

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church he started around the year 50 AD. He has since left the church in the hands of other leaders so that he might start other churches, and he writes this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to what he is hearing about some of the issues in the Corinthian church. So far he's addressed the pride and arrogance in the church that has led to division and rivalry, the sexual issues that are rampant in the church and culture, and in the last section he focused on how they should deal with the rampant idolatry in the city. In this next section, he is going to turn his attention to issues that are taking place in their worship gatherings.

Before we dive into the passage, I want to spend a few minutes giving you a crash course in how to read the Bible. When you read the Bible, some passages are easy to understand and easy to apply to your life; for example, last week's verse 1 Corinthians 10:31 – "so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Other passages, like the one we are going to read today, are not so easy. In fact, I would put the first 16 verses of 1 Corinthians 11 in the top 3 of New Testament passages that make you go "huh?" and are very difficult to understand what they mean for us today.

When you're reading and interpreting the Bible, there are two main tasks: **exegesis and hermeneutics**. Exegesis essentially answers the question "what does the passage mean in its original context?", and hermeneutics essentially answers the question "what does the passage mean for us today?" **You should recognize that two-step process in my preaching every week.** I typically begin by explaining what the passage meant in its original context, and then I unpack what the implications are for us today in 21st century America. One of the main errors people commit when reading the Bible is skipping the first task, exegesis, and going straight to the second one: what does the passage mean to me? But if you don't understand what it originally meant, you run the risk of making up a meaning that really isn't in the passage. **When you skip exegesis, you are assuming that God dropped the Bible out of the sky to 21st century Americans.** Doing the work of exegesis recognizes that the Bible was written by specific people, inspired by God, to specific people in specific cultural contexts, for a specific purpose.

So when you are reading and interpreting the Bible, the best way to do it is to **read it in its context**. First of all, you want to understand a passage in its **grammatical** context. Recognizing that the Bible was written primarily in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament), there are going to be times when you

need to understand what a word means in its original language, and recognize that the English translation might not mean exactly what you think it means. Secondly, you want to read it in its **literary** context. This means recognizing that a passage fits into a context: there are verses that come before it and verses that come after it. There is a purpose to the book, the letter, the passage, and the verses you are reading fit into that purpose. You can't just pluck a verse out of its context and assume that you are understanding it correctly. Reading in literary context also means reading a passage or book according to its **genre**. 1 Corinthians is an occasional letter, written to address what is happening in a church. Matthew is a gospel, an account of the life of Jesus designed to convince you that Jesus is the Messiah. Acts is a historical book, laying out the history of the early church. Revelation is apocalyptic literature, using symbolism and imagery in order to communicate spiritual truths. Psalms is musical poetry. You will go wrong in your interpretation if you read Psalms as history or Acts as a letter.

Thirdly, you want to read a passage in its **historical** context. If you want to understand what a passage means, it helps to know the historical and cultural context. Who wrote it? Who was it addressed to? What was going on in that situation? What was the culture like? What was the church like in those days?

There are many more things I could say about how to read the Bible, but for our purposes today, that is enough. I say all of that to tell you that when we read 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, if we are going to understand what Paul is saying, we need to answer some contextual questions, such as:

How do you translate and understand the Greek word “kephale” (translated here as head)?

How do you translate and understand “kata kephales echon,” literally “having down the head” –

Is he talking about head coverings or hairstyles? And what we do know about head coverings and hairstyles in ancient Greece?

What does Paul mean by “the very nature of things”?

How do you translate “epi” – on or over? Is it “authority on her head” or “authority over her head,” and either way, what does that mean?

With that in mind, let's read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16:

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 - *I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.* ³ *Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.* ⁴ *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head.* ⁵ *And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-- it is just as though her head were shaved.* ⁶ *If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.* ⁷ *A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.* ⁸ *For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;* ⁹ *neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.* ¹⁰ *For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.* ¹¹ *In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.* ¹² *For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.* ¹³ *Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?* ¹⁴ *Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him,* ¹⁵ *but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.* ¹⁶ *If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice-- nor do the churches of God.*

What is Paul trying to communicate to this church?

The main issue in question seems to be that some women in the Corinthian church are not wearing head coverings – **kata kephale echon** – especially when they pray or prophesy in the church meeting. And evidently there is something culturally wrong about this that Paul needs to correct.

