Pastor David M. Choi

**What Sin Does: Divides**

**Scripture Reading:** 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Last Wednesday my girlfriend and I went to go see a Broadway show in New York. And the show we watched was the musical adaption of the movie Mean Girls. Now if you haven’t seen it, or don’t know much about it, it’s basically about a girl named Cady Heron who moves from Africa to the United States, whereupon she has to quickly figure out how to navigate the toxic social scene of her new high school. When Cady arrives to her new school for the first time, she befriends two people, named Janis and Damian, who are sort of the weird kids that don’t really fit in. But they take innocent Cady under their wings anyway, because it’s clear that she doesn’t really fit in either. And as they’re helping her get settled in, there’s this vivid scene where they’re all standing inside the lunchroom together.

While inside the lunchroom, Janis and Damian start pointing out all of the different types of cliques within the school to help their new friend, Cady, make sense of who is who. At one table, there are the freshmen, and at another there are the preps. Also at their own tables, there are the jv jocks, art freaks, Asian nerds, cool Asians, varsity jocks, desperate wannabes, actual human beings, band geeks, cheerleaders, and then, of course, the plastics. (They’re the mean girls who sort of run the school and stomp on everyone else’s feelings.)

For many of us, this probably isn’t a difficult scene to imagine, since it brings to mind what we probably experience in our lunchrooms most days at school. Now if you can picture it, I’d like for you to hold onto that image, because in our passage for this evening we encounter something similar, only here the stakes are much higher, because it’s happening *within* the church amongst Christians, not to mention during the Lord’s Supper. In this passage, the Corinthians are celebrating the Lord’s Supper as part of a larger meal – or potluck – with each member bringing food for the service. Paul tells us that some members are showing up early, but instead of waiting for the others to arrive they go ahead and they start eating and drinking without them.

We should note that it isn’t random that some people are showing up early while others are showing up a little later. It’s very likely that the people showing up early were the wealthier members, since they would’ve had the time and leisure to do so. The poorer members of the church then – such as slaves, servants, and laborers – would’ve been those joining in later, since they’re the ones who had to work. As they come to break bread with one another, the wealthier members, of course, bring lots of food and wine with them, but the poorer members don’t contribute to the meal a whole lot, since they don’t have access to as many resources nor do they have the money to pay for it. And this was their loss because by the time they show up there’s nothing really left for them to eat or drink. The wealthier members had consumed all of it; and so, they’re the ones who go away drunk and full. But the poorer members, on the other hand, leave with nothing. In fact, they leave with stomachs that are now emptier than when they first arrived.

When Paul hears about this, he is immediately ticked off. He says, “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?... Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.” You see Paul is in shock that Christians could treat each other this way. He tells them that they would be delusional to think that what they’re doing is actually a celebration of the Lord’s Supper. For Paul, there is nothing Christian about their fellowship, since their communion has nothing to do with Jesus, even if it might seem like it does on the outside.[[1]](#footnote-1) In v.23, Paul explains why that is by shifting gears to give an account of the Lord’s Supper. He tells the Corinthians that a true celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a proclamation of Jesus’ death until he returns. Now whatever that might mean, Paul’s negative reaction, at the very least, tells us that they have failed to do that. So, what does it mean then to proclaim Christ’s death?

By proclaiming the Lord’s death *through the action* of eating bread and drinking wine, Paul means that communion ought to be a tangible way for believers to see and experience the gospel. This is why, in the church, communion is considered to be a sacrament, because it is a visible proclamation of the gospel. It is “[a]n embodied action that testifies to the reality that God loved us so much that he sent his Son to be an [atoning] sacrifice for our sins.”[[2]](#footnote-2) So, when Christians eat the bread and drink the cup they are proclaiming Christ’s death, because by doing so they are proclaiming the good news of the gospel. Let me put it this way. By giving up his body and pouring out his blood, Jesus paid the ultimate price for our sins and for our salvation. And so, by eating the bread and drinking the cup, Christians proclaim that they are recipients of God’s salvation, that they are now children of God, and that they belong to him. In this, they are reminded that nothing will be able to separate them from God’s love.

However, it goes even further than that, because by proclaiming the Lord’s death in this manner, Christians are also testifying to the gospel’s transformative impact in their own lives. They are proclaiming that the stories of their lives have now been radically flipped and altered. As Paul tells us, “You were once enemies of God, but now you are reconciled to God through the death of his Son.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Which means if you are reconciled to God in Christ you are now a new creation: “[For] if anyone is in Christ,” it says in 2 Corinthians, “[she] is a new creation.”[[4]](#footnote-4) And if you are a new creation, then that means you’ve been given a new identity. Your identity is literally made new.

