

The Last Supper

Mark 14:12-26

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In recent years, there has been a trend amongst parents to move away from giving their children tangible gifts and towards giving children experiences. The theory is that experiences are much longer-lasting gifts; gifts children will remember forever.

Jesus was a master at creating experiences for His disciples. He was intentional about the things He did with them, knowing those experiences would stick with them. Probably nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the last supper he shared with the disciples. Everything about that night was a rich experience that no one ever forgot. And that was the point. Even today, we remember that experience, and hopefully the lessons Jesus was teaching in it.

Preparations

The last several weeks, we have looked at several events that happened during the last week of Jesus' life. Jesus and His disciples had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In our passage today, we have finally arrived at the time to celebrate these feasts. Mark tells us a bit about the preparations for the Passover meal.

¹² On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go to prepare the Passover meal for you?"

¹³ So Jesus sent two of them into Jerusalem with these instructions: "As you go into the city, a man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴ At the house he enters, say to the owner, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?' ¹⁵ He will take you upstairs to a large room that is already set up. That is where you should prepare our meal." ¹⁶ So the two disciples went into the city and found everything just as Jesus had said, and they prepared the Passover meal there. (Mark 14:12-16, NLT)

Passover was a big deal for the Jewish people. It involved a significant amount of preparation, so the disciples wanted to know where Jesus planned to meet so they could get everything ready. Jesus gave them specific instructions about how to find the place. He said to look for a man carrying a pitcher of water and follow him, then at the house the man enters, they should tell the owner that "the Teacher" was asking about the guest room for the Passover meal. He would take them upstairs to a room prepared especially for them. That was where they should prepare the meal.

The sign Jesus gave them was to look for a man carrying a water pitcher. This would have been distinctive, as usually women carried water pitchers, not men. If men were carrying water, usually it would be in a skin or pouch. Many believe this was a pre-

arranged signal Jesus had worked out with the owner in advance. We don't know if that was the case or if Jesus was just exercising divine knowledge. The reason Jesus told them to find the house this way (as opposed to just giving them an address) was likely that He wanted to keep the location a secret, lest their meal be interrupted by His betrayal. Jesus knew He would be betrayed but wanted to ensure it happened at the right time. These steps would ensure Judas wouldn't know the location until he arrived.

The two disciples did as Jesus said, found the room prepared for them, and went about preparing the meal. Typically, the Passover meal would involve sacrificing a lamb at the temple, then roasting the entire lamb over an open fire. There would also be three circles of unleavened bread, four cups of wine, a bowl of salt water (which represented the tears the Israelites shed in Egypt), a bowl of bitter herbs (which symbolized the bitterness of their slavery), and the charoset, which was a mixture of apples, dates, pomegranates, and nuts all made into a paste (this symbolized the bricks the slaves had to make). These were all integral parts of the Passover celebration, so the preparations had to be carried out carefully. The disciples did as they were told, and then seemingly returned to Jesus and the others to take them to the place where they would celebrate the meal.

Predicting Betrayal

After they arrived, Jesus made a prediction that shook the gathering to its core.

¹⁷ In the evening Jesus arrived with the Twelve. ¹⁸ As they were at the table eating, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, one of you eating with me here will betray me." ¹⁹ Greatly distressed, each one asked in turn, "Am I the one?" ²⁰ He replied, "It is one of you twelve who is eating from this bowl with me. ²¹ For the Son of Man must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago. But how terrible it will be for the one who betrays him. It would be far better for that man if he had never been born!" (Mark 14:17-21, NLT)

Jesus told the disciples that one of them gathered there would betray Him. Mark says each disciple asked Jesus if they were the one. The way the question is written in Greek assumes a negative answer, i.e. "It's not me, right?" Each disciple hoped they would not be the one to betray Jesus. But I think they each also recognized they could be.

Jesus simply said it was one of the twelve eating from the same bowl as Him. That didn't narrow things down much. He also said that the man who betrays Him would face a fate worse than death.

The other gospels record a bit more detail about this prediction. In John's gospel, we are told that Peter leaned over to John and asked him to ask Jesus who He was talking about. The disciples would have been reclining toward the table on low couches, so John would have been next to Jesus, and could easily ask Him the question privately. Jesus responded by saying that it was the one to whom He handed the morsel He dipped in the bowl—and then He handed it to Judas, who was on the other side of Jesus.

