

Understanding the Lord's Supper

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 14:12-25/ July 7, 2024

Introduction:

How often do you slow down to consider the significance of communion, or the Lord's Supper? Our passage holds Jesus' institution of this important act in church life, giving us a great opportunity this morning to slow down and consider precisely what communion is before we partake of it together. Interestingly, Mark focuses more on the moments surrounding it than the Lord's Supper itself. He details the preparations of Jesus for the Passover, and Jesus' prediction of His betrayal, but sums up the Lord's Supper in few words. This reveals how that context informs what it means. Whether you have considered its significance before, or this is your first time hearing of communion at all, I am praying this will be a uniquely valuable passage for us. I want to draw out three truths about the Lord's Supper or Communion this morning. First,

The Lord's Supper Intentionally Relates to the Passover

When we observe this story, we discover purposeful connections Mark and Jesus make between His death, the Lord's Supper and the Passover. Look at setting Mark establishes in verses 12-16, "And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, 'Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?' And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, "The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us.' And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover." In four verses, the Passover is mentioned four times. Twice in verse 12, once in verse 14, and a final time in verse 16. Every detail also points to the uniqueness and necessity of Jesus taking the Passover with His disciples, from the repetition of the word "preparation," to the rarity of meeting a man carrying a jar of water, to them finding a large furnished upper room. Further, this story is remarkably similar to Jesus preparing to enter Jerusalem in chapter 11. Both events share a string of common words, involve meetings with specific people, have precise errands to be completed, and everything happening as Jesus told them it would. The goal is to emphasize Jesus' knowledge and control over everything taking place. Now, pay attention to the beginning of verse 12, "And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb." Mark intentionally places this in the context of the day everyone sacrificed the Passover lamb in remembrance of its provision in the Exodus. In Exodus 12, before the final plague in Egypt, God tells Moses to have each family kill a lamb without blemish and put its blood on the door posts of their house, remaining inside until the morning. Then, in Exodus 12:12-13, The Lord says, "I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt." The blood of the lamb was a sign of covenant protection from God's judgement. This and the meticulous preparations show us the Lord's Supper intentionally relates to that symbolism in the Passover. Yet, we will see it goes beyond simply relating to this event. This brings us to the second truth,

The Lord's Supper Supersedes the Passover

In verses 17-25, Jesus disrupts the normal proceedings of Passover twice, redirecting the disciples' attention to His impending death. The Passover meal was divided into four parts, with each part carefully crafted to remember and anticipate specific things. There were distinct blessings recited, questions asked, and hymns sung. The story of the Exodus was recounted and special foods eaten that represented the blessings and hardships of the Exodus. Each part would conclude with a cup of wine that symbolized specific promises God made to Israel in Exodus 6:6-7. Mark mentions very little related to these proceedings, and instead focuses on two interruptions of Jesus from the normal reflections. These interruptions provide two reasons the Lord's Supper supersedes the Passover. First,

