

# 1 Corinthians 11

by Todd Atkinson

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*Todd Atkinson's sermon on 1 Corinthians 11 emphasizes the importance of unity and self-sacrifice in the context of the Lord's Supper amidst social divisions in the church.*

**Duration:** 35:46

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 11:17

**Topics:** "Tradition"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the clash between the materialistic culture we live in and the teachings of the Lord. He emphasizes that our society is consumed with the accumulation of things, believing that more possessions will bring happiness. However, this addiction to consumerism affects not only our personal lives but also our relationships within the church and community. The speaker then turns to 1 Corinthians 11, discussing the importance of understanding and reflecting on passages like this one, particularly focusing on the significance of communion and the Last Supper.

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## Transcript

Thank you Dave and team for leading us so beautifully this morning. Let's just express our appreciation to them. Well, it was a beautiful week.

I hope some of you were able to get out of doors and enjoy it. Did anybody find yourself feeling a little ripped off that winter was so mild this year? Nobody, eh? All right. Do you feel like you didn't get your money's worth? It was definitely the mildest winter that I've seen here and I didn't find myself complaining at all.

It was lovely. I'd like to turn you to 1 Corinthians chapter 11 this morning. Stephen preached on 1 Corinthians 10 last week.

Such full passages, more than I'll be able to do justice to in a week. And actually this passage, I think I might break into a couple segments and preach part of it next week. And it's a much-beloved passage.

In fact, for people who wouldn't really even know much about communion or the Eucharist, if you were to ask them in the New Testament to turn to one passage, the most famous passage to them, it's either going to be the Last Supper or it's probably going to be this passage, the ones that they're familiar with. And yet for all our familiarity, we often haven't spent probably enough time in these important passages.

And I'm really looking forward to doing that with you this morning.

So 1 Corinthians 11. Let's take a reading from the 17th verse and following. Paul says, 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. For in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions amongst you. And I believe it in part for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

When you come together, it is not for the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.

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. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread. 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. 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.

This wonderful passage actually continues, but we're going to stop there and just read that much today. So the Apostle Paul had a close relationship with this church in Corinth. He was the one to have brought the gospel to this church.

And now he keeps in close contact with it. He sends it messages. He writes letters.

He knows what's going on there. And he writes in a very fatherly way through 1 Corinthians. And in the beginning of the 11th chapter, he begins with a different note.

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and you remember the traditions that I delivered to you. And so there's words of commendation because really important things that he passed on to them, they kept hold of those things. And so even after his absence, they didn't stop following those teachings.

They didn't depart from those important traditions. But here on the 17th verse, he says the exact opposite. But in this area, I have no commendation for you.

And of course, if a father figure like the Apostle Paul begins a letter with I have no commendation for you, I'm sure it makes the people cringe a little bit. And so I want to take a look at why do you use such strong language? Why would he say I have no commendations for you in this? And first reason is this. He says because I hear that there are divisions amongst you.

Now when he talks about divisions, he's not actually talking about theological divisions. He's not talking about a breakdown between families or marriages. There's no open conflict going on in this church.

So what kind of division is he talking about? As we follow through this passage, we're going to find out that he's talking about social divisions. The kind of divisions that there were in Roman society, class divisions that had infiltrated the church and were beginning to play themselves out in the church, just like they did in Roman society, social divisions. So when they gathered together as a church in the early church, there were two parts to their meetings.

And it's evident here in First Corinthians, there was a common meal part. Food was brought and enjoyed. It was a real meal, a full meal.

And there was a sacramental part to their meetings. And there's different probably views on how those were played out. Some think that there maybe was a sacramental part at the beginning that maybe had to do with the breaking of bread, an official beginning to the service.

And that maybe the common meal part played out where people ate food and meals that they had brought. And then it culminated in a cup. It culminated in the sacramental part.

Sometimes maybe people who are reading the ancient documents think, well, no, there was just the common meal first. And then it culminated, all the sacramental part was left till the end. There's some different views on it.