Why did Jesus do this? I believe He was giving Judas one more chance to turn back from his plan. To offer food from your bowl to someone else was an act of friendship. Jesus was giving Judas one more opportunity to repent. Though God's plan utilized Judas' betrayal and brought good out of it, God didn't make Judas betray Jesus—Judas chose to do so. Jesus gave him a chance to repent but Judas' heart was hard, so Jesus told him go and do what he must.

The other disciples apparently didn't register what was going on. Jesus didn't come right out and say Judas would betray Him that night, and with good reason—if He had, the other eleven would have tackled him and held him down...or worse! Jesus knew what lay ahead, and He didn't try to stop it. He knew that this betrayal, as awful and terrible as it was, would ultimately lead to good.

This encounter shows us the tenderness of Jesus, even toward those who fail Him over and over again. Jesus continued to hold out an olive branch, an offer of friendship to Judas, even though He knew the evil that lay within Judas' heart. Jesus hadn't completely written Judas off. He was willing to forgive him—if he repented. Judas didn't repent and suffered the consequences of that choice. We should take a lesson from Judas and remember that while Christ's love for us is bigger than we can imagine, we are foolish if we think our sin will not bear consequences.

This is also a reminder that we can never know what is really going on inside a person's heart. The disciples did not suspect that Judas would be the one to betray Jesus. The others seemed to trust him implicitly, allowing him to handle the money. I suspect it was not until later that they realized Judas had been pilfering from their funds all along.

The lesson here isn't that we shouldn't trust people, but rather that we should recognize that every person is deeply flawed, sinful to our core. We must be patient with people and must be careful not to put anyone on a pedestal—because every one of us, under the right (or wrong) circumstances will fall.

The Meal

After the revelation of Jesus' impending betrayal, Mark shifts gears and tells us about the meal itself.

²² As they were eating, Jesus took some bread and blessed it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take it, for this is my body."²³ And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them, and they all drank from it.²⁴ And he said to them, "This is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice for many.²⁵ I tell you the truth, I will not drink wine again until the day I drink it new in the Kingdom of God."²⁶ Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. (Mark 14:22-26, NLT)

What Mark records for us became the basis for what we now know as our communion celebration. These are familiar words, but my hope this morning is to help us put them

in a new context—to help us to hear the words as the disciples did that night in the upper room.

The Passover meal was highly scripted and highly symbolic. Everyone around Jerusalem would be saying the same words and doing the same things. The intent was to remind the Israelites of how God delivered them from Egypt and to give them hope of a day when they would be delivered by God once more.

The Passover meal would begin with the host (which would have been Jesus) praying over the first cup of wine, after which they would all drink of it. The host would then wash his hands three times as part of the normal cleansing ritual. Then everyone would take parsley, dip it into the salt water and eat. The parsley symbolized the hyssop the Israelites used to smear blood over the doorposts, and the salt water was a reminder of the tears of the Israelites in Egypt, as well as the Red Sea, which God led them through.

After this, they would break the first loaf of unleavened bread and eat together. Then the host would retell the story of God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. After this, the group would sing Psalms 113-114 together. They would then drink from the second cup of wine, after which everyone would wash their hands in preparation for the meal.

The host would say a brief prayer, then distribute pieces of the unleavened bread to everyone, who would put the bitter herbs between the two pieces and dip it into the fruit paste and eat it. It may have been at this point that Jesus told them that the bread was His body. After this, they would eat the roasted lamb. Every bit of the lamb had to be eaten, none was to be left over. After this, everyone would wash their hands once more then eat the remainder of the unleavened bread.

Before drinking the third cup of wine, the host would say a prayer over it. Part of this prayer included a petition for Elijah to come. Elijah was to come before the Messiah and herald His coming. This is probably where Jesus changed the script. We don't know if He said the normal words first or not. It's distinctly possible that He did not, as Elijah had already come, and the Messiah was in their midst. Here, instead of praying for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus said this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and His people.

After this, Jesus said He would not drink of the fruit of the vine again until He would drink it anew in the Kingdom of God. Some have taken this as a prohibition against alcohol. That's not what Jesus was saying. There was still one more cup that would be drunk during the Passover meal. The fourth cup was accompanied by the promise that God would take them as His people, and He would be their God. Jesus was reiterating this promise, in essence saying that He would redeem the disciples, but that the process wasn't finished yet. He said one day they would drink this final cup together in the kingdom of God.

After this, they would sing Psalms 115-118, and would conclude the meal. After they finished all these things, Jesus and the disciples departed for the Mount of Olives.

The entirety of the Passover meal was a reminder of God's faithfulness in the past, by delivering the Israelites from Egypt. It was also to point forward to a future deliverance by the coming of the Messiah. Jesus forever changed the Passover meal. It was no longer to symbolize waiting for the deliverance of the Messiah, but rather was to symbolize the Messiah's deliverance!

