

November 2, 2025

Group Study: The Open Table

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

1. What divisions in the Corinthian church were exposed at the Lord's Supper? What divisions do you see in your faith community?
2. What does Paul mean when he warns against eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner"?
3. How do you understand Paul's command to "discern the body"? Christ's body, your own, or the church community? How does that understanding impact your faith and action?
4. How might our own church practices unintentionally exclude people from the Lord's table?
5. How can the Table serve as a place of reconciliation, not division?
6. What would it look like for us to truly "wait for one another" in worship and in life?

Good Faith Bible Study

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"The Open Table"

Focal Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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When Paul writes to the Corinthians about the Lord's Supper, he isn't just trying to correct bad manners. He's calling the church back to the heart of its identity. The words often spoken around the Lord's Supper table begin with, "On the night that Jesus was betrayed," and while we do remember the sacrifice of Jesus' death, coming to this table is just as much—if not more so—about Jesus' life.

In this week's study, we will explore Paul's concern that the Corinthians were turning this meal of unity into a display of inequality. In this podcast, we're going to take that insight one step further. We'll think together about how our tables—our church tables, family tables, even café tables—can become spaces where the hospitality of Christ still takes on flesh.

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Here's something to consider: Every time we gather at the table, we are being formed, not just fed.

In Corinth, the church had forgotten that the table shapes the soul. When the wealthy ate first and the poor went hungry, the act of eating reinforced the world's hierarchies instead of proclaiming the beloved community's welcome.

In the first-century Mediterranean world, sharing a meal wasn't just about eating. Positions at a dinner table—and even a person's presence at the table—sent powerful signals about status and inclusion and community. For the church in Corinth—a city with a real mix of rich patrons, freed people and slaves, merchants from all over the Mediterranean world, and everyone else in between—when people gathered in homes for a common meal, like we see Paul describing in 1 Corinthians 11, the way things were provided and arranged and served revealed more than just hospitality. Often these choices also revealed social divisions. Some people brought plenty of food and wine; they reclined and feasted. Others remained hungry or they were relegated to the margins of the table or sometimes even to another part of the house.

In the Greco-Roman world, diners would recline on couches arranged around a low table. And “places of honor” were clearly defined. For example, often the highest place of honor was to the right of the host, and from that seat importance decreased as a person moved around the table away from the host. In other cases, among Romans sometimes the “last place” on the middle couch might be the honored spot, while among some Greek communities the “first place” on the center couch was the position of honor. But whatever the situation, you can bet that everyone present at that dinner knew the unspoken rules. In short: Where you sat said either “you are important” or “you are less important.”

So, it's true: Paul's critique of the Corinthian church isn't just about bad manners. It's about how status and privilege were disrupting the meaning of community, the Lord's Supper, and the idea that in Christ there should be no division. When someone with less means came to the same table but ended up being ignored or humiliated, the table of unity becomes a place of exclusion. When we read this passage, we can hear Paul saying: “You're eating, you're drinking, but you're not discerning—not paying attention to and caring for—the body” (1 Corinthians 11:29). Part of discerning the body has to do with honoring one another, not just focusing on our own place at the table.

Social status still shows up around our tables today, even though it might look somewhat different. All you have to do is think about a middle school lunch room. Where people sit

matters. It also matters in our churches and in our families, in our communities and neighborhoods.

Here's a question to consider. Think about the last church meal that you attended. Who was missing? Who did what during that meal? Was everyone involved? Why or why not? What would it look like for your community to make its "table" more inclusive?

This is an important question because our own tables still carry formative power, and they communicate something very real about our community's values. A potluck that includes everyone says something different than one where the same small group always cooks or the same small group always cleans. Celebrating communion in a way that moves slowly enough for everyone to be seen and for everyone to be served teaches us something about grace.

So this week, as we move toward celebrating Thanksgiving in the United States and toward the holiday season in general, it's worth mentioning that for some people, the word "table" brings warm memories—family and laughter and celebration. But for other people, the word "table" can stir the ache of exclusion, times when they weren't invited, or times when they didn't feel safe to be themselves.

The Lord's Supper table engages both kinds of stories. It's a place where the hungry are fed and where the wounded and excluded are seen. Paul's call to "discern the body" reminds us that God's healing often begins just with shared presence, when someone finally feels noticed and included and valued.

Hospitality isn't just about offering food. It's about making room—making room for another person's story. Around the table, we practice this kind of "slow listening" that reminds us that each person is a bearer of God's image. When the church sets a table of genuine welcome, it becomes a place of restoration, where people who have felt unseen can find belonging again.

When Paul tells the Corinthians that the Lord's Supper proclaims Christ's death until he comes, he's reminding them that the meal itself tells the gospel story.

Each time we gather and make space for one another, we proclaim that love is stronger than status. When we serve instead of compete against one another, when we notice who's missing and draw them in, we proclaim that reconciliation is possible—and not just in heaven, but here and now.

Our tables can be signs of God's beloved community. So, when we serve communion, or invite someone new to dinner, or just slow down to share coffee with a friend, we're not just "being

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nice.” We are declaring, with our lives, that Christ’s table is still open. The table, I think, is one of God’s most ordinary classrooms. At the table, God teaches us how to wait, how to notice, and how to give and to receive.

As you go about your life this week, consider doing this “homework.” Share a meal or a coffee or a tea with someone from a different culture, or someone from a different social location than you, or maybe someone from a different theological background.

And then, when you join your Bible study group later this week, or maybe in a conversation with a friend, reflect together: What did you learn about the person that you shared a table with? And what did you learn about yourself?

Paul wanted the Corinthians to see that the table is not just about remembering Christ’s sacrifice, but embodying Christ’s care for each other.

Each time we sit down together, whether it’s for communion or coffee or just conversation, we participate in that same grace. The table is a place where love takes shape, and where the hungry are filled, and where the Spirit still gathers strangers together to become family.

So the next time you set a place at your table, remember: You’re creating a sacred space. You’re making room not only for another person, but also for the presence of God.