But what we do know is this, that amongst these two parts, common meal and sacramental part, that the first part, the common meal, was being played out in such a way that it was completely undermining and degrading the sacramental part of their gathering. It was totally against it. So what was happening in order to do that? Well, each family brought their own food to this meal.

It might on first impression sound a little bit like a potluck. But in some ways it was the opposite of a potluck. Everybody brought food, but there was no sharing of that food.

You just brought enough food for your own family. So we have enough challenges with our own potlucks sometimes, making sure that there's enough food to go around. Or if my wife brings her famous curry, it goes quite quickly.

I've even heard it rumored around that, like, Sherry brought her curry. And so you don't want to be at the back of the line on those dishes, because it could produce divisions in the church. So in some ways it's far worse than the worst potluck.

And that is every family is bringing their own food, but they're hoarding their food and they're not sharing it with others. And so because of the great social disparity in the Roman Empire at this time, there were some members had plenty of food, more than they could eat, and some had either little food or next to nothing in the same room. And so the divisions Paul's talking about is actually a division between the haves and the have-nots.

It's a division between the rich and the poor. And the problem is they can't see anything wrong with this. But Paul, on the other hand, is greatly distressed by this, because it is contrary to everything the Lord's Supper was about.

So remember two parts. There's a meal that culminates in a sacramental part, a breaking of bread and the sharing of a common cup, and they can't see that the way they're doing this common meal is meant to represent the sacramental part. It's meant to embody it.

And instead it's completely undermining it. It's against everything the Lord's Supper represents. So the Lord's Supper is about unity.

Last week Stephen expounded chapter 10 where we heard these words, we are one body because we eat of one bread. So this is where the oneness of the body, the body comes together. And we don't just

celebrate the oneness that we already have.

Every time we come together for the breaking of bread, the potential is that the oneness is magnified. Our oneness is increased. It's better.

It's improved upon. We are one body because we do what? Because we eat of that sacramental meal. Because we eat of one bread, our oneness is strengthened and reinforced.

And so here these people come from a deeply fragmented society, and if they're not careful, they will carry those fragmentations right into the church where we're meant to be one. And they're having a deeply fragmented meal in preparation for a sacramental meal that's all about oneness. And they couldn't see the wood for the trees.

Secondly, the Lord's Supper is a picture of self-sacrifice. So we say these words every time, this is my body which is given for you. And those people every time they gather hear those words and they receive the free offering of Jesus to them.

This is my body which is given for you. And yet in the meal that leads up to this, it's got nothing to do with giving. They're hoarding.

It's got nothing to do with self-sacrifice. They're self-serving. They have more food than they know what to eat and will not walk across the church gathering to someone else and give it to someone who's hungry.

So Paul is, how could you come to the Lord's table where Jesus gave everything for you and you couldn't share your food with the guy across the room? Do you see how the Lord's table acts like a check and balance on us? It has a way of bringing us back to what's important. It's a plumb line that goes right through our soul. It examines all our practices and helps us understand where the things of the world are creeping into the church.

It helps us to say no to those things. And it brings us back to what's true and important and good and holy. And so they can't see this.

So the Lord's table is a picture of unity. It's a picture of self-sacrifice. It's also a picture of separation where Jesus ransomed a people, purchased them with His own blood, set them apart for Himself, drew them apart from the world in which they live, that they would belong to Him and be His own holy people.

And yet here's a picture of people that are not separate from the world. The world is influencing them more than Christ is because these practices are quite contrary to Christ. So in Roman society, of course, house meetings were common, meals amongst wealthy families.

We can assume that this was the house of a wealthy family. It's the only place that would have had space enough for this type of event and this kind of people. And so in Roman society, it was common to have a room at the center of a larger house called a triclinium.

It was like, we would call it a dining room, but it was a place where hospitality was shown, where you would treat your guests well. And so there was comfort provided, a place to recline. But your guests that you didn't consider to be as important would be in the atrium with no comfort or there wouldn't be any place to sit.

