

"COMMUNION AND COMMUNITY"

Before Connie and I took off for our vacation, I planned a new series for May titled *"How to love life and see good days."* The focus of this series is our unity in Christ. The beautiful theme verse for it is **1 Peter 3:8-11**, *Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰ For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; ¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it.* At one point I almost decided to do something different but thought it best to stick with this. With that Scripture as our theme, we will look at various Scriptures that speak to the issue of unity in the church and our responsibilities to each other.

We've been celebrating *The Lord's Supper*, or *communion*, in every service during the lead-up to Easter, and I knew we would be doing so this morning, so I wanted to begin with the relationship in Scripture between Communion and community.

An article on the Gospel Coalition website recently highlighted what a hard time this has been. Let me read a few lines.

The past year has been filled with challenges and difficulties... underneath the headlines and debates, underneath the health department orders and tweetstorms, has been a steady stream of human suffering.

This year has left a trail of hurting, struggling, confused, and isolated image-bearers in its wake. Anxiety, depression, suicide (considered or attempted), financial hardships, anger, marital discord, and relational tensions are seemingly at all-time highs.

Here we are as the body of Christ in this challenging time, and what is needed right now? Many things, I am sure, but we have been focused on the central truths of the gospel in the last months and celebrating the Lord's Supper in every service. So let's take time today to come before God and ask him to help us understand how we draw life and healing grace from him and then celebrate, strengthen and share that life with him and with one another in Communion and community.

One thing that stands out in the verses we have read today is that The Lord's Supper or Communion matters. 1 Corinthians 10:16 says, The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? The Greek word translated participation twice in verse 16 is Koinonia which is also translated fellowship or Communion.

I. COMMUNION IS NOT AN EMPTY RITUAL. IT IS AN IMPORTANT, LIFE-GIVING GIFT THAT STRENGTHENS US ALL.

Three things highlight the significance of the Lord's Supper. First,

A. The importance of Communion is revealed by the multiple names used to describe it.

Some people ask if we should call it *Communion, The Lord's Supper, or The Lord's Table, "the cup of blessing," "the breaking of bread," or The Eucharist?* The answer is "Yes!" All those expressions are used for taking the broken bread and the cup, as Jesus said, in remembrance of him. It is *Communion* because we have *Communion* with Christ and each other. It is the "*cup of blessing*" because God blesses us, and we bless him. *The word Eucharist* means "thanksgiving." It is the *Eucharist* because Christ gave thanks for the cup though it meant his sacrifice. We give thanks to him for our salvation. It is called *the breaking of bread* because he is the bread of life broken for us to spiritually feed us. It is *The Lord's Supper* or *The Lord's Table* because he is the host who invites us to receive his gifts.

Second,

B. The importance of Communion is also reflected in the frequency with which we are to observe it.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are both uniquely set apart in Scripture as important and meaningful God-given signs and seal of God's grace. They are both outward, physical, visible signs of inward, spiritual, invisible gifts of God's grace. They stand apart from any other rituals or ceremonies we might observe because of three characteristics shared only by them. 1.) that are both ordained by Jesus in the gospels 2.) They were both practiced by the church in the book of Acts. 3.) The meaning of both of them is expounded by the apostles in the epistles or letters to the churches. These three things set them apart.

Of the two, most Christians probably know more about baptism and place more weight on baptism than the Lord's Supper. But that is odd. I

heard a well-known Bible teacher Sinclair Ferguson say that if you looked on his bookshelf, you would find four times as many books on baptism as there are on the Lord's Supper. He said it occurred to him that that is odd because baptism is the sacrament that you only need to do once (some of you have done it more than once), but the Lord's Supper is supposed to be something you receive continually throughout your Christian life. I was Baptized twice, once as an infant and then again after coming to faith. At different seasons in my life, I have received the Lord's Supper at least once a month and often once a week. I did some calculations, and I estimate I have received the Lord's Supper well over 700 times so far. Without minimizing the importance of baptism, let's elevate the importance of the Lord's Supper. Whether we receive it once a month or every week as we have recently, either way, we do it often, and we should see its importance. It is the cup of blessing which we bless.

