

Barriers to Community: *Divisions*

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 7, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ Last week we started a new series for the month of August called *Barriers to Community*. We'll be looking at select passages from 1-2 Corinthians. I think it makes sense to camp in Corinthians because, if you're familiar the books, you know the Corinthian church dealt with a whole assortment of divisions. **They faced plenty of barriers to experiencing and manifesting true gospel community.**
 - ▶ The Corinthian church was a sharply divided church, and they couldn't have been more than a few years old. Paul planted the church on his second missionary journey, and he wrote 1 Corinthians on his third journey a few years later. Apparently it didn't take long for division to set in, for barriers to community to be erected.

- ❖ How did that happen? And so quickly! The answer is straightforward. It's because the Corinthian church was made up of people, and people are sinners, and sinners deal with sin, and that sin is what causes division and disunity in a body of people. That shouldn't be any surprise to us. We experience it all the time.
 - ▶ **The world is divided along so many different lines.** We're divided by ethnicities, by nationalities, by rich vs. poor, by the political left vs. right, by the young vs. old. **And sadly, these same divisions are perpetuated within the church, within a congregation like ours.** And add to that, divisions over minor points of theology and over our preferences of worship style or ministry methods. Divisions are everywhere!

- ❖ Now I think it's important to address the elephant in the room. **Namely, isn't it a bit ironic that a Chinese-American pastor in a Chinese church in America is talking about the problem of divisions in the church?** Aren't we part of the problem? Aren't we perpetuating ethnic divisions?
 - ▶ There's not a simple answer. Because you could argue Yes and No. **In some ways, we do perpetuate worldly divisions, but (this might surprise you) I don't have in mind our identity as a Chinese church.** In its purest form, an immigrant, language-specific church in America – whether a Chinese church, Korean church, Vietnamese church, Nepali church, Ethiopian church, Somalian church, Brazilian church, Dutch church, etc. – **these immigrant churches are not necessarily perpetuating worldly divisions but rather, in their purest form, they're pursuing world missions.**

- ❖ The nations are coming to us and settling in American neighborhoods. **And immigrant churches, at their best, are trying to contextualize gospel preaching and gospel community like good missionaries.** If you go to Asia today to do missions, to plant a church, what language are you going to preach in? English? What illustrations are you going to use? Football analogies? What songs are you going to sing? Chris Tomlin?
 - ▶ No, the missional mindset says you have to contextualize. No one really denies that anymore. **So if we agree that you shouldn't impose Western-contextualized ways of doing church on new churches started in China, then why would we do that to immigrant Chinese churches here?**

- ❖ Because the only real difference between *new* Chinese immigrants here in Houston and Chinese people there in China is geography. The same language and culture barriers are found in both. So if we want to make disciples of Jesus among the unchurched Chinese immigrant community in Houston, then Chinese churches are best suited for the task.
- ❖ **So I don't think we're perpetuating worldly divisions simply by being a Chinese church as long as new immigrant outreach is front and center.** And it *is* on the Chinese side. But on the English side – where we're not focused specifically on Chinese immigrants – we do need to ask if we've put up barriers, if we're complicit in perpetuating worldly divisions.
 - ▶ That's why the answer is Yes and No. No, when it comes to the unique mission of our church to reach new immigrants. **But potentially Yes. We perpetuate worldly divisions when we gather in a congregation like ours and, by the way we assemble, we signal our differences with other Christians rather than our unity.** And I'm not just talking about ethnicity. Our divisions can be economic. They can be generational. Perpetuating social class distinctions, age and life stage distinctions.
- ❖ But Paul is warning in today's passage that for a church that's about to celebrate the Lord's Supper (like we will this morning), we could be eating and drinking judgment on ourselves if we willfully tolerate and perpetuate divisions. That's the point he's driving home in our text. **The Lord's Supper is a condemning ordinance if partaken in an unworthy manner.**
 - ▶ But Paul also affirms that the Supper, as Jesus intended it, is the antidote to our divisiveness. **It's a unifying ordinance where the gospel – that every Christian needs and every Christian equally receives – is remembered and proclaimed.** I was to show that to you in our passage. I've broken down our text into four sections.

