

The Weight of the Table

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (ESV)

Teacher Guide

Introduction: Losing the Weight of the Table

In recent years, a video surfaced online showing a church trying to “modernize” the Lord’s Supper. Instead of traditional bread and juice, congregants were handed snack-sized bags of Doritos and plastic cups filled with Pepsi. The mood was upbeat. The message was casual. Leaders praised the creativity and accessibility of the approach, suggesting it might make communion more “relatable” for the next generation.

But for many watching—both inside and outside the church—it raised an unsettling question:

Have we forgotten what the Table is really about?

That’s the very concern Paul brings to the surface in 1 Corinthians 11.

In Corinth, the problem wasn’t Doritos and Pepsi. It was pride, division, and disregard. Wealthy believers were arriving early to communion meals and eating full feasts, leaving little to nothing for the working poor who came later. Some were even drinking to excess. Others were being excluded entirely.

Instead of gathering to remember Christ’s sacrifice, they were gathering to serve themselves. And Paul doesn’t hold back. He writes, “*When you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse.*” (v. 17)

What was supposed to be a sacred moment of shared reverence had become a spectacle of selfishness. The Lord’s Supper had been hollowed out—treated like a social gathering, not a gospel proclamation.

This passage is not just about how to take communion. It’s about how the church comes together—how we honor Christ, examine ourselves, and remember that this Table is not ordinary. It’s sacred. It points to a Savior who gave everything so we could come to it at all.

Starter Question:

Why do you think it's easy to treat sacred things casually?

Possible Answers:

- We grow too familiar with them and forget their meaning
- We get distracted by routines or logistics
- Our hearts drift into self-focus instead of reverence

I. What the Lord's Supper Meant in the Early Church

In the early church, the Lord's Supper wasn't just a ritual—it was a rhythm. It wasn't tacked onto the end of a service. It was the *heartbeat* of the gathered body of Christ.

Jesus instituted the Supper on the night He was betrayed (Luke 22:14–20), telling His disciples that the bread was His body, given for them, and the cup was the new covenant in His blood. From that moment on, the church understood this meal as central to its identity. It wasn't a reenactment—it was a *proclamation*. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26, *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”*

In Acts 2:42, we're told that the early believers *“devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”* That phrase, *“the breaking of bread,”* likely refers not just to shared meals but specifically to the observance of the Lord's Supper. It was a regular part of Christian worship, deeply tied to community, prayer, and the Word.

But it was more than remembrance. It was participation. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:16, *“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”* The word “participation” (Greek: *koinōnia*) implies a spiritual sharing. In taking the bread and the cup, the believer communes with Christ—not physically, but spiritually and sacramentally.

Equally important, the Supper was an act of *corporate unity*. Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians 10:17, *“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”* The Table reminds us not only that Christ died for us, but that we belong to one another through Him. The Supper is not only vertical (between us and God)—it is also horizontal (between us and each other).

In the early church, the Lord's Supper served as a holy recalibration. It was a moment to remember the cross, confess sin, renew love, and realign priorities. That's why Paul was so

grieved by what he saw in Corinth. They hadn't stopped taking communion—but they had stopped *being* communion. Their divisions contradicted what the Table was designed to declare.

Today, the Lord's Supper still calls us to the same essentials: remembrance, participation, self-examination, and unity. It is not merely symbolic—it is sacred. It is not private—it is shared. And it is not casual—it is covenantal.

When we approach the Table with humility, clarity, and love, we don't just consume bread and juice—we proclaim Christ crucified, risen, and returning. Together.

II. Disregard for the Body Destroys the Gathering

17 But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. 18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, 19 for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. 20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22 What! 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. (1 Corinthians 11:17-22, ESV)

What's Going On Here?

Selfishness Had Replaced Fellowship

Paul begins with a rebuke so strong it almost seems exaggerated—“*it is not for the better but for the worse*” (v. 17). Imagine hearing that your worship service is doing more harm than good. That's what Paul tells the Corinthian church.

At the heart of the issue was not doctrine but division. Wealthier believers were arriving early, bringing their own food, and feasting before the poorer members—many of whom likely had to work long hours—could get there. The Lord's Supper, intended to proclaim the unity we have in Christ, had become a showcase of class separation and self-indulgence.

Rather than waiting and sharing, they were excluding and humiliating. Paul asks, “*Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?*” (v. 22). What was

meant to be sacred had become selfish. They hadn't just misunderstood communion—they had fundamentally misrepresented the gospel.

Contempt for One Another Reveals Contempt for Christ

Paul connects how they treated one another to how they were treating Christ Himself. In verse 20, he essentially says, *"This isn't even the Lord's Supper anymore."* Why? Because they were gathering in name, but denying its meaning in practice.

To dishonor fellow believers at the Table is to dishonor the One who invited them there. These divisions weren't just interpersonal—they were spiritual offenses against Christ's body. The meal that was supposed to proclaim His sacrificial love had become a display of pride and indifference.