Third,

C. The importance of Communion is reflected in the sacramental reverence with which we are to receive it.

In **1 Corinthians 10:16** he says it is a participation in the body and blood of Jesus. In the next chapter he tell us not to take it in an unworthy manner. There is a sacredness to it. The word *sacrament* is often misunderstood. It comes from the Latin word *Sacramentum*. It originally meant a solemn oath or ceremony that created a bond. *Sacramentum* in turn comes from the word *Sacro* which means *set apart or consecrated*. The bread and cup were set apart by Jesus as his *sacramentum*. In Communion we *receive* the sacrament, the bread and cup and with it his promise. The Lord's Supper isn't primarily about a promise you make to Christ. It is the chosen sign and seal of the promises God makes to you in Christ. That's no small thing.

Most denominations accept Saint Augustine's definition of a sacrament as an outward sign of an inward grace instituted by Jesus. Please don't allow yourself to fall into the error of thinking that because it is an outward sign, it is somehow unimportant. ***We all know that physical things can be the means of communicating important truths in ways that words alone do not.*** Imagine I meet you at the door and say: "Hello, I am glad to see you." With no smile, no sparkle in the eye, no inflection of tone. Is something lost? Does a handshake, fistbump, hug, or kiss matter? I think so. Who invented the kiss? It's weird if you just analyze it. It's not hygienic. But would you want to only say words of love and never, ever, get a hug or receive a kiss or have someone

take your hand? Who would ever claim that all of those physical acts and expressions are just rituals without value? Yes, it is possible, because of fallen human nature, for things that are done often to become nothing more than empty rituals. Given enough time and a bit of spiritual laziness and we can take what God graciously gave us as a pledge of love, and we can push it into some recess of lifeless ritual or mindless ceremony where the incredible sweetness and deep power the Lord imparted to it is buried under crusty layers of formalized rituals. We have to fight against that. The Lord's Supper is a gift chosen by Jesus to picture what he has done for us and what it means to receive his love by faith. Be blessed in and nourished by his sacrificial love for us. Have faith. Believe this, *Communion is not an empty ritual. It is an important, life-giving gift that strengthens us.*

How does Communion strengthen us? Look at the verses again, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 says, The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

II. WHEN YOU, AS A BELIEVER, RECEIVE COMMUNION IN FAITH, YOU ARE SPIRITUALLY FEEDING ON THE BREAD OF LIFE.

Notice the words “*participate*” and “*partake*” are used repeatedly here.

A. When you receive Communion, you are partaking of Christ the bread of life.

1. Jesus commanded his disciples, "Take, eat; this is my body given for you" (Matt. 26:26). As we individually receive the cup for ourselves, each one of us is *by that action* proclaiming, "I am receiving the benefits of Christ's death."

2. Jesus says, do this in remembrance of me. But remembrance in the Bible is never just remembering. It is taking to heart, treasuring the reminder, entering into the meaning. When we do this, we participate in or share in the benefits earned for us by the death of Jesus.

3. The bread and cup of the Lord's Supper picture Jesus' real spiritual presence and our true spiritual nourishment. That does not mean the bread and the cup miraculously become the literal body and blood of Jesus Jesus spoke in symbolic ways many times when speaking of himself. He said, for example, "I am the door" (John 10:9).

"I am the true vine" (John 15:1). In a similar way, Jesus says, "This is my body." The bread and cup of the Lord's Supper do not change into the literal body and blood of Christ. The bread and cup gave a visible sign of a spiritual reality. But understand: The spiritual reality communicated by the bread and the cup is that Jesus not only died for us back then but is here with us right now. He himself is present, and he nourishes us as we receive his grace by faith.

