Partaking “Unworthily”: Context, Meaning & the Lord’s Supper

Introduction

Few passages in the New Testament have been more misunderstood than Paul’s warning about partaking of the Lord’s Supper “unworthily” in 1 Corinthians 11. For generations, this phrase has often been interpreted to mean that believers must reach a certain inward spiritual condition—free from unconfessed sin or personal fault—before participating. As a result, the Lord’s Supper has been treated primarily as a private, introspective ritual rather than a communal act of covenant fellowship.

However, when Paul’s words are read in their full context, a different picture emerges. His rebuke is not aimed at personal imperfection but at the **manner in which the Corinthians were conducting the Supper as a communal meal**. The problem was not that they were eating a meal, but that they were doing so selfishly, divisively, and irreverently.

This paper examines what Paul actually meant by “unworthily,” and how the often-quoted phrase, *“Have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?”* (1 Corinthians 11:22), should be understood within that context.

---

1. What Does “Unworthily” Mean?

Paul writes:

> *“Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:27)*

The Greek word translated “unworthily” (*anaxiōs*) refers to **the manner of participation**, not the moral status of the person. It means:

- irreverently
- improperly
- in a way inconsistent with what the act represents

Paul is not saying, ***“Do not take the Supper unless you are worthy,”*** but rather, ***“Do not take it in an unworthy way.”***

Before examining Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians’ conduct, it is essential to clarify the meaning of the term “unworthily.” The next section will address this lexical point in detail.

---

2. Lexical Clarification: The Meaning of “Unworthily” (1 Corinthians 11:27, 29)

A proper understanding of Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11 requires careful attention to the Greek term translated “unworthily.” The word is the adverb **ἀναξίως (*anaxiōs*)**, which Thayer’s Greek Lexicon defines as ***“in an unworthy manner”*** (Strong’s G371). The term describes **how** an action is performed, not the inherent worth or moral status of the person performing it.

This distinction is crucial. Paul does not say that one must

be a ***“worthy”*** person before partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Rather, he warns against participating in a way that contradicts the meaning of the ordinance itself. The grammar of the passage places the emphasis on the **manner of eating and drinking**, not on the spiritual condition of the individual as a sinner.

This lexical meaning aligns precisely with the context of Paul’s rebuke. Earlier in the chapter, he identifies the Corinthians’ behavior as selfish and divisive:

> *“For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken.” (1 Corinthians 11:21)*

Their fault was not that they were eating a meal, but that they were doing so in a way that dishonored Christ and shamed fellow believers:

> *“Or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not?” (1 Corinthians 11:22)*

Thus, to eat and drink “unworthily” means to partake in a manner that disregards the unity of the body and the sacred meaning of the Supper. This is further confirmed by Paul’s statement:

> *“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.” (1 Corinthians 11:29)*

Here, “discerning the Lord’s body” must be understood in light of Paul’s earlier teaching that believers together constitute one body (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). The Corinthians failed to recognize both the communal nature of the Supper and the dignity of the gathered assembly.

The remedy Paul gives is not withdrawal from the Supper, but reform of conduct:

> *“Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another.” (1 Corinthians 11:33)*

If “unworthily” referred to a believer’s personal sinfulness or spiritual inadequacy, Paul’s solution would have been confession or abstention. Instead, he commands orderly, unified participation. This confirms that the problem was not the existence of the meal, but the unworthy manner in which it was being observed.

In summary, the lexical evidence demonstrates that Paul’s warning concerns irreverent and divisive participation rather than personal moral worthiness. The Lord’s Supper was being treated as a private feast rather than a covenantal act of fellowship. To partake “worthily,” therefore, is to partake in a way that honors Christ and His body by preserving unity, reverence, and mutual regard within the assembly.

To help visualize the difference between the biblical meaning of “partaking unworthily” and the modern misunderstandings of this phrase, the following brief video illustrates the contrast between Paul’s concern for communal conduct and the common assumption that the warning refers primarily to personal feelings of spiritual inadequacy.