They could sit on the floor. And less consideration, if any, taken for them. And so Roman society thought, particularly the wealthy part of society thought nothing of the poor.

So it wasn't uncommon for people to be having lavish meals, and of course they got poor people serving them every single time they eat. It wouldn't have even crossed their mind if it was this person eating today. So their conscience on this matter had been seared that they didn't think there was a problem with feasting while there's people in the perimeter who have went hungry and are starving.

Enormous disregard for the poor. So this week as I've thought of this, I've wondered how. How is this true of us? Because that situation maybe would be unlikely to repeat itself in exactly that same fashion.

We head off to Africa in three weeks. I've went once or twice a year. For many years.

And I just don't find I can eat a meal with hungry kids around me. Just everything in me feels this has got to be wrong. Now Wilson is our African leader and he's teaching me how to do it better because two visits ago now I caused something that was near to a riot.

Seriously, that almost ended up destroying buildings. And I'm a seasoned at this. I've been doing this for 30 years and it started out with just a handful.

Oh come on, I told him there's no way I'm going to lunch with hungry kids here. And so I thought I was being so careful and discreet and anyways before I knew it there were hundreds and hundreds of people. And it got quite aggressive.

So I'm getting better at finding good ways to do this. But I never want to lose that out of my heart. The instinct that says I'm not going to sit and eat a meal in front of people that are going hungry.

And I think probably most of us feel exactly the same. But I think there are other ways in which we could heed Paul's words. What are the things about Canadian culture, not Roman culture? What are the aspects of Canadian culture that have come in with us and we're like them.

We barely detect it. It's all we've ever known. We're so familiar with it.

It's just inside of us. Just like these people could eat these lavish meals, poor people. Never even think twice about it.

Complete disregard for the poor because they're so immersed in their Roman culture. It's just all they've ever known. And if we're not careful, we can think that we are exempt from that.

So every time I brought Canadians for example to England, they're always interested in accents. But Canadians never think they have an accent. And so people went and said, well I like your accent too.

How many times have I heard, well I don't have an accent. But we read the passage and said, well that's a very, that's a great problem that you would take Roman society and bring it into the church like that. But that doesn't happen in Canada.

Really? Well, I'm not so sure. I think it does. We live not just in a country, a continent that is deeply deeply materialistic.

Deeply materialistic. Where our sense of goal in life, we're just almost consumed with the accumulation of things and the underscoring supposition that we'd be so much happier if we could accumulate more. And so we live in what's been called the consumeristic society.

We just feel like we've got to consume. And even once we buy things, it puts on the shelf and our attention turns to the next thing. Because it didn't make us happy or assure the kind of happiness that we thought it would.

And yet there's a deep addiction to it. And I wonder how does it affect church? How does it affect community? How does that part of society affect how we think of each other? How we treat each other? How does it undermine unity amongst us? Because if that is our mindset, in some way that works inside of us and even relationships are the next thing to be consumed. Even I knew church is the next thing to be consumed.

Church shopping. And we'll try relationships out for a while, but once we've gorged ourselves, which is actually some of the language in the Greek behind their eating. Once we've satiated ourselves, people get discarded.

They get dropped. I wonder if we treat Christ like that. I'm convinced we do in our country.

Which is I'm into Him so long as He satiates me. As long as I can use Him as another place to consume. And interestingly, once Jesus puts a hand up and said, I love you more than you can ever imagine, but I can't buy into that.

I'll feed you, but you can't consume me in that way. I'm not just something to be bought and sold. I'm not just something to be picked up and put down.

And once He says I can't play that game, then actually part of our heart feels in dearth. And so here we come to the Lord's Supper. And how does it play out? Less and less so.

But I've seen a generation, I've seen for the last 30 years, people come to the Lord's Supper who know all the teaching about the Lord's Supper. They know full well that this is a table of unity. And know full well that there's people in the congregation that they don't want to speak to, that there is conflict.