That night, the disciples surely did not understand what Jesus was talking about as He changed the Passover script. They likely did not understand what Jesus meant when He said, "this is my body" and "this is my blood". In the coming days, however, they would see Jesus' words played out before them in vivid, gruesome, and gut-wrenching detail. They would come to understand that Jesus knew that all of this lay ahead, but He endured it because of His love for them—and for us.

Jesus was saying that He would offer Himself to pay the penalty for their sin. He would become the ultimate Passover Lamb. And because of Him, there would be a new covenant with God. The old covenant was mediated by following laws. Jesus was establishing a new covenant, one that would be ratified by the shedding of His blood. This covenant is not dependent upon our performance, but upon His sacrifice. But notice what Jesus said—His blood would be poured out as a sacrifice for *many*, not for *all*. This is a reminder that Christ's sacrifice, while more than valuable enough to pay for the sins of all mankind, is only applied to those who believe. It is a tremendous gift—but only for those willing to accept it.

This is what Jesus wanted the disciples to remember. He wanted them to frequently come back to the upper room in their minds, and to remember that on what Jesus knew would be His last night on earth, He vividly demonstrated His love to the disciples. He encouraged them to replay this event over and over again, to remind themselves of what He had done for them.

This is why the scriptures tell us that we should not partake of the communion celebration in an unworthy manner. Listen to what Paul said about it,

²⁷ So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. ²⁹ For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29, NLT)

He was saying that the Lord's Supper is to be a solemn time of remembering Christ's love for us and recommitting ourselves to Him. This is why communion should only be taken by followers of Jesus. For someone who does not follow Jesus, taking communion would be showing disdain for His sacrifice. Similarly, when Christians partake of it without giving it the proper level of respect, we are showing disdain for Christ Himself. When we choose to partake with hard hearts that refuse to acknowledge or deal with our sin, we are harboring the same attitude as Judas! Believers must ensure that when we take communion we are not merely going through the motions, we

are not simply having a snack, and we are not just going along with the crowd. We must work to align our hearts with His; to remember the sacrifice He has made for us; and to celebrate the difference that makes, both now and forevermore.

Conclusion

This passage tells a familiar story, but I hope today you come to it with fresh eyes. I hope as you think back to the upper room with the disciples, you see Christ's love for you, and are renewed in your faith. As we conclude, I want to draw a few lessons.

First, we must decide whether we will follow Christ or ignore Him. Judas was given every opportunity to follow Jesus. He was given every advantage, but when face to face with Jesus, he chose to indulge his own desires rather than trust in Christ. You and I face the same decision each day. You have an advantage over most people—you know what Christ has done, you know who He is! The question is, what will you do with Him? He offers you a chance to repent and follow Him, and for the one who ignores that opportunity, it would be better if they had never been born.

Second, we should continually remind ourselves of what Christ has done for us. This is the purpose of the communion celebration, but it can be extended to many areas of our lives. We must constantly bring our eyes back to the cross, and ultimately to Jesus. In those times where you wonder if God cares about you, you need look no further than the cross. In those times where you feel you have messed up too badly for God to love you anymore, you must look back to the cross. And on the flip side, when we begin to get puffed up with pride, thinking about how far we've come, we need only look back to the cross to remind ourselves that we owe everything to Jesus. We are saved because of what He has done, not what we have done. When we look at the last supper, we see Jesus giving His disciples a tangible reminder of His love for them. That reminder is for you and me as well. In times of trial, doubt, or even pride come back to the upper room, reflect on the cross, and remind yourself of what He has done—for you.

Third, Christ's love should motivate us to love our world. Mark doesn't record this, but before the supper Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. It was a task that should have been done to Jesus, not by Him. He did it as an object lesson that we were to serve one another as He did. Christianity is never about rankings, it is about grateful service. Christ was willing to sacrifice Himself to save us. In Him, we see the perfect picture of love and service. We must follow his example as we interact with the world around us. If you have truly understood that kind of love, then it cannot leave you unchanged. Christ's love leads us to love those around us. In those times that we struggle to be kind to those who are difficult, the times we struggle to forgive, the times when we become frustrated that people aren't coming along as quickly as we'd like...remember how Christ treated the disciples and treats you. If we can do that, we will grow softer and more compassionate. We'll deal differently with the world. And maybe, as the world sees Christ's love reflected in us, they will respond more enthusiastically to the gospel of grace.

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