This is a warning to every church: when community life breaks down in pride, partiality, or neglect, the Table becomes not a place of grace—but a reminder of judgment. If we lose sight of the body, we lose the meaning of the meal.

Discussion Question:

Why is division in the church—especially at the Lord's Table—so offensive to God?

Possible Answers:

- Because it contradicts the unity the Table is meant to display.
- Because it turns a moment of remembrance into a moment of pride or exclusion.
- Because contempt for fellow believers is a form of contempt for Christ, who died for them.

III. The Table Was Designed to Remember Jesus

23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26, ESV)

What's Going On Here?

Jesus Gave Us the Meal to Remember the Cross

After addressing the Corinthians' divisions and abuses, Paul does something pastoral and powerful—he returns them to the very words of Jesus. *“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...”* (v. 23). This moment isn't about his personal opinion. Paul is reminding them—and us—that this meal is not man-made. It is sacred in origin, given directly by Christ.

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper on the night He was betrayed—not at a moment of triumph, but in the shadow of the cross. This underscores the gravity of the moment. The bread, He said, is *“my body, which is for you.”* The cup, *“the new covenant in my blood.”* This wasn't symbolic language for symbolism's sake—it was sacrificial language. The bread and the cup point to His real suffering, His real death, and His real gift of grace.

So when we eat and drink, we are not performing a dead ritual—we are remembering a living Redeemer. We are re-centering our distracted hearts on the cross, the place where His body was broken and His blood was poured out. The Lord's Supper realigns us. It refocuses us. It renews us. It slows us down in a fast-moving world and brings us back to the core of our faith: *Christ crucified, for us.*

The Supper Declares That Jesus Is Our Hope

But the Supper is not just a remembrance—it's a *proclamation*. *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”* (v. 26)

Every time we come to the Table, we are making a bold declaration—Jesus died. Jesus rose. Jesus will come again. Communion is not private devotion; it's public declaration. The church, together, preaches the gospel—not with a sermon, but with bread and cup.

And this proclamation isn't just about the past. It's filled with future hope. *Until He comes.* That phrase reminds us that we live in a world where brokenness still exists—but the broken bread points us to the One who will make all things new.

Our hope isn't in our performance. It isn't in our perfection. It isn't in our church routines. It's in the finished work of Christ. And the Table brings us back to that again and again.

This is why we come not only with individual reflection—but with corporate unity. The Supper is a family meal. It's a shared confession. And it proclaims that we are a people defined not by what we've done—but by what Jesus has done for us.

Discussion Question:

Why is it so important to regularly remember the cross through communion?

Possible Answers:

- Because we are prone to forget the cost of our forgiveness.
- Because it brings us back to the center of our faith—Christ crucified.
- Because it humbles us and reminds us that grace is not earned.

IV. Examination Is Essential to Right Participation

27 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. 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. 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. (1 Corinthians 11:27-32, ESV)

What's Going On Here?

A Casual Heart Makes Communion Dangerous

Paul now issues a serious warning: *"Whoever eats... in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord."* (v. 27). The word "unworthy" doesn't mean you have to be sinless to take communion. It means you must not take it *lightly*.

The Corinthians were eating and drinking without self-examination. Some were engaging in the Table with hearts full of pride, division, or unrepentant sin—and God was judging them. Paul says plainly that some were sick, and some had even died, because of the way they treated the Lord's Supper.

This is a sobering reminder: the grace of God is free, but it is never cheap. The Table is sacred space. Casual participation turns a holy moment into a dangerous one.

Self-Examination Prepares the Heart for Grace

But Paul’s warning is not meant to keep people away from the Table—it’s meant to draw them *closer* through repentance. “*Let a person examine himself...*” (v. 28). The Table is for sinners—but it’s for sinners who are willing to examine, confess, and turn.

To examine yourself means to ask: Am I walking in repentance? Am I at peace with my brothers and sisters in Christ? Am I treasuring the gospel as I come?

Examination is not about earning your seat—it’s about preparing your heart. It’s not a barrier to grace. It’s the pathway to receiving it deeply.

Discussion Question:

What are some practical ways we can examine ourselves before taking communion?

Possible Answers:

- By asking the Holy Spirit to reveal any unconfessed sin.
- By considering whether we’re at peace with others in the church.
- By reflecting on whether we’re trusting Christ or ourselves for righteousness.

V. Our Unity at the Table Reflects Christ to the World

33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for 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. (1 Corinthians 11:33-34, ESV)

What’s Going On Here?

Waiting Is an Act of Worship

Paul closes with a simple instruction: “*Wait for one another.*” (v. 33) In context, this is about correcting the selfish behavior of eating early and leaving others out. But spiritually, it’s about something bigger: honoring others as you honor Christ.