The Divisive Problem over the Supper

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the divisive problem in the Corinthian church that manifested itself during their celebration of the Lord's Supper. We need to understand the problem in its historical context, so we can better identify similar problems in our own context.
 - ▶ In vv17-22, Paul is calling out the Corinthians once again for their divisiveness. At the beginning of the chapter in v2 he was commending them for how they maintained the traditions and practices that he taught them. **But when it comes to the tradition of celebrating the Lord's Supper, he has more to condemn than to commend.**
- ❖ Read with me starting in v17, *"¹⁷But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you."*
 - ▶ The word for "come together" (*sunerchomai*) by itself just refers to any gathering, any assembly. That's why in v18 Paul qualifies what kind of gathering of Christians he has in mind – *"when you come together as a church."*

- ❖ So Christians can come together as many different things. Two Christians can come together as accountability partners. Five can come together as a prayer group. Ten can come together as a small group. **But none of these “coming together” necessarily constitutes a church.** Where two or three gather in Christ’s name he’s certainly there as he promised (Mt. 18:20), but that doesn’t necessarily make it a church.
- ❖ **One of the defining marks of a coming together of Christians that would make it a church is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.** Along with baptism, these two ordinances effectively draw lines around a body of believers and proclaim, *“This is a church! These people are disciples of Jesus set apart from the world to be his witnesses.”*
 - ▶ The point is that coming together with other believers as a small group or a campus fellowship or an office bible study is wonderful, but it’s no replacement for coming together as a church where you regularly partake of the Supper with fellow members.
- ❖ **But for the Corinthians, their issue wasn’t the failure to come together as a church, but the failure to truly be the church (God’s new humanity) when they did come together.** Paul says in v18 when you come together, I hear there are divisions among you.
 - ▶ He goes on to say, *“And I believe it in part, ¹⁹for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”* **He acknowledges the inevitability of their divisiveness because that’s how true believers are sifted from false ones.** Divisions are painful and the result of sin, but God can even use sinful divisions to accomplish his good purposes. And in this case, divisions have the net effect of revealing those who are genuine, who genuinely belong to Christ.
- ❖ Now how were the Corinthians actually being divisive and what did it have to do with the Lord’s Supper? Keep reading in v20, *“²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. ²¹For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.”*
 - ▶ **You have to understand that the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper differently. They observed it with an actual meal, which was common in antiquity.** Meals were a part of worship. In pagan temples, you’d sacrifice food to an idol and then feast on it. These Corinthian believers were coming from pagan backgrounds and were use to eating a meal as part of their worship (Cf. 10:16-22; see also Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11).
- ❖ Of course in our modern society, where worship services are planned down to the minute and last for an hour and a half at most, it’s not feasible to include an entire meal when we observe the Supper. So we’ve kept the elements of bread and wine, but sadly we’ve lost the symbolism found in sharing a meal together. But the Corinthians were in a worse position. **They had kept the meal together, but they had lost the symbolism and meaning behind the bread and the wine.**

- ❖ Paul says in v20 that you call what you do the Lord's Supper but it's really just your own supper. He says in v21 that you're eating your own meal and not the Lord's. **What was most likely happening is that wealthy church members were eating their own lavish, sumptuous meals in the presence of poor church members and simply not sharing.**
 - ▶ So at the same Supper, one goes hungry and another gets drunk. The focus is not on drunkenness per se, but more on the glaring disparity between being stuffed over a big meal while your brother or sister is next to you starving.
 - Look at v22, "*22What! 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.*"

- ❖ Commentators point out in ancient Greco-Roman homes where early churches gathered, there was a smaller dining room (triclinium) which could only fit about 9-12 guest. Everyone else would have to eat in the larger atrium that could accommodate 30-50 on average.
 - ▶ So some speculate that what was happening in Corinth was that the church was privileging their wealthier members by inviting them to sit in the dining room where better food and more food was served.

- ❖ Paul is flabbergasted. He says you rich members have plenty of opportunity in our own homes to fill your bellies with food and drink. When you come together as a church to eat the Lord's Supper, you should see that as an opportunity to fill the belly of your hungry brothers and sisters. But instead you humiliate them.
 - ▶ **He's appalled at how they've maintained and perpetuated the same social divisions that you find in the world.** When the rich of this world despise or marginalize the poor, you might get be upset but you're hardly surprised. But if affluent Christians are behaving the same way towards less affluent believers, then we've got a really serious problem on our hands.

- ❖ **Mahatma Gandhi** shared in his autobiography that when he was a student in England, he read the four Gospels. He was impressed by Christ and seriously considered converting to Christianity because it seemed to offer a real solution to the divisive caste system in Indian society. Those born in a higher caste were assigned greater dignity and worth than those of a lower caste. Gandhi despised this system, and he saw real hope in the gospel.
 - ▶ But he describes one Sunday when he tried to attend a church service. Upon entering the sanctuary, he was stopped by ushers who refused to seat him, suggesting that he go worship with his own people. He left and never returned, thinking to himself, "*If Christians have caste differences also, then I might as well remain a Hindu.*"

- ❖ So how are we doing? Some might say we don't seem to have any divisions between rich and poor in our church. They won't deny that we have other divisions to deal with, but this passage doesn't seem to apply to us directly. But think about it: **Maybe the reason we don't detect any division between rich and poor in this church is because there aren't many poor believers in this church.**

- ❖ **And could that be because we give off a vibe that says you have to be university-educated, white-collared, and relatively affluent to feel at home here?** That would be just as bad. I hope for the day when we actually wrestle with the specific tension found in chapter 11. Because that'll at least mean we'll have at that point greater socio-economic diversity represented in our congregation. That's a start.