END of First Video
Select an option below
Load 2nd Video
Replay Video 1

This visual example reinforces that Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11 addresses disorderly, selfish, and divisive behavior within the assembly—not the sincere believer who approaches the Lord’s Supper with humility and faith.

---

3. Paul Defines the Problem Before He Issues the Warning

Paul explains exactly what he means by “unworthily” earlier in the chapter:

> *“For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken.” (1 Corinthians 11:21)*

And again:

> *“What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not?” (1 Corinthians 11:22)*

The abuses Paul identifies are:

- selfishness (“every one taketh before other his own supper”)
- inequality (“one is hungry, another is drunken”)
- shaming the poor
- despising the assembly

These are not mystical failures. They are **social and communal sins** that destroy the unity of the body.

---

4. “Have Ye Not Houses to Eat and Drink In?” — What Paul Is (and Is Not) Saying

This verse is often interpreted to mean:

> *“You should not be eating a meal at the Lord’s Supper at all.”*

But that is not what Paul says.

The force of his question is rhetorical and corrective, not prohibitive.

Paul is saying:

> *“If your purpose is private indulgence and personal feasting, do*

> *that at home. Do not turn the Lord's Supper into a selfish meal that humiliates others."*

Notice carefully:

- He does **not** say, "Stop eating altogether."
- He says, "Stop eating in a way that despises the church and shames the poor."

This is confirmed by what he commands later:

> *"Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another." (1 Corinthians 11:33)*

Paul assumes they will still:

- come together
- eat
- do so as one body

If Paul were abolishing the meal entirely, verse 33 would make no sense. Instead, he corrects the **manner** of the meal, not the existence of the meal.

---

5. "Discerning the Lord's Body" in Context

Paul continues:

> *"For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." (1 Corinthians 11:29)*

In the immediate context, "the Lord's body" refers not only to

Christ’s body on the cross, but also to the gathered body of believers:

> *“For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.” (1 Corinthians 10:17)*

They were failing to recognize:

- the unity of the body
- the dignity of fellow believers
- the covenant nature of the meal

Their sin was treating the Supper as personal consumption rather than communal participation.

---

6. Why Later Teaching Drifted from Paul’s Meaning

As the Lord’s Supper gradually ceased to be connected with a real meal and became a short ritual within a worship service, the original abuses Paul addressed disappeared. Over time, “unworthily” was reinterpreted to mean:

- inward spiritual inadequacy
- unconfessed sin
- personal moral failure

This shifted the focus from:

> ***communal behavior and unity***
> *to*
> ***private introspection and fear***

But Paul never tells believers to refrain from the Supper

because they are sinners. He tells them to change how they treat one another when they partake.

---

7. The Seriousness of the Ordinance

Paul's warning is severe:

> *"For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." (1 Corinthians 11:30)*

The seriousness lies not in failing to achieve inward perfection, but in **despising the body of Christ through selfish and disorderly conduct**. The Lord's Supper is not casual. It is covenantal. It is communal. It requires accountability.

This concern directly applies to modern questions about authority, assembly, and practice. When the Supper is detached from the gathered body and from recognized oversight, it risks becoming private and casual—precisely the kind of misuse Paul condemned.

Conclusion

Paul's warning against partaking "unworthily" in 1 Corinthians 11 does not mean that believers must reach a flawless spiritual condition before participating. It means they must not participate in a way that contradicts what the Supper represents. The Corinthians' sin was not that they ate a meal, but that they ate it selfishly, dividedly, and without regard for the body of believers.

The statement, *"Have ye not houses to eat and drink in?"* is

not a rejection of the meal itself, but a rebuke of private indulgence that destroyed communal unity. Paul's remedy is clear:

> *"When ye come together to eat, tarry one for another."*

The Lord's Supper is meant to proclaim Christ's death through a unified, reverent, and orderly assembly. To partake rightly is to discern both the sacrifice of Christ and the body of believers who share in that one bread.

When Scripture is allowed to interpret Scripture, the issue is not whether believers are worthy enough to partake, but whether they are willing to partake in a manner worthy of the Lord and His body.

