

Holy Examination

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Last week, we started in chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians, and we learned that chapters 11-14 were all about corporate worship. Specifically, Paul was writing to exhort the Corinthians to honor one another in corporate worship. The divisions, rivalries, and pride problems of the church in Corinth were wreaking havoc on the gathered assembly, and Paul needed to address these things. He started by talking about head coverings and moved next to Communion. His focus on communion has to do with how they were sharing or not sharing the meal, and how they were lacking any self-examination. Paul's instruction regarding the Lord's Supper frames self-examination not as a morbid introspection but as an essential act of worship. Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for approaching communion in a manner that fractures the body rather than proclaims its unity. Their failure was not merely liturgical but spiritual: they participated in a sacred meal without discerning the body—both Christ's body given for them and the communal body gathered among them.

Paul's call to "examine oneself" before eating the bread and drinking the cup elevates examination into a worshipful posture. To examine oneself is to pause, to remember, and to realign one's life with the meaning of Christ's self-giving love. This examination honors the Lord because it refuses to trivialize the cross or privatize grace. Instead, it acknowledges that worship is embodied in relationships, humility, and repentance.

Moreover, Paul connects examination with spiritual formation. The failure to examine leads to discipline, while proper discernment leads to life. In this way, examination becomes an act of reverence—an offering of honesty before God. When believers examine themselves rightly, communion becomes not a ritual of habit but a formative encounter that proclaims the Lord's death until he comes, shaping a people who worship God with both heart and life. **Following Jesus in a life-defining way involves Spirit-led reflection.**

1. Honored through waiting.

- a. The Roman world – No dedicated day of rest.
 - i. For the Roman world, though, there was no official day of rest, and there is historical evidence that until the third century, with Constantine, that different calendars existed in the Roman Empire. These calendars ranged from seven to ten days.
 - ii. In early Roman society—especially during the Republic—time was structured around an **eight-day cycle**, not seven. Romans counted days **inclusively**, so this was often described as a **nine-day cycle**, hence the term *nundinae* (“ninth day”).
 - 1. **Days A–H** were marked on Roman calendars (*fasti*).
 - 2. **Day H** was the **nundina**, the public **market day**.
 - 3. Rural farmers would come into the city to sell goods, settle debts, attend legal matters, and hear public announcements.
 - 4. This system functioned as a **work rhythm**, not a rest rhythm. Most days were workdays; the nundina was a commercial and civic focal point, not a sabbath-like holiday.
 - iii. During the early Imperial period—especially by the 1st–3rd centuries AD—the **seven-day planetary week** spread across the Roman world. This shift accelerated under **Constantine**, who in AD 321 officially recognized **Sunday** as a day of rest, blending Roman civil practice with Christian theology.
 - 1. Jewish societies and communities would have had Saturday as that day of rest.
 - 2. Early Christians celebrated on Sunday, because of the resurrection.
- b. **The rich weren’t waiting for the poor. – A Communal meal (communion)**
 - i. Divisions and rivalries abound! - The fundamental problem in Corinth, as we have seen many times already, is division (**v 18**). Paul has heard reports of this, perhaps from Chloe’s people again, and he is predisposed to believe it; he adds, clearly sarcastically (given his opposition to division throughout the letter), that “no doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (**v 19**). They are divided over leadership, and sexual ethics, and litigation, and idol food, so it is no great surprise that they are divided at the Lord’s Table as well.¹
 - ii. **It is supposed to be a communal meal, with everyone united around the same table and with everyone demonstrating the same need for grace. In social terms, it is meant to feel like a potluck dinner, with everyone sharing together, no matter how much or little they can afford.** But instead it has become an airplane meal: everyone has their own private supper, with the rich eating First Class and even getting drunk in the process, and the poor getting leftovers (if that) in the seat at the back by the toilets (**v 21**). *What on earth is the point of that? If all you want is a meal, Paul says, you can eat at home. Yet you insist on doing it during the most sacred moment we have, despising the church of God and “humiliating those who have nothing” (v 22).* He is dumbfounded.²

¹ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 126–127.

² Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 125–126.

c. Communion was supposed to be a representation that Christianity and Christians were distinctively different.

i. God honoring man.