¹³ *Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?*

So what are these head coverings? Our best understanding of what head coverings referred to is that for men, Roman men would wear the toga over the head at pagan sacrifices. Paul says that this practice would dishonor his head, Jesus, as it is a participation in idolatry.

⁴ *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head.*

Women, on the other hand, would wear a veil or kerchief on her head when they were out in public to show that they belonged to their husband. Covering their head communicated that they were modest, virtuous and untouchable. An uncovered head in public, on the other hand, meant that you were available. And so, a married woman who prayed or prophesied with her literal head uncovered dishonored her figurative head, her husband.

⁵ *And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-*

So apparently there were some women in the Corinthian church who were praying and prophesying with their head uncovered. Why were they uncovered? No one is entirely sure. Maybe because they were worshiping in homes, and so they didn't think they were in public. Or maybe because of the liberation and equality they experienced in the Lord had led them to believe they no longer needed to wear the head covering. Whatever the reason, Paul wants them to know that what they are doing is not a good thing. Why?

A Corinthian woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her husband

³ *Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*

What does “kephale,” translated here as head, mean? Three possibilities.

Some translate “kephale” as head meaning **authority**, i.e. man has authority over woman, or a husband has authority over his wife (“aner” can mean man or husband, and “gyne” can mean woman or wife). But that is anachronistic – we hear head as authority, but that is not how it was typically used in the literature of that time. Kephale was almost always used to talk about either an actual head on a body, or as something that was physically the top or extremity of an object. When it did refer to authority, it was in the context of a person having authority over a community, not the relationship between two people. And in the context of 1 Corinthians 11, we see that his focus is on shame and honor, not authority and subordination.

Some, typically scholars who object to how this verse has been used to promote the idea that men have authority over their wives, translate kephale as **source** – as in, the source of every man is Christ, the source of the woman is man, and the source

of Christ is God. But kephale as source is a very rare occurrence in the literature of this time, so this translation is unlikely.

The best translation is that in the literature of that time, kephale usually refers to the **physical top or extremity of an object, that which is first temporarily or spatially, that which is representative by virtue of its prominence**. Head was almost always the topmost representing the whole. The kephale of the family is the one who represents its public face, the representative person who focuses its identity. The head of the family publicly symbolized the family's honor, and members of the family were to behave in public so as to not bring disgrace or dishonor to that person and the family's good name. The wife would do this through her personal integrity and sexual purity, and wearing the head covering in public

Paul is making the point that in Corinthian culture, a married woman's behavior brings either shame or honor on her husband as the prominent member in the family, just as a man's behavior brings either shame or honor on Jesus, and just as Jesus' behavior would bring shame or honor on God the Father. And for a married woman to not dress in a culturally modest way dishonors her husband. He makes a cultural comparison to hair length to make his point.

¹³ *Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?* ¹⁴ *Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him,* ¹⁵ *but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.*

“The very nature of things” is an expression in Paul's day that refers to “the ordering of how things are,” societal conventions, what is understood to be right by the culture – he contends that it is shameful according to their cultural mores for men to have long hair or for women to have their heads shaved.

¹⁰ *For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.*

Authority epi (on or over). Some argue that the head covering is a sign that she is under the authority of her husband. But this is unlikely, for he would have said a sign of subordination on her head. **More likely is that the head covering is a sign of authority over her head, that she is exercising control over her head by covering it and demonstrating her faithfulness to her husband.** What about the reference to angels? It probably means that they are present in worship as observers – pay them heed through your modesty.

Paul's point is that when a wife converts to Christianity and learns that she is set free in Christ so that she can pray and prophesy in public, it does not mean that she can disregard social conventions. A good analogy might be a **Muslim woman** who commits to Christ not giving up the hijab but respecting the customs of modesty, so as not to offend.

Having said that, notice first of all that Paul expects that both men and women may pray and prophesy in the assembly. Prophecy as pastoral preaching that offers guidance and instruction to build up the church. Also, notice that they are interdependent – this is about shame and honors, not about authority and submission or superiority and inferiority.

The bottom line is to take into account cultural expectations related to shame and honor so as to not bring shame upon God or others in the church. The gospel is already offensive enough; there is no need to add more offense.

Paul moves on to talk about The Lord's Supper

¹⁷ In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. ²² Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not! ²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ²⁷ Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not

come under judgment. ³² When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. ³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. ³⁴ If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.