1) Christ Himself is the Promised Sacrificial Lamb

The first interruption is found in verses 17-21, where Jesus directs the attention to His betrayal. Look at verses 17-19, “And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, ‘Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, ‘Is it I?’” The reference to eating likely means this happens in the third phase of the meal. While they were eating and thinking on the blessings and hardships of the Exodus, Jesus proclaims one of them will betray Him. Have you ever been at a meal and someone all the sudden brings up a subject out of left field? Everyone has that puzzled look on their face and is thinking “where did that come from?” That is kind of how I picture this moment. All conversations are interrupted as Jesus declares this. Each person grieves and begins to wonder if it is them. Imagine being there, as everyone’s heart sinks into their chest and one by one everyone asks Jesus, “Is it I?”. Notice what He says next in verses 20-21, “He said to them, ‘It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.’” Jesus narrows it down to one of the twelve who is intimately sharing the dish with Him. Then, He says a striking statement. This will take place because “the Son of Man goes as it is written of him.” What is striking about this statement is how nothing in the Old Testament speaks of the Son of Man being betrayed or even killed. The Son of Man was depicted as mighty, not mild. Jesus, once again, connects the Son of Man from Daniel 7 to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52-53. Church, think about this. The one to be “given dominion and glory and a kingdom” would be “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities.” The one that “all peoples, nations, and languages” would serve would be “despised and rejected by men.” Isaiah 53 promises one would come to bear the sins of many, and it was the will of the Lord to crush Him to make many accounted righteous. This betrayal doesn’t come as a shock to Jesus. It was promised. It was necessary. Jesus told the disciples in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Christ knew He would be a ransom for our sin. He knows He was the promised sacrificial lamb and would go as it was written of Him. Yet, He doesn’t relieve Judas of his responsibility. He says woe to the one who betrays the Son of Man, and it would have been better to not been born at all. Even though it was God’s will to crush the Messiah, the sovereign plan of God doesn’t negate the moral responsibility of Judas. Christ needed to be sacrificed but woe to the man who betrayed Him. The Lord’s Supper supersedes the Passover because the sacrifice of the Passover lamb foreshadowed something greater, Christ, the promised sacrificial lamb. The second reason is because,

2) Christ’s Sacrifice Inaugurates a New and Better Covenant

The next interruption comes through Jesus redefining the symbolic elements of the Passover. Look at verses 22-24, “And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.’” This likely happened during the second and third cups in the Passover meal. Traditionally, the bread was broken and a general thanksgiving was given for God’s provision of daily bread before they ate together. When Jesus says “my body,” both the Aramaic, likely spoken by Jesus, and the Greek recorded by Mark are terms that mean more than Christ’s physical body, referring to His whole “person or being.” Luke’s gospel adds, “which is for you.” Jesus redefines the symbolic meaning of the bread to signify Himself as God’s provision for us. The idea appears to be as the Israelites received bread from the Lord to sustain life in the wilderness, we, through faith, receive Christ Himself for life now. Then, Jesus takes a cup, possibly the third cup of redemption, and gives it to all of them to drink. And after they drink, He says “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” alluding to two Old Testament scriptures. The first is Exodus 24, where Moses gathers Israel at Mt. Sinai to confirm God’s covenant.

In Exodus 24:8, the people made sacrifices to the Lord, and we read that Moses, “took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” The blood thrown on the people signified a sealing of that covenant with Israel. A covenant that required obedience from Israel for it to be maintained. Jesus is alluding to that moment to speak of His blood accomplishing something similar. The second scripture is Jeremiah 31:31-34, which says, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant God would make with His people because the old covenant was broken. This new covenant was greater than the first, because God was the only one making promises. He would write His law on His people’s hearts, forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. Luke and Matthew make this connection clear in their gospels. In Luke 22:20, Jesus says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” In Matthew 26:28, He says, “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” By connecting to these Old Testament scriptures, Jesus is saying as the covering of blood by Moses marked the beginning of God’s covenant with His people, the shedding of His blood on the cross would mark the beginning of God’s new covenant with His people. A better and abiding covenant. By doing this during the Passover, He was instituting a new moment His people would celebrate going forward that superseded the Passover. Jesus then says, in verse 25, “Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” At the cross, Jesus Christ inaugurated a new and better covenant to be consummated one day at His return. He would not drink the fruit of the vine again on earth because His blood sealed the new and abiding covenant of God that guaranteed all who belong to Him would be seated at the marriage feast of the lamb. He will wait to drink the final cup until that day, when all things are made new and we dwell in the kingdom of God forever. Until then, an important change was made to the festival celebration of His people because He, as the promised sacrificial lamb, would shed His blood on the cross, inaugurating the new and better covenant. The third truth about the Lord’s Supper comes from outside of this gospel,