Do you know the verse in **Revelation 3:20** where Jesus says, *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.* That verse is often used as an invitation to salvation. But in the context it is part of a message to a church. It is far more clearly applicable to Christian as an invitation to open the door of faith and draw near to Christ and experience his presence with us. Jesus promised to be especially present whenever believers gather for prayer and worship. As we receive bread and cup in the presence of Christ, we partake of him and all his benefits spiritually. We "feed on him in our hearts" with thanksgiving, so it is the *Lord's Supper*, and *Communion* and *eucharist* and *blessing*.

4. The bread and the cup are given to help weak people gain strength. This helps us understand what it means in the next chapter when we are told to examine ourselves and warned not to take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. It does not mean we have to be worthy people. It means we have to come relying on Christ and trusting in Him, and receiving grace. It's preposterous to present the need for self-examination in such a way that we lead people to believe that if they have been weak, they can not partake of the Lord's Supper, which has been given to bless and strengthen our lives. It would be like saying to someone who is undernourished and suffering because of it, "Well, you need to fix your problem, and then, when you do, we'll let you have some food." It is for the weak and the unworthy who admit their deep need for help and grace. Come partake of the strength offered, the grace held out to you, and be nourished in faith.

One more thing...

B. When you receive Communion, you are powerfully reminded that you share the same grace of Jesus with each other.

1 Corinthians 10:17, *Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.* Christian community is built on the fact that there is a shared connection to Christ, and

because of that, there is a connection to each other that calls us into the fellowship of a common life centered on Jesus.

In a little book titled: *"Everybody's Normal Until You Get To Know Them."* John Ortberg says we've got to realize that when we deal with real people, it's sort of like shopping at the "as is" sales table in a clothing store. This is where clothing marked "*slightly irregular*" is sold. This is the *Something Went Wrong* department. I remember buying a shirt once that seemed like a great deal, but when I went home, the shoulder seams were way up on my collar bones. Slightly irregular means there is a flaw here somewhere. We're not going to tell you what it is, But we know it's there, so when you find it and you will find it, or else someone else will point it out, don't come back to the store whining and expecting a refund. You have to take it "*as is.*" When you deal with human beings, even people touched by the grace of God, when you deal with a church, even a good church, you are always dealing with that which is slightly irregular. If you are looking for perfection, you are not just in the wrong church. You are on the wrong planet. That's true whether you are talking about romance, friendship, family, or community. Sure there are some things too evil or abusive to be tolerated, but there are a lot of other things that are just part of the slightly irregular quality of life in a sinful world filled with real people.

As Christians, we should have no problem accepting this because we worship a God who is not only God but also Savior for sinners. That means we live in a house whose foundation is grace. Every time we have the Lord's Supper, we confess that His body had to be broken and His blood shed for us to even belong to the community of the redeemed. By His grace, if you believe, you do belong to him. He accepted you "*as is.*" He'll make the needed alterations in time. I think a lot of us get that. But what we need to remember this morning is that in choosing us for Himself, Christ also chooses us for each other. In the Scriptures, the church is not just a service you attend. It is the community of Christians to which you belong.

Conclusion

Let us let our celebration of Communion remind us we are in Communion with Christ, we partake of his saving grace and his nourishing, life-giving presence by faith, and we do this together because, in him, we are one.

Amen.

A Prayer for Receiving Christ

Almighty God, You have beautifully revealed your love in Jesus whose body was broken, whose blood was shed for our salvation. I confess my sins and admit my need for your saving grace. I have gone my own way and sinned against you. I turn to Christ, the bread of life and trust in him for my redemption. I believe he died on the cross to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. Grant me the eternal life promised to all who come to him in faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord Jesus, in my weakness I need the life-giving nourishment that only, ultimately comes from Christ. Forgive the foolishness and sinfulness into which I so often fall. Feed me with the bread of life. Nourish my spiritual life with the hidden food of grace revealed in Jesus. Enable me, by your Holy Spirit to live in deep communion with him and with my brothers and sisters who share in his grace with me. Amen.

A Prayer for People who need Christ.

I pray not only for myself and the church but also for others who also need Christ. Please send your Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the people you have placed in my life, to draw them to Jesus and make them kingdom laborers. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.