Questions & Answers on "Partaking Unworthily" and the Lord's Supper

(1 Corinthians 11)

Q1: Does "partaking unworthily" mean a believer must be free from all sin before taking the Lord's Supper?

Answer:
No. In 1 Corinthians 11, the word translated "unworthily" (*anaxiōs*) means "in an unworthy manner," referring to **how** the Supper was being observed, not the moral worthiness of the participant (1 Corinthians 11:27, 29).

Paul rebukes the Corinthians for selfish and disorderly

conduct:

> *“For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken.” (1 Corinthians 11:21)*

The issue is behavior that dishonors Christ and divides the body, not hidden personal sins or a requirement of spiritual perfection.

Q2: What does Paul mean by “discerning the Lord’s body”?

Answer:
In context, this refers both to Christ’s sacrifice and to the unity of the gathered believers as His body.

Paul had already taught:

> *“For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.” (1 Corinthians 10:17)*

The Corinthians failed to recognize the sacred unity of the assembly by shaming the poor and indulging themselves. They were not discerning the body of believers as Christ’s body.

Q3: Doesn’t Paul forbid a meal when he says, “Have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?” (1 Corinthians 11:22)?

Answer:
No. Paul is not forbidding a meal; he is rebuking **selfish private feasting** that destroyed the meaning of the Lord’s

Supper.

His question is rhetorical and corrective:

> *“What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not?” (1 Corinthians 11:22)*

Paul is saying:

> *If your purpose is personal indulgence, eat at home. Do not turn the Lord’s Supper into a selfish feast that humiliates others.*

This is proven by his later instruction:

> *“Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another.” (1 Corinthians 11:33)*

If Paul were abolishing the meal entirely, there would be nothing left to “wait for one another” to eat. Instead, he corrects the manner of the meal, not the existence of the meal.

Q4: Why does Paul say some were weak, sick, and had died (1 Corinthians 11:30)?

Answer:
Because the Corinthians were treating the Lord’s Supper with contempt through division and selfishness. They were despising the assembly and dishonoring Christ’s body.

> *“For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.” (1 Corinthians 11:30)*

The seriousness lies in **communal disrespect and disorder**, not

failure to confess every private sin before partaking.

Q5: What does it mean to “examine himself” (1 Corinthians 11:28)?

Answer:
Self-examination in this passage concerns one’s conduct toward the body of believers:

- Am I acting selfishly?
- Am I causing division?
- Am I treating others with contempt?
- Am I participating in a way that honors Christ and His body?

It is not a call to search for sinlessness, but to correct behavior that contradicts the meaning of the Supper.

Q6: Why is the Lord’s Supper often taught today as a purely inward, private moment?

Answer:
As the Supper gradually moved away from a shared meal and became a brief ritual within a worship service, the social abuses Paul addressed no longer occurred. Over time, “unworthily” was reinterpreted as referring to personal spiritual condition rather than communal misconduct.

This shifted the focus from:

unity and fellowship
to

> *introspection and fear*

Yet Paul’s concern was primarily with how believers treated one another in the gathered assembly.

Q7: What is the main lesson Paul teaches about the Lord’s Supper?

Answer:
The Lord’s Supper is:

- covenantal
- communal
- serious
- and governed by order

It is not casual, private, or individualistic.

Paul’s command summarizes his teaching:

> *“When ye come together to eat, tarry one for another.” (1 Corinthians 11:33)*

The Supper must reflect:

- unity
- reverence
- mutual regard
- and obedience to Christ

Closing Summary (for the Q&A section)

Paul’s warning about partaking “unworthily” does not concern personal sinlessness but improper participation that contradicts the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. The Corinthians were condemned not for eating a meal, but for turning a sacred communal act into a selfish private feast.

The statement, “Have ye not houses to eat and drink in?” is not a prohibition of the meal, but a rebuke of behavior that despised the assembly and shamed fellow believers. Scripture shows that the solution is not abstention, but reformation of conduct: waiting for one another and discerning the body.

When read in context, 1 Corinthians 11 calls believers not to fear the Supper, but to honor Christ and His body through unity, order, and reverence.