The world classifies us according to our race, gender, age, sexuality, wealth, our talents, and our performances. But according to Paul, these things no longer define us, because now Jesus defines us. Therefore, regardless of our superficial differences, what defines each and every one of us at the core of our being is Jesus. As a result, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ. And if that’s true, then this fundamentally changes the way we relate to one another, since the way we relate to one another is no longer determined by the world’s standards, but rather the standards set by Christ. To this notion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “In Jesus, broken and divided humanity has become one… Christ opened up the way to God and to one another. Now Christians can live with each other in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In other words, *Christ determines the way we relate to one another by breaking down the dividing walls of hostility and by allowing us to enter into relationships with those we would not have chosen to otherwise*.

I think this gives us a better understanding of why Paul is so angry in this passage. The fact that the wealthier members can’t wait – or, are unwilling to wait – for the poorer members shows that they are still living outside of Christ. They are still viewing them as inferiors, according to their class, race, and gender. Because of that, it doesn’t even come across their minds that they should wait, because for them the people that matter have already arrived. Now it wouldn’t be entirely fair to say that the wealthier members were being intentional about this. That is, it’s not like they came together and schemed in a back room somewhere that they were going to eat up all of the food and drink all of the wine so that upon the arrival of other members they would feel bad. Their behavior was probably unintended. But by comparing what their current behavior is to what it should have been, Paul is highlighting for them the ways in which their life together is still being defined by the world and not by Christ. He’s demonstrating how they are still viewing one another from a human perspective, because if they were genuinely viewing one another through Christ their behavior would tell a different story.

For the wealthier members, they only did what they did because it felt natural to them. We get this. It only feels natural to hang out with people we’re close to. It only feels natural to hang out with people we have more in common with. It only feels natural to hang out with people who look like us. That’s why people intuitively know where to sit in their high school cafeterias. For instance, no one told the Asian nerds to sit together, no one told the varsity jocks to sit together, and no one told the band geeks to sit together. They just did it, it came about naturally. Having said that, Paul isn’t saying that it’s necessarily sinful for us to be with people we’re more inclined to get along with. That’s not what he’s saying. However, what is symptomatic of sin is our *inability* to step outside of our immediate social circles in order to be with those who differ from us. I know it seems so harmless, but in fact the social cliques we consider ourselves a part of, and the seats we sit in during lunch, all betray in some ways the broken spiritual reality of human relationships.

But Christ is now working to unite all things in him, starting with his church. And because of that, the church is now the principal site for people who normally wouldn’t come together to now come together and enter into relationships through love and service. By loving and serving people we normally wouldn’t love and serve, what we are doing is we are overturning the world’s divisions and shedding ourselves of its labels, and we are instead living into the common identity we now share in Christ.

Thus, we need to take seriously Paul’s warnings to the Corinthians as a warning for ourselves. We can come to church week in and week out, and go through all of the correct religious motions. But when it comes to doing life together in church, does is it actually look any different from the way our friends do life together at school in the halls or in the cafeteria? When you come to this place, are you actually attempting to be around people who you normally wouldn’t want to be around? Are you asking Christ to challenge the way you might view people as inferior to you? Are you genuinely trying to love those who you probably wouldn’t be inclined to love on your own? Paul says that what seems natural for the Corinthians is actually sin, because it has divided the body of Christ. And we are in danger of this as well when the only thing we’re willing to do when we come to youth group (and church) is to be around people we like and to wait only for those we think matter. But if that’s the case, how are you not contributing to the problem by creating more cliques and social divisions within Christ’s body?

In order to wrap up this series, everything we’ve talked about during this Lenten season now comes full circle. Here we see how the Corinthians are *enslaved* to sin by doing what seems most natural to them without any regard for the poorer members. We see how such sin then *destroys* the fabric of Christian community in Christ, because they are living according to the world’s standards and not according to the way Jesus taught them to live. And we see how their practices are actually born out of a *confused* notion of what it means to worship God through communion, because they have not allowed the gospel to transform the way the see and relate to others. This is why we need the forgiveness of the cross, that is, to eradicate the sin of our social presumptions. And this is why we so desperately need the power of the resurrection, to help us actually live into the new order now being established through Christ, the church.

1. Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Keith L. Johnson, “The Body of Christ,” from a sermon delivered at Wheaton College’s All School Communion service in 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Romans 5:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2 Corinthians 5:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)