In Corinth, there were no church buildings like we have today, but the churches met in homes, typically the homes of wealthy patrons who had enough space to fit a good-sized crowd of people. What was likely happening was that the church was meeting on a Sunday evening, and people would bring what were called basket dinners to eat in fellowship with others. The host would provide the bread and wine for communion. In a typical wealthy person's house, the dining room, known as the triclinium, was where the guests of honor would eat, and the atrium was where the rest would squeeze in. Paul rebukes the church for how the Lord's Supper gathering has become a time of division.

¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.

What was likely happening is that the wealthy members brought their food and ate nice meals in the dining room. The lower class members probably arrived late, as they were poor freedmen and slaves who did not have control over their own schedules. When they would arrive, the wealthy members had already feasted, and the lower class members had little or nothing of their own to eat.

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. ²² Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not!

He warns them that they are under God's judgment for the way they are turning the Lord's Supper into a self-centered feast:

²⁷ Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick,

and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

Let me share two implications for us today:

1) Regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper as a reminder of Jesus' sacrificial death that saves us from our sins and reconciles us to God

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The last supper took place on Passover. Jesus took a Passover meal and gave it new meaning. The bread is his body, the cup his blood. By his death, he has freed us from death just as the Lamb did in the Exodus. Astounding. Imagine me doing this about the 4th of July, saying that it's about the independence I have won for you.

Jesus declared that he was making a **new covenant** with them. Old covenant was at Mt. Sinai with Moses. Brings back God's promise in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 - "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

The writer of Hebrews explains:

*Hebrews 9:12-15 - He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! ¹⁵ For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new **covenant**, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance-- now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first **covenant**.*

When we celebrate communion, we remember and explain the significance of his death for our sins and remember the new covenant we enjoy with God because of Christ's death.

2) We honor Jesus as we follow His example of sacrificial love in remembrance of Him

In a remarkable rebuke, Paul tells them that what they are doing is not the Lord's Supper.

²⁰ *When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.*

Do you hear what Paul is saying here? Even though you are technically going through the ritual of the Lord's Supper by sharing in the bread and the cup and reciting the words, you are NOT eating the Lord's Supper. What does he mean? **It's not about the form!** It's not about the ritual!

The Lord's Supper is not about saying some words and having a meal, as if it was some sort of magic experience. It's about the spirit. (Uncle Walter example) It is about uniting ourselves with a Lord and Savior who gave up His advantages and rights for our salvation. Therefore, it compels us to follow His example. What the Corinthians are doing, by excluding and dividing, does not proclaim the Lord. This is not the Lord's Supper. And God hates empty worship.

Isaiah 1:11-17 - "The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. ¹² When

*you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? ¹³ Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your **evil assemblies**. ¹⁴ Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; ¹⁶ wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, ¹⁷ learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.*

Do you hear God's heart in this passage? Your worship is empty to me, because you are acting in injustice towards your neighbor. The Corinthian experience is no different. And so Paul tells them that need to examine themselves. They are not acting in the spirit of the Lord's Supper. Every person, regardless of gender, social class, race, or any other worldly division, is equal at the foot of the cross. Therefore, welcome one another and share your food instead of acting in greedy and divisive self-interest.

Perhaps when Jesus told his followers to **"do this in remembrance of me,"** he **meant more than just celebrating a meal**. He also meant that we should do what he is doing in remembrance of him. We should also become broken bread and poured out wine; sacrificing our rights, our interests, and even our lives out of love for our neighbor.

We proclaim Jesus' death not just by sharing a meal together as brothers and sisters, but by following in His footsteps in the way we sacrificially love others. Particularly timely in this time of the Coronavirus. We have opportunity to love our neighbor sacrificially.

Historically, plagues and epidemics have been times when the church shines in their courageous, sacrificial love. One thing that contributed to both the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity was two epidemics that took place during the years 165 and 251. The difference between the response of the Christians and the pagans was striking. Consider the words of Dionysius, the bishop of Corinth:

"Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ,

and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

“The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.”

According to history, Galen, the famous classical physician of Rome, lived through the first epidemic because when it hit, he got out of Rome quickly, retiring to a country estate in Asia Minor until the danger receded. That typified the response of the Romans.

Again, as Tertullian, another early Christian leader, said, *“It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’”*

Following Jesus is not about participating in empty rituals. It is about celebrating His sacrificial death for us, and then going out to love others sacrificially in remembrance of Him, to honor Him.