this is what scholars and commentators have said for generations. Personally, however, I do not agree with this. I reckon Paul was genuinely shocked by the reports he had heard, and wanted to confront the Corinthians with the truth about what they were doing. His words would hardly have been accepted if the Christians at Corinth could turn round and say 'it's never been that bad!' But Paul wanted the church there to heed what he said and change for the better.

Paul began this last verse with an exclamation, 'What!' and he ended it with the conclusion, 'I give you no praise for this!' In this way, he completed what he had to say on the matter of the Corinthians bad habits at the Lord's Supper (see 11:17). In between these exclamations, he asked four questions;

'do you not have homes in which to eat and drink?'

'do you treat the church of God with contempt and humiliate those who have nothing?'

'what should I say to you?'

'should I commend you?'

The first two questions challenged the Corinthians to consider the nature of what they were doing in coming together for the Lord's Supper, and also their responsibilities to one another as God's people. The third and fourth questions challenged the Corinthians to consider whether what they were doing was right or wrong. It was a straight challenge. Paul sounds like a schoolmaster who turns to his class and says, 'Think! What are you doing!' The Corinthians needed such a challenge, as perhaps we all do from time to time.

Discipleship

Application

- The Lord's Supper, a simple meal to remember Christ
- The Lord's Supper, the possibilities
- The Lord's supper, the future possibilities?

The Lord's Supper, a simple meal to remember Christ

Most might think this passage does not leave us with any understanding of the Lord's Supper from which we can now learn. However, I think you would be wrong. Is there an argument for saying that the highly ritualised celebration of the Lord's Supper as Communion, Eucharist, or Mass, has lost the genuine sense of sharing around a meal table that early Christians assumed when they shared this 'sacrament'? We must remember that the first 'Lord's Supper' was Jesus 'Last Supper'. In both cases what happened was not part of a meal, but a whole meal, within which bread was broken and wine drunk specially and symbolically, as a remembrance of Christ and a celebration of new life.

The Lord's Supper, the possibilities

Also, perhaps it is time to break the division between the 'agape' meal, which many Christians celebrate freely in the form of a meal (or a 'love feast') and the ritualised 'Lord's Supper'. Can we allow God's people to share Jesus presence in their midst in wider ways than simply in their own church buildings and with their own leaders, now separated from each other by the formal divisions of the church over centuries? There are vast numbers of Christians who would have no difficulty in sharing the Lord's Supper in ways entirely consistent with scriptural tradition and yet freed from the cultural conditioning that has reduced this sacrament to a little understood (though highly meaningful) church ritual. It started out as a meal with real food, celebrating Jesus' real presence; and the bread celebrated His broken body and the wine celebrated the new life of God's Spirit. The Corinthians may have messed up the picture somewhat, become drunk and failed to feed the poor; but their faults and foibles enabled Paul to write about what they did, and in the process, remind us that what we do now is not necessarily the 'tradition of the church'.

The Lord's supper, the future possibilities?

Our passage today only gives us a glimpse into the actual life of the Corinthian church, but it is telling. I often wonder what will happen in future years if people read about what we do when we worship and celebrate the 'Lord's Supper'. What will they think of us, and our devotion to the Lord? Will we be shown up as somewhat ignorant of our failings? Will God's church move on and rediscover ways of celebrating the 'Lord's Supper' in ways that reflect the true mission of the church and also its unity? We will have to see, but the best thing we can do is to do our best to maintain our integrity towards each other and our Lord in all matters of church tradition and discipleship.

Questions for groups

1. To what extent do church divisions surface today within the worship life of the church and in the Lord's Supper?
2. How do the social differences between people in your church manifest themselves, and does this create problems?
3. What does the Lord's Supper mean to you, and how do you think it is best celebrated today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Attend the celebration of the 'Lord's Supper' in a different church to normal. You may find this hard, because you may not be allowed to take part, and this can be hard. However, it may help you gain a bigger understanding of God's blessings through this sacrament.*
- *Pray for all who find the sacrament of the 'Lord's Supper' difficult to follow and difficult to understand. Ask the Holy Spirit to give them understanding and a desire to receive the things of God.*

Final Prayer

Praise God for the abundant wealth He gives us, whether it be wealth of faith, wealth of love, wealth of possessions or wealth of happiness. May each of us be so blessed that God's love overflows from us, and may we be as generous to other people as God has been to us. AMEN
