

1Corinthians 11:17-22 "Will Your Love Stand the Test?"

1 Corinthians 11:17-22 ¹⁷ But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. ¹⁹ For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. ²⁰ Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, ²¹ for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? 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 will not praise you.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is one which is designed to get the attention of these believers and exhort them to seek to love God above all and their neighbor as themselves. And in the process of doing this Paul mentions specific examples of how they have fallen short, and what they need to do to correct the problems.

He would love to be able to praise them and use them as model Christians for the world, but that doesn't seem to be where they are right now. In trying to give them a glimmer of hope he does praise them for the way in which they remembered him and the teachings he brought them.

1CO 11:2 "I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you."

But remembering and doing are meant to work together. And some of these people were not doers of the word and had deceived themselves into thinking that simply belonging to the church or simply professing faith in Christ was enough to demonstrate that they were the real thing, when in fact, as James points out, "faith without works is dead."

And the kind of works Paul is looking for among these believers in Corinth are the kind of works which are demonstrated in love for one another, and not the divisions which were being caused because of selfish motives.

The Thessalonians, on the other hand, were believers who did not just talk about their faith, but showed their faith, and Paul recognizes this in their lives as they submit to the Spirit.

1TH 1:3 "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul would love to be able to write the same message to the Corinthians, but that was not to be.

1CO 11:17 "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good."

Imagine being on the receiving end of this personal letter from an apostle of Jesus Christ. And, as Paul begins this section on the type of worship that was going on in Corinth, he points out that in the following directives there is no praise, only correction.

This is not to suggest that Paul has given up on these Corinthians, only that he loves them enough not to sugar coat their problem. He gives them the truth in love. And that is how the word of God must be taught. And that is how Paul disciplines other leaders including Timothy.

2TI 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

This Corinthian church was not equipped for every good work; not because they had not heard the truth, but because they were not willing to walk in that truth. And when we're not willing to walk in the truth of God's word then the Lord will get our attention by pointing us back to His word and exhorting us to get back to the basics of our faith.

This is what is happening here in our text. Look at what Paul says at the end of verse 17; "for your meetings do more harm than good."

What meetings are being spoken of here by Paul? The inference here is those times in which they come together as the church in Corinth. They meet together specifically as the body of Christ.

Now, consider what this means. Paul is saying that under the present circumstances when they come together as the church in Corinth, they are actually doing more harm than good. In other words, they would be better off if they didn't get together at all as a church if they were going to persist in division.

But in what ways are they doing more harm than good? Well, when they come together they actually harm each other's faith because they are not coming together to encourage each other; they come together for selfish reasons. The writer of Hebrews tells us one of the main reasons for coming together as the church.

HEB 10:23-24 "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

The operative phrase here is "one another." If we come to church only to get, or only to be entertained, or only to make ourselves feel good for having come, then it makes it quite difficult to have the attitude of reaching out to others for their good, and to encourage them toward love and good deeds.

This is a major reason for meeting with the saints; to strengthen each other to be better equipped for the work that Christ has given us. And Paul is saying to these Corinthians that under the circumstances they'd be better off not meeting together if they have no intention of meeting to encourage one another.

Now, is Paul seriously saying that if the circumstances are not perfect, and if the attitudes of everyone's heart is not perfect that it would be better not coming to church? No. What he's suggesting here is that since they are doing more harm than good when they get together they need to actively seek how they might now do good as opposed to harming each other. Paul is exhorting them to change their attitudes as they humble themselves before the Lord.

This is meant to shame them into reality in the sense that, under the present circumstances, they are not found worthy to be given the privilege to represent Christ as the church in Corinth. And Paul is saying that that needs to change for the sake of Christ.

The following directive or the following instruction he is about to give is an apostolic order, if you will, coming directly from the throne of God as Jesus Christ Himself gives them this directive from the hand of His servant, Paul.

1CO 11:18-19 "In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval."

Again, notice that Paul makes the distinction of them practicing their faith individually, outside of public gatherings as the church,

with gatherings where they come together as the church representing Christ.

This doesn't mean they are any less the church when they don't meet publicly, it simply means that Paul is making a point of how they act publicly under circumstances which need to change.

But he points out where their problems surface. It all stems from the divisions they have among each other. And here Paul is about to make a difference in the kinds of divisions which are unhealthy, as well as the divisions which are actually healthy for the church.