They know full well they should go around and probably remedy that and fix that. And yet week in and week out, some stubborn part of their heart from our Canadian culture, not a church culture, it's the opposite of Christ's culture. Christ's culture would say, before I go to the Lord's table or straight away afterwards, I'm going to go fix that one.

I'm going to go forgive. I'm going to go lay down my offense. I'm going to repair that relationship with that person.

And yet our Canadian culture says, no, it makes me uncomfortable. It's awkward to do that. Of course it's jolly well awkward.

You think when I do it, it's fun, but when you do it, it's awkward? No, it's because there's a clash of cultures taking place. And if Paul was here today, he would speak and say, there's more important things than your culture. That's why we celebrate the Lord's table, because it wasn't actually a picture of comfort.

He didn't put his own comfort ahead of us. It was far from comfortable. The cross, we could say this, it was a bloody mess.

And so when we come in with our culture and it confronts this culture, one of them has to go. And everyone who truly loves Jesus in their heart will realize, Oh yeah, I brought in stuff and I will lay it down because this culture has got to reign supreme. This culture, a culture of the cross, a culture of real love, a love that persists, a love that would die for us.

Not a love that just comes along. Jesus doesn't come along to you and consume you. Well, I just like this person until they, till my, my sense of loneliness goes away and then drop you.

He won't even love you until he sees something wrong with you. Everything wrong with me, he knew it in advance. I mean, and so interesting, the love that all our hearts are yearning for, sacrifice, costliness.

It's the antidote. Every single one of you that wonder, am I worth something? The answer is found here. Am I valuable? Guess where the answer is found? Here.

Do I matter? It's found here. Am I really worth loving? It's found here. Not in our Canadian culture.

And so when we gather together, we ask, we lay down it. There's a clash and one of them wins. So Paul goes on and says these words, for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.

That's a weighty sentence. So do you know why this culture wins? Because he says, I received it from the Lord. That's why this has to trump everything else.

We're not exactly sure how he received it from the Lord, whether he received it by supernatural revelation. He spent 12 years in prayer in the deserts of Arabia. It was rich with revelation.

Is that where he received it? By direct revelation? Or does it mean that the apostles that were with Jesus at the last supper, when these words were first said, now faithfully communicated that to Paul. But when apostles say something, it is still from the Lord. They got it from the Lord.

And so it is authoritative. So however he comes by this, it's secondary. And the truth still stands.

This is from the Lord, has authority. I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. How that the Lord Jesus Christ on the night in which he betrayed, took bread.

And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body. These are the words spoken at the last supper. So the last supper became the Lord's supper.

And the exact words that Jesus used have been said aloud every Lord's table from that day till this, through all of history. And so when we do that, it binds us with him, the one that said these words. Do this in remembrance of me.

It binds us with the Christians who have said these words through the entire of church history. Two thousand years, every communion, these words are said. It binds us with them.

It's a sign of our unity with them, but it binds us with each other. And so imagine a church who celebrated the Lord's table and every single week allowed a Canadian culture to flush out and they allowed the culture of the cross to reign supreme. So every single week offenses were cleansed away.

How bad could relationships ever get? They just get better and better and better. How deep would they become? How deep and profound would the unity be? Because you could never keep a long slate. You could never build a whole slate of offenses against somebody, whether that was your child or whether that was your friend or a colleague or someone across the church or your spouse.

You could never build a large record of wrongs. And our unity would be such that Jesus would be able to look down and say, that's what I paid for. Look at these beautiful, look at the kingdom of heaven, right there on earth, they're doing life like nobody around them.

Look at their separation. They live in the world, but they're not of the world. They have my culture in them.

And they left their consumeristic ways behind as well. And they've taken my nature on them. They're self-sacrificing for me and they're self-sacrificing for one another.

So I love things when things happen in the church. Keep your antennas up all the time for people who have needs. Keep your antennas up all the time.