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Waiting for one another means valuing the unity of the body. It means seeing the person next to you as someone for whom Christ died. It means remembering that communion isn't private—it's shared.

This act of waiting is itself a form of worship. It's a declaration that the Table is not about individual experience, but about *shared identity* in Christ. It is about the "us" in the body of Christ—not just the "me."

Worship Without Unity Invites Judgment

Paul ends with a final warning: if the Corinthians won't correct these behaviors, they will be judged. *"If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment."* (v. 34)

This isn't about meal planning—it's about spiritual health. The Lord's Table is too significant to be entered casually, divided, or distracted. When unity is ignored, worship becomes offensive rather than beautiful.

But when we come in humility, honor others, and remember the cross, the Table becomes what it was meant to be—a place of grace, unity, and gospel proclamation.

Discussion Question:

What does it say to the world when believers take communion in unity and love for one another?

Possible Answers:

- It shows that the gospel doesn't just reconcile us to God, but to each other.
- It demonstrates that the church is a diverse but unified family centered on Jesus.
- It models a different kind of community—one marked by humility, honor, and grace.
- It proclaims that Christ's love tears down every dividing wall.

Living Out God's Grace

Prepare Your Heart Before You Worship

The Lord's Supper is not something we drift into lightly. It's a sacred moment that calls for thoughtful preparation. Take time during the week to invite God to search your heart. Is there any sin that needs to be confessed? Any bitterness that needs to be resolved? Any relationship that needs to be mended? Communion is not just about remembering what Christ did—it's about realigning our hearts with Him. Let the words of Psalm 139 become your prayer: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!"* (vv. 23–24, ESV). A heart prepared is a heart ready to receive grace.

Honor Others at the Table

Communion is not a solo act. It's a family meal. As you come to the Table, ask yourself: *Am I honoring the people I'm sitting beside? Am I more focused on being served or on serving others?* Philippians 2:3–4 reminds us to *"do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."* Let that posture shape how you interact with your church family. Look for someone to encourage. Sit with someone new. Extend hospitality in small ways that say, *"You matter here. You belong."* The Lord's Table becomes most beautiful when it reflects the unity Christ died to create.

Take Communion Seriously, Not Somberly

There's a difference between reverence and heaviness. The Lord's Supper is serious—but it's also joyful. We come with sober minds and full hearts. We remember the agony of the cross, yes—but we also celebrate the victory of the resurrection. *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* (1 Corinthians 11:26, ESV). Don't come out of habit. Come with hunger. Let the weight of Christ's sacrifice lead you to gratitude—and let that gratitude overflow into joy. Communion is a grace, not a grim duty.

Proclaim Christ Together

Every time your church shares the Lord's Supper, something powerful is happening—not just within you, but among you. Your unity becomes a living sermon. Your shared confession becomes a testimony to a watching world. Jesus said, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:35, ESV).

Communion is not just a ritual—it's a witness. It proclaims that the ground at the foot of the cross is level. That Christ is our peace. That we belong to Him—and to each other. So come to the Table not just to receive, but to declare: *We are His. And He is worthy.*

Group Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Paul took the Lord's Supper so seriously?
2. What does it look like to "examine yourself" before communion?
3. How does our behavior toward others reflect how we view the Table?
4. What can we do as a class/church to keep the Lord's Supper meaningful?

Conclusion: Remember and Proclaim

The Lord's Table is not a ritual to rush through or a snack to consume—it is a sacred proclamation of the gospel.

Each time we take the bread and the cup, we are proclaiming with our mouths, our hearts, and our unity: *Christ died for us. Christ rose for us. Christ will return for us.* This is no ordinary meal. It's a covenant meal—given by Christ, centered on Christ, pointing to Christ.

When we treat it casually, we distort the message. But when we approach it with humility and awe, we give the gospel the weight it deserves. We remember the cross. We proclaim the resurrection. We anticipate the return.

So let us come to the Table with gratitude—not just for what Jesus has done, but for what He is doing among us. Let us come with humility—not because we are worthy, but because He is. Let us come in unity—not as isolated individuals, but as one body, reconciled by grace.

Let our posture proclaim what our hearts believe: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.*

Closing Prayer

Thank You for giving us the Table—a place to remember Your body given, Your blood poured out, and Your love freely given. Thank You for inviting us in—not as perfect people, but as forgiven people, made one by Your grace.

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Forgive us, Lord, for the times we've come casually, carelessly, or distracted. Forgive us for treating this holy moment like routine instead of reverence. Search our hearts and cleanse us. Restore in us a holy fear, a deep gratitude, and a fresh awe for who You are and what You've done.

Help us to come to Your Table with sincerity, unity, and joy. Let it be more than a tradition—let it be a transforming moment. May our worship reflect Your worth. May our unity reflect Your love. And may our lives proclaim Your gospel until You return in glory. - Amen.