The Intended Purpose of the Supper

- ❖ Now after calling them out and accusing their celebration of not truly being the Lord's Supper but just their own, Paul goes on to recount the intended purpose of the Supper found in the words of institution handed down from Jesus Himself. This is our second point.
- ❖ Starting in v23, he repeats the words of the Lord spoken on the eve of his betrayal. On that night Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover meal. It was to commemorate God's deliverance of them from the bondage of slavery in Egypt.
 - ▶ **In a typical Passover meal, the head of the house would break bread and serve wine as the family would feast on the Passover lamb together.** It celebrates the lamb that was slain on the eve of the first Passover when divine judgment visited every home exacting punishment, the death of the firstborn son.
- ❖ But for every family that heeded the Word of the Lord, who sacrificed a spotless lamb and covered their doorposts with its blood – the judgment of God would pass over that household because a substitute had died in their place (Ex. 12).
 - ▶ Ever since that day, it became a tradition once a year for the people of Israel to break the bread, serve the wine, and feast on the Passover lamb – all in remembrance of their deliverance from slavery and, more importantly, from the judgment of God.
- ❖ The significance here was not lost on Paul. **In the words of institution there's a notable absence of any mention of the typical Passover lamb.** That's not to say they didn't eat one that night, but on that night, the cooked lamb no longer was the focal point of the celebration.
 - ▶ **On that night, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world was standing before them.** Jesus identified the bread with his body given for us. And he called the wine his blood, which seals the new covenant between God and man.
 - This new covenant is the basis for a new relationship with God available to all peoples without respect to your goodness or your badness, without a view to your gender, your ethnicity, your nationality, your status or station in life. **A saving relationship with God is now available to all of us.**
- ❖ That's because all of us need the same salvation that God offers. Everyone is guilty of sin and divine judgment hangs over every head. **But the blood of the true and better Passover Lamb is sufficient to cover everyone who believes.** If you're covered by the blood, the judgment of God has passed over you. That's the good news of the gospel.
 - ▶ Friend, if you're not confident that you're covered by the blood, then ask in faith for God to cover you and let his judgment pass over you. That's the gospel.

- ❖ That's the saving message that's communicated every time we celebrate the Supper. That's what Paul says in v26, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" Every time you eat the bread and drink the cup, you do it in remembrance of Jesus and his death that delivered you.
- ❖ There's this place in Tolkien's *The Return of the King*, where Pippin is standing at the gates of Minas Tirith and the dreaded Witch King arrives and he's about to destroy the city and everyone in it. All the men of Gondor flee and the only one left is Gandalf riding on Shadowfax his trusty steed. But at that exact moment, off in the distance, Pippin hears the horns of the Rohirrim. The riders of Rohan have come to the rescue!
 - ▶ The book goes on to say that, from that day forth, Pippin could never hear a horn off in the distance without bursting into tears. Because the horn would remind him of that moment of rescue. It would trigger that memory of deliverance.¹
- ❖ That is why we celebrate the Supper. To awaken that memory, so that it moves us once again to greater love for Jesus, greater gratitude, and greater faith. That's the intended purpose.
 - ▶ But for the Corinthians, their conduct at the Table was a gross contradiction. **The Supper is meant to proclaim the gospel – the good news of our Savior who was rich but became poor so we might become rich (spiritually) by his poverty** (2 Cor. 8:9). But instead if the way you treat the Supper proclaims class distinctions – if it perpetuates the differences between the *haves* and *have-nots* – then you're denying the gospel and not truly celebrating the Lord's Supper.
- ❖ **The Supper is suppose to be a unifying and identity-shaping ordinance.** For every believer who partakes, it reminds us that we are one because we all share, at our core, the identity of slaves who have been mercifully delivered from the bondage of sin.
 - ▶ But these Corinthians – who were selfishly gorging themselves and humiliating the less affluent – were maintaining their old identities as the elite of Roman society. And in so doing, they were profaning the Supper and the point of Jesus' death, which was to create in himself a new people of God where we are all one in Christ.

The Potential Judgment of the Supper

- ❖ God will not take such blasphemy lightly. This leads to our third point, the potential judgment of the Supper. That's the tragic irony here: **They're trying to celebrate a meal intended to proclaim a death that frees them from guilt, but instead their conduct at the meal is compounding guilt for the very death they're trying to commemorate.** That's what Paul means when he says in v27, "*Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.*"

¹ I read this illustration in Tim Keller's sermon, *Practicing the Christian Life: The Supper*, preached on May 4, 2008.