You're going to buy a new car. You're going to trade your other one off and they're going to give you a fraction of a price. I'm in that, looking at cars I rez.

Go give it away to somebody. We've got tons of young families. You're going to get a fraction for it.

Next time you order a bunch of food, go take a third of it and take it to some other that you know is right now in a tough month. Think of each other. That a culture of self-sacrifice would be amongst us like it was in our Lord.

As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death. You revel in it. You exult in it.

You proclaim the Lord's death. You sit under that. You let yourself be affected by it.

You keep it central, the cross. You keep it central until he comes. And so as we transition in a minute to the Lord's table, it would be fitting for us to say, Lord, I realize that maybe we have more of an accent than we think.

Maybe Canadian culture is more subtle, but it's in us. And there's ways of doing things out there that has affected us more than we think in here. Because Canadians don't like confrontation.

They don't like feeling awkward, uncomfortable, because we are the world's nice guys. We've been described as that in many countries I've been. That's not a bad reputation, but we could examine what parts of that culture are clashing with, and inferior to the culture of the cross.

And we could lay those down. Just before Todd leads us to the table, just a couple of words for those of you who are new to Christianity or new to our church. One of the things we hear often, Todd and I were up for lunch a few weeks ago, and we met a waitress who said she wanted to come to our church.

And her biggest fear was, she felt disqualified from coming to church. She thought her life was too broken. She'd made too many mistakes, messed up too many times to come to church.

And which, in hearing that, our response is, that's what all of us are. We want you to come be a part of this. But part of what I think needs to be communicated to you is that we're a place that we do make mistakes.

We do fail. We do fall short. We do sin.

We do break things, and even break relationships. But what you have here is a community and a family of people that every week we have a solution to those mistakes. We have the good news of Jesus, the cross of Jesus, that removes from us our mistakes.

And so what it kind of could create for you is what the church should be is one of the safest places on earth. Not because we don't make mistakes against one another, but because we have a solution to those mistakes. And so what I just want to welcome you into today is that we want you to come be a part of this.

That you would know that you cannot make too big of a mistake here. That this is a safe place to make mistakes. And that you join us in coming and receiving Jesus's work and cleansing and salvation from those mistakes.

Okay, so please feel like you're a part of this, that you would come and share in it, even if you're not a baptized Christian yet. Okay, Bishop Todd. When I was many years ago the president of a Bible school, and when I had finished that and moved on, moved to Scotland, I had the great pleasure of spending some time one day with a person who had been hurt by a Bible school, or felt that they had been hurt.

I had never been their leader, but because of my story I could stand in that place, and I could say this, I'm sorry. As a past president of the Bible school I could say, I repent if you've got hurt. I could offer the deep repentance.

I didn't know till a few years later that that was that person's journey back. So as we move into the time of communion, not only dealing with our own shortcomings, I also want to say this for your entire story, however old you are and however long you've been around, here or anywhere, any country. If you were ever hurt by the church, then I would like to stand in the gap and say, I'm really sorry. If you ever received a treatment that was just so much less than what you deserved, and so maybe as we're as we're meditating in a few minutes, your heart could say, Lord that that's me, and that's what's kept me from bonding to community.

And you could let that go, and you would find a new liberty in your heart. So if at any time through your entire life you were hurt by a church, would you allow me to humble myself, and to stand in the gap and say, I'm really sorry. If you fell overlooked, misunderstood, maybe what Ryan was saying is it's a place where we're meant to be forgiven, and it's okay that we're a bit flawed, but if you were ever treated like that was okay for everybody else but not you, that your flaws were singled out and judged, I'm genuinely sorry.

I'm not so sure how it happens that Christ's church can get so separate from Christ at times, but he's bringing it back. And maybe in our time, in a few minutes of confession, maybe you could receive that into your heart, and let that anger and offense go. All who truly turn to Christ, and repent of their sins, all who seek to be reconciled in that unity with your neighbors, and to accept the Lord as your Savior.

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