He begins in verse 18 with the unhealthy divisions. He uses the Greek word *schisma* which is where we get our English word schism, meaning a division or dissension.

We saw some of these divisions being spoken of early on in this letter.

1CO 1:11-13 "My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?"

But evidently, the divisions Paul speaks of in chapter 11 are a bit different from the ones he mentions in chapter 1, which he believed on the basis of credible witnesses. But in chapter 11 he makes the comment, "and to some extent I believe it", as it regards this next allegation.

There may have been rumors and other allegations he may have heard second hand from other sources, but under the circumstances he believes some of what he has heard based on their track record of divisions in other areas.

These divisions may have involved false teachings, they may have involved patterns of behavior which were harmful to the church, but were being promoted among some of the people in this church.

But then he addresses those in the church who have divided themselves out from such practices and such teachings and says in verse 19, "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval."

The NASB and the NKJV puts it this way in verse 19, "For there must also be factions among you..."

What does Paul mean by this?

Paul is making the point that there are times in the lives of believers where trials and tests, which are designed to actually strengthen the body of Christ, prove the faith of God's people.

The phrase "there have to be", or "there must be", as it connects the thought "there have to be" differences or factions, is one word in the Greek. It's simply *dei* and it means, it is necessary. Paul is saying that it is necessary for these factions to arise to determine who will stand and who will crumble, or as Paul puts it, "to show which of you have God's approval."

Which of you will pass the test? These tests are necessary, but they are not meant to be failed by followers of Christ who must grow through them and come out the other side refined by the fire. What has been viewed by some in the church, as an unfortunate circumstance or division, Paul would say, is being used by God to see who is serious about staying the course.

I like the way John MacArthur puts it. "The worldliness and fleshly disobedience of those who caused the divisions would expose and highlight the love, harmony, and spirituality of those who are approved."

The ones approved are the ones who have divided themselves out from following after the fleshly desires, and instead have chosen Christ's way. In this way, they have chosen the better and have been approved in their faith to flee from wickedness and hold tight to the truth and love of Christ.

The same can be found in the church today, where many believers must make a choice between bad teaching and practice, as it's found in popular movements, where the choice must be made to divide ourselves out of those things which will be harmful to the church and the name of Christ.

It has nothing to do with trying to thwart the unity of the church if we are part of a division which is meant to prove the truth. Unity at the expense of truth is not unity but compromise. And so, to unite ourselves with others who name the name of Christ, while they deny the gospel, for example, in their teachings and in their practice, is to unite ourselves to falsehood.

And in that way, those type of meetings, in the long run, do more harm than good since they promote a false gospel under a false unity. And under those circumstances, to divide out from that is

actually a passing of the test and showing ourselves approved of God as we choose truth over emotion and falsehood.

And so, Paul commends many of these believers in Corinth and encourages them to continue to walk with Christ in the love and truth of the Savior, despite how some in the church come off as the spiritual leaders, when in practice they prove themselves to have failed the test.

Some of these professing believers in Corinth have failed the test in the way they divided themselves out of the body by disassociating themselves from other believers in the body. And they can actually do this even though they may still come to church and participate in things the church is doing.

Paul has a specific thing in mind with his exhortation in our text. And, of all things, it involves the very act of remembering the death and burial of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His subsequent resurrection from the dead; the Lord's Supper.

This is the supper that was instituted the night Jesus would be betrayed and the very night before He would be hanged on a cross for the penalty of our sins.

This supper sums up everything Jesus embodied as our Savior as He showed how the bread and wine would speak of His body being broken and His blood being spilled for us. And some of these professing Christians in Corinth were making a mockery of it.

It's no wonder Paul was incensed at such an attitude of only considering themselves and not the One who died for their sin, and then demonstrating that selfish attitude by not considering fellow brothers and sisters in Christ around the table of the Lord.

1CO 11:20-21 "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk."

"When you come together." This was a coming together as the church of Jesus Christ. It was a coming together with the express purpose of worshipping the Lord. And yet, what Paul points out here is that despite what they thought it was, it was anything but a time of worshipping the Lord.

What they thought was a meal leading up to the Lord's Supper, Paul would essentially call a non-supper as it related to the worshipping of Jesus Christ.