1. Communion is a celebration that is instituted by God (Jesus) for man by grace. God sacrificing himself to make a new covenant with man was not earned by man, but instead, it was given as a gift of Himself by God. In the most simplest terms, Communion reminds us that God honored us, so that we could be brought into his family. This disrupts the performance narrative.
2. Part of the way the cross destabilizes the prudential, calculative, and exchange-driven ethic of violence is to undermine what Timothy Keller has called the “performance narrative” that governed Roman society in part and, since the welcome fall of rigid social hierarchies in modernity, governs our own social life more fully and more exclusively. The cross subverts the performance narrative because it introduces a new paradigm of status, one that is neither by birth (the dominant paradigm of the premodern world) nor by performance (the major measure of status in the modern world) but by grace.³

ii. The rich honoring the poor.

1. The rich had more time on their hands and supplied the vast majority of the food for the meal. By waiting, the rich were to honor the poor in the body by having a truly common meal.
2. Clubs and associations in antiquity often had communal meals, sometimes paid for out of group funds. It was not uncommon for the food served to the diners to differ in quality and amount. Theissen cites associations where officials by regulation received more than others, some one and a half times, some twice, and some three times the normal. He also draws attention to hosts who had better food for privileged guests.⁴ – This was the normal way of Roman society, but the church was supposed to function differently.

iii. A truly common meal.

1. All together.

- a. The Eucharist is shared “when you come together as a church” (**v 18**), a point that Paul makes five times in this section (**v 17, 18, 20, 33, 34**). It is a corporate act for the church when they gather, not a private and individual one which is intended to take place in isolation from other believers.⁵

2. “A feast of love.”

- a. Clearly at Corinth the Holy Communion was a full meal, of the type called a ‘love feast’ (Jude 12; some mss; of 2 Pet. 2:13). But what happened at Corinth was a travesty of love. The wealthier members of the congregation clearly provided most of the food, and this could have been

³ Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 408.

⁴ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 155–156.

⁵ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 126–127.

a marvellous expression of Christian love and unity. But it was degraded into the very opposite. The poor would have to finish their work before they could come, and slaves would find it particularly difficult to be on time. But the rich did not wait. They ate and drank in their cliques ('divisions', v. 18), each eating 'an own dinner' (*idion deipnon*). The food was gone before the poor got there! *One remains hungry, another gets drunk*. There was a sharp contrast between the hungry poor, lacking even necessary food, and the drunken rich. There was no real sharing, no genuinely common meal.⁶

2. Holy Examination

a. A needed warning – v. 28

- i. 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.
- ii. **V. 28.** *Examine* is *dokimazō*, 'test' (often used of the testing of metals). Holy Communion is not just another service. It is a solemn rite, instituted by our Lord himself, and charged with deep significance. Before taking part in such a service it is important to conduct a rigorous self-examination (cf. 2 Cor. 13:5f.), so that we avoid communicating unworthily (v. 27).⁷
- iii. **What are the judgments that Paul is talking about here?**
 1. On the one hand (v. 31), if they were to "discern themselves" (cf. v. 28), they would not be experiencing the present "judgments" of v. 30; on the other hand (v. 32), the present "judgments" mean that they are being "disciplined" so that they will not come under the final "judgment"—condemnation with the world.⁸
 2. The judgments are not salvific in nature. I.e., You can lose your salvation if you eat the meal incorrectly. Instead, it is talking about the consequences of sin. These consequences are meant to be pain points that call them back to obedience and conformity to Christ.
- iv. Communion is oriented not only as a celebration, but as a rhythm of worship to examine yourself.
 1. You consider who Jesus is and what he has done for you.
 2. You consider your need, and if there is anything that needs repenting.

b. Truth-telling before God.

i. Fertile soil for growth in Christ.

1. Living in Iowa, we understand the value of good soil. So, I love the image that is so relevant to us when Comer writes, "**The soul grows best in the soil of honesty**"

⁶ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 155–156.

⁷ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 160.

⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 559.

and vulnerability.”⁹ Examination, then, is not self-accusation but courageous truth-telling before a loving God who already knows the heart.

ii. Empowered by the Holy Spirit.

1. We are not alone in the Christian life, we have each other, and most importantly, the Holy Spirit. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to convict and encourage the believer. These actions help the believer tell the truth before God. Truth-telling is empowered by the Spirit of God.

iii. An important action of worship.

1. Worship is a whole-life pursuit. For the Christian, it is the action of ascribing worth to God and God alone. In order to participate in this ascribing worth action, we have to tell the truth about who God is, who we are, and about what isn't God. This process of examination as truth-telling isn't just a means of shame or guilt, it is more holy than that. It is an important action of worship for the believer.

⁹ John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019)