The Lord’s Supper is Meant to be Remembered and Experienced

As the Lord’s Supper been celebrated throughout church history, it has always involved more than simply knowing what it means. After studying the early church father’s writings, James Edwards concludes, “From earliest times the Last Supper has been regarded by the church as the truest representation of its fellowship with Christ” (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 425). Family, communion involves more than mental ascent that acknowledges a death that occurred on a Roman cross 2000 years ago, it is a representation of our fellowship with Christ. It involves deeply reflecting on and cherishing what that death truly means for you and me. And as we cherish Christ through communion, we discover a nearness of His presence found when we partake of this act together. So, what exactly is communion? First,

1) Communion is a Thoughtful Remembrance of Peace through Christ Alone

The largest section of teaching on communion comes from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. There, he rebukes the church because of their selfish desires when they come together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. These desires are shown through divisions and a lack of care for each other. So, Paul tells them they aren’t eating the Lord’s Supper at all.

Then, he reminds them of what Jesus said when He instituted it in 1 Corinthians 11:24-26, saying, “when he [Jesus] had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” Paul points out two important things. First, twice Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” We are called to approach this act thoughtfully remembering Christ. We remember His life and death, His teaching and actions, His grace and presence. When we come together, He is meant to be the exclusive focus of our hearts and minds. Second, we aren’t only remembering, we are proclaiming the Lord’s death until He comes. When we come together to eat this bread and drink this cup, we are proclaiming our need of Christ’s death for our sins, our trust in Christ’s death as sufficient to cover them, and our hope in Christ’s death to present us blameless before God at His return. We are saying, by faith I am living through Christ’s provision and part of the new covenant community. We are declaring that we have peace with God because of Christ’s blood and no merit of our own. Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 11 to speak of some who are ill and even dying because they aren’t discerning the body rightly. They were approaching communion in an unworthy manner without examining their hearts and thinking on their need of Christ’s grace, so God was disciplining them for it. Family, this doesn’t mean we should be anxious and ensure every single sin is confessed before we can take communion. It means we are always thoughtfully remembering and recognizing Christ is what we need, and we are in complete dependence on Him. Second,

2) Communion is a Shared Experience of Life in Christ Alone

I think we sometimes miss an opportunity to experience a unique moment of enjoying the presence of Christ in communion. To be clear I am not teaching the elements in any way become the actual body and blood of Christ when we partake of them. But I do think communion involves more than simply remembering His death on the cross. Before his teaching on The Lord’s Supper, Paul uses it as an illustration in his teaching on food sacrificed to idols. Look at what he writes in 1 Corinthians 10:16, “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?” Note Paul’s repetition of participation in the blood and body of Christ. I believe this shows us that when we partake of communion in true faith, we are uniquely participating in our collective union with Christ. These elements are not just symbols of what took place to secure our salvation but also signs of our firm and lasting union in Christ. When we partake of them in true faith, the Spirit supernaturally unites our hearts together, strengthening and nourishing our faith as we reflect on where our life is now found. Communion is given to remember what Christ alone has done and to experience a fresh connection to life in Christ alone.

Conclusion:

Family, this act we are about to partake in is a unique expression of our faith to be taken seriously. This is why we take extra time to reflect before we take communion together. As the worship team is coming to lead us in that reflection, I want to encourage you to take time today to examine your heart, think on what Christ has done, and contemplate how you have been united to Him forever. We intentionally choose two songs centered on truths of what Christ has done and who we are in Him to provide ample time to cherish Christ together. At the end of these two songs of reflection, I will come back up to lead us in taking this together. Think on how Christ Himself provides the nourishment that you need. Dwell on how His blood has secured that your sins are forgiven and remembered no more. Confess your sin, knowing He is faithful and just to forgive them and cleanse you. However the Spirit guides you to respond, lean into God’s grace. Come down and kneel before Him, remain where you are as you think on Christ, or stand and sign because your heart is filled with joy. If you are not a follower of Christ, we ask you to refrain from communion and instead think on what Christ accomplished on the cross. If you are moved to trust in Him, all you need to do is ask for His mercy and trust that His death is sufficient to cover your sin and you will be saved. Let’s pray as we remember and experience the Lord’s Supper.