

Sermon 1 Corinthians 11 “Living in a fish bowl.”

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- Picture. This is Tish the fish. He died in 1999 at the age of 43.

He was found dead at the bottom of his bowl after a short illness and was buried in a yoghurt carton at the bottom his garden in Yorkshire. Can you imagine living in a bowl for 43 years?! Can you imagine swimming around in circles in that tiny space for 43 years?

DO you think, as Christians, that we might sometimes live our life that way? In a fishbowl. In our own comfortable world. Especially when it comes to relationships – sometimes we find it hard to step outside of our own world, our own fiends, our own fishbowl. This is what 1 Corinthians 11 wants to challenge us about:

- **“Are we living in a fish bowl? Are there times we keep to ourselves as Christians? And are we willing to look a little further beyond our own world for the sake of relationships?”**

Corinth is a church that is having problems relating to each other. People are coming to church and just doing their own thing. And Paul says to them: This is not church. Church is not about keeping to yourself and focusing on yourself. As Christians, we need to look beyond our own private world and see the people and the relationships around us.

And 1 Corinthians 11 is often a difficult passage to talk about because it says things about the roles of husbands and wives which we often find controversial. But there are really important principals in this passage. Some of the details are cultural, but the big picture is a principal we need to understand as Christians today. He principal is really simple – relationships are important. And Paul uses two examples of relationships in this chapter:

1. Husbands and wives, and
2. The Lord’s Supper (Communion)

First, Husbands and wives.

What seems to have been happening in Corinth is that a husband and wife would come to church and completely disregard their marriage. Could you imagine a husband and wife turning up to church and taking off their wedding rings at the door and just doing their own thing in church? It would be strange wouldn’t it? But that’s what was happening in the church in Corinth. Except instead of taking off their wedding rings, in that culture 2000 years ago, they would do things with their hair. A wife would come in and let her hair down. In those days, that would signify that she was single and free and independent. She would behave as if she wasn’t married. And the men would do similar cultural things, acting as if they were not married while they were at church.

And Paul says: You can’t just forget your relationships when you come to church! And Paul talks about the order that God created and the importance of those relationships in every day life. For example, verse 11:

“In the Lord however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.” (Note that the words Paul uses refer to “husband” and “wife”.)

In the marriage relationship there is a dependence upon each other. A two way relationship. And you can’t just ignore that when you come to church. But we’re not going to discuss the details of this here. Because the heart of what Paul is saying is the important thing: we are created as people in relationships. And we cannot ignore our relationships when we come to church.

Some people like to come to church and forget about their life – and their relationships. People have often said to me that they like to come to church and switch off from the world – including family, friends and work – and just focus on God. But we can't do that! Because those relationships are part of who we are. We can't come to church and say: "I just want to worship God on my own!" That's not church! And then Paul turns to his second example:

2. The Lord's Supper. From verse 17, 20-21:

- *"¹⁷In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good....²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk."*

Now surely you would think that the Lord's Supper is the one place you would expect to find **unity** in a church! But not in Corinth. Everyone looks after himself. Everyone is in his own goldfish bowl. So Paul says, from verse 28:

- *"²⁸A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."*

Paul is saying: When you share in this meal you need to look around you and **recognise the body of the Lord**. The people around you ARE the body of the Lord! US, together. God's church. And Paul says, when we come to share this meal, we can't ignore the people we're sharing this meal with! In Corinth, when they came together for the Lord's Supper, there were rich people over here stuffing themselves full of food and wine and getting drunk, and there are poor people and slaves over here, who are starving, and sick and even dying because they are so poor. And no-one in the church over here is even noticing them!

- These people were only looking after themselves. Living in their own fish bowl. Forgetting about the relationships in their lives. And because of that, they can't see the needs of the people around them.

Let me suggest today that we all probably have at least 3 relationship circles in our lives.

1. There's the inner circle – our closest friends. The people we share everything with. The people you really look after in your life – and they look after you. They are **in** your fish bowl.
2. Then there's the second circle. People who you know a bit about. You call them friends, but you're not involved much in their life.
3. Then there's the third circle. The outer circle. You know their name, maybe. But you're not involved in their life at all. You've probably ever been to their house or talked to them for more than 5 minutes. They may be very different to you – age, interests, family life.

Of course, when we look around our church, we can't know everyone on a very personal, inner circle, level. But when we come to church each week, we can often find ourselves talking to the same people in the same group – our inner circle.

But I want us to think about this. Think about those people in your third, outer circle. The people you hardly know at all. The people outside your fish bowl. Consider this. Those people in your outer circle are often in **everybody's** outer circle. It's possible that **nobody** knows them really well. **Nobody** knows what sort of week they've had. **Nobody** knows the struggles they're facing in life at the moment.

Paul challenges us with this in verse 31:

- *"³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment."*

What's he saying? Look at yourself. Your fish bowl. Can you judge yourself and just ask: Am I looking out for people who are in need? Am I looking out for people who are in the outer circle? Are there people I could be reaching out to a **little** more?

Paul is writing to a church where people are walking in to church worship God on their own. And they forget about everyone else around them. Church is all about them. They are in their own little fishbowl.

- What does Paul say about that church? Verse 17: *“your meetings do more harm than good.”*

People often say to me: “All Saints is a really welcoming church”. Many people feel really welcome at this church. And this is important. It’s been shown that a church that welcomes well will grow twice as fast. And churches who help people join in church life, like small groups, will also grow twice as fast. Do both of those things and you’ll grow 4 times as fast!

People hear this sort of thing and often say to me: “We need more training for welcoming. We need another welcoming program. We need a better follow up system for newcomers.”

But actually, all we need is people. Not programs. Church changes when one person looks a little and sees the need around them. When you and I actually talk to people. When we take that responsibility on ourselves.

This week I talked to someone who is unable to get to their church anymore because of health reasons. They said “I think everyone’s forgotten about me.” I believe if we hear what Paul is saying to us in this chapter, and open our eyes a little wider, we will see the needs around us better. And we won’t need programs. Just ourselves.

- We live life in relationships. God wants us to keep stepping out of our comfortable fishbowl. The same way Jesus did when he came down from heaven to earth to be with us. Ephesians 2:13 says:

*“But now in Christ Jesus **you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.**”*

That’s what Jesus has done for us. Reached out to us and brought us near to him. Brought us into his inner circle. That’s what he wants this family to be. Bringing people near. Bringing people into this family of God.

- Wouldn’t it be terrible to live for 43 years in a fishbowl? And isn’t it great to know that we don’t have to!