- ❖ He goes on to warn the Corinthians that they're eating and drinking judgment on themselves, and that a recent string of illnesses and deaths is a manifestation of divine judgment against the whole church. Look at v30, "³⁰*That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.* ³¹*But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.* ³²*But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.*"
- ❖ Now there's no suggestion here of a one-to-one correlation of being divisive and getting sick or dying. But there is a general connection. **According to Paul, it's not unreasonable or unjust of God to discipline his church with temporal punishments.** Now we know we're not dealing with a loss of eternal salvation since v32 says the purpose of the discipline is so we won't be condemned with the non-believing world. This is a wake-up call for them.
 - ▶ And lest we end up in a state of spiritual slumber and be in need of a similar wake-up call, Paul tells us what to do in v28, "²⁸*Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.* ²⁹*For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*"
- ❖ **These verses have caused no little amount of anxiety among Christians who fear they might take the Supper in an unworthy manner and end up eating and drinking judgment on themselves.** I remember when I was in the youth group there was an upperclassman that would sometimes refrain from Communion, and his reasoning was because he felt like he has sinned so much that he'd be eating and drinking in an "unworthy manner". We were all impressed because it sounded so mature. He's so sensitive to his sin!
- ❖ But in hindsight, I think he missed the point. A lot of Christians do. We take these verses out of context, and **we end up treating the Lord's Supper as a private devotional with God that takes place with others who are having a similar private moment at the same time.**
 - ▶ So Paul's call for self-examination in v28 has been taken to mean you need to sit there quietly while the elements are being passed out, think about all the sins you committed this past week, and try to discern whether or not your worthy this morning to eat and drink of the bread and wine.
 - But that misses the point of the Supper. You aren't worthy of the Table because you didn't sin as much this week or because you avoided the really bad ones. **You're only worthy to partake because the sinless Savior died for you and made you worthy if you live your life in Him.**
- ❖ If you treat the Lord's Supper as this very private experience where you're only thinking about yourself – if you're not concerned with those around you – **then to a certain degree, you're like the Corinthians who were focused on themselves and their own meal with no concern for others.** You've lost sight of the church!
 - ▶ Don't get me wrong. There's definitely a place for self-examination. If there's a sin in your life that you don't want to repent of, that you want to cherish instead, then I'd warn you against approaching the Supper with such a cavalier attitude. You *would* be eating and drinking judgment on yourself.

- ❖ But in context, the point of the passage is more corporate. It's for you to examine your attitude towards those with whom you're sharing the Supper. **The failure to discern the body is a failure to recognize the nature of the body of Christ.** To fail to see the Church as God's new humanity where old worldly divisions are transcended by our new unity in Christ.
 - ▶ **So for us to perpetuate (or simply to maintain) those same divisions, while attempting to observe the Supper, will certainly incur judgment.** That's the "unworthy manner" that Paul specifically has in mind.

The Right Application of the Supper

- ❖ Let's conclude by considering the right application of the Supper. This is our last point. It's how Paul concludes the passage. He offers application in vv33-34, "³³*So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another* [footnote says it could be *share with one another*] – ³⁴*if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home – so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.*"
- ❖ I don't take that to mean Paul's advice is simply for the rich to fill up their bellies at home (out of sight where the poor can't see you), and then show up to church for a simple Lord's Supper meal. No, that seems too pragmatic for Paul.
 - ▶ I think when he says "*if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home*", his point is if you're just here to eat, if you're only thinking about yourself and not the body of Christ, then just go home. Don't treat the Lord's Supper like that or it will become a supper of judgment for you. So there are reasons to sometimes refrain from the Supper.
- ❖ **That's why there should be self-examination, but don't be so caught up in introspection that you lose sight of those around you in the church.** What you should be examining is if you've contributed to divisions, if you've look down your nose at certain people, if your actions or attitude have set apart others as different and less important than yourself.
 - ▶ If you're convicted by some division between you and another believer in the church, then the right application of this passage might warrant you to refrain from the Supper and to go make things right at the first opportunity.
 - Take heed to what our Lord said in **Matthew 5:23-24**, "²³*So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*"
- ❖ Let me end by returning to my point in the beginning. If we, as a congregation, continue to take the Supper, which proclaims gospel unity, but then we turn around and continue to tolerate and perpetuate worldly differences, then may the Lord discipline us for our good.
 - ▶ **Are we willing to inconvenience ourselves, to step out of our comfort zones, to make space that's hospitable to others different than us?** Let's be willing to do what it takes so that, when we come together for the Supper, brothers and sisters in Christ – who look and talk and worship with styles very different than us – can feel united with us. That's what the Supper was always meant to proclaim.