They thought they were being spiritual and yet it was nothing short of carnality. You talk about the deceitfulness of the human heart. But this is exactly what was taking place precisely because they were not doers of the word, only hearers.

In fact, let's read that passage found in James and we'll see that being deceived is the direct result of not being doers.

JAM 1:22-25 "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - he will be blessed in what he does."

Being a hearer only; that is one who gains knowledge from God, and yet is not willing to obey and walk after God according to His word, has essentially opened himself up to deception. And the irony is that they don't see it as deception. But isn't that how deception works?

We are less likely to succumb to deception if we have our eyes opened to the truth and then walk in that truth by the power of the Spirit.

This, by the way, will also give us the ability to discern what is true and what is false. Our spirits will bear witness to the difference, but only as we have studied the truth and then applied that truth in our daily lives and see the Lord use us as He blesses us in what we do for Him.

But getting back to our text. "What Paul desires in the church is unity that can be achieved only in the context of love. He knows that the factions in the Corinthian church seriously undermine genuine love among God's people." (Simon J. Kistemaker)

1CO 11:21-22 "...for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 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 for this? Certainly not!"

What Paul is referring to here is something which is not normally practiced in our culture as it was in the culture of his day. In fact, what Paul is alluding to is a feast prior to the church coming together to worship the Lord in a communion which involved the elements of bread and wine.

After the day of Pentecost we see this practice among believers in Jerusalem where they gathered together to fellowship and worship the Lord.

ACT 2:46-47 "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

The breaking of bread initially involved an actual meal. The meal was referred to as a love feast since it was more of fellowship and eating together with the saints. We see this being referred to in both Jude's and Peter's letters to the saints warning them of false teachers in their midst.

JUD 1:12 "These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm -shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted -twice dead."

2PE 2:13 "They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you."

What was taking place at Corinth were these love feasts. But instead of love being shed abroad, only selfishness was being promoted. And in the context of these feasts or church fellowships where they came together to eat with each other Paul says, "each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk."

The church was always meant to be the one place where class envy and status in life did not make a difference in the way we treated each other because of our all being one in Christ. Whether slave or free, whether a common laborer or businessman, we are all one in Christ.

But even in the church there is the temptation to treat people differently if they have money or status. And the Lord's half-brother, James, speaks about this very thing.

JAM 2:1-4 "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

Where is the love in love feasts if this is the attitude people are taking among each other? And evidently this was happening in Corinth. These love feasts had each person bringing food to the feast that was meant to be shared. Imagine a poor person having nothing to bring, and maybe those who could bring something got tired of sharing with them.

One way to overcome that was to bring your own food and eat before the poor got there, or go off to another part of the house to eat with your friends while leaving others out. And so, you might have had people staying in their own little cliques as they ostracized other believers who didn't fit into their clique.

And so, the charge that one remains hungry while another gets drunk speaks of such division even among those with whom you eat. They couldn't even get together for a meal let alone the work of Christ.

1CO 11:22 "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 for this? Certainly not!"

Having homes to eat and drink in suggests that the gathering of the saints outside of their homes together is what is going on. And Paul is intimating that if you are going to humiliate those who gather with the church, then just stay home.

What a rebuke. But it is a rebuke that is meant to get their attention as to what the real purpose of Christian fellowship is all about; and that is to create an environment of growth, discipleship and encouragement so as to better serve and worship our Lord and Savior.

What our Lord Jesus has essentially said in this letter to those who are better off, financially, is that when you despise the least of mine, you despise me as the head of my church. And therefore, you despise the church.

PRO 17:5 "He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker;..."

As much as Paul wants to praise the believers in Corinth he will not praise them for this. This letter was meant to get their attention and have them begin doing those things and practicing those things which would show the true love of Christ.

You can't fake the love of Christ for very long. And Paul certainly didn't want these Corinthian believers simply going through the motions of loving their neighbors. But unless we see people the way God sees people, we will have a tendency not to show mercy and grace.

JAM 2:5 "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"

If we are rich in faith, we will be rich in love because we will understand that our faith and our salvation is a gift which neither the rich or the poor deserve. And as we learn to appreciate such an eternal gift our desire will be to encourage others in their faith and to give it away to the world as we give them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me end with Paul's encouragement to the Romans which is meant for our edification as well.

ROM 15:5-7 "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."