

"As Often as You Eat..."

Pastor Dan Erickson

December 4, 2022

Moishe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus, used to tell about the first time he was in a Christian Church when they observed the Lord's Supper. He had heard this ceremony was similar to the Jewish Passover. Yet when the bread was served, rather than being given a big piece of Matzah, he received a little oyster cracker. And when the wine was served it was not even wine, but grape juice, and rather than being served in a big goblet, it was in something that looked like a thimble. At that point Moishe thought, "Wow, and these people have the nerve to think that Jews are stingy."

Well, I am not sure what your first impression of the Lord's Supper was. As a kid I remember the Welch's grape juice smelled really good. Yet, now, having led about 500 observances of the Lord's Supper over the past four decades, what strikes me is that I sometimes just go through the motions, without really thinking about the meaning of the event. And when I do think about it, my thoughts are sometimes rather shallow.

I have recently been reading a wonderful book, "Gospel Theology," by David Torres. He covers many theological topics, but each chapter concludes with how the Lord's Supper reflects that particular truth. This has helped me grow in appreciation for the Lord's Supper. My hope is that the things I say this morning will help it be a more significant and spiritually beneficial experience for you as well. Let's pause and pray that will happen.

The Lord's Supper, also called Communion or the Eucharist, which means giving thanks, has been a part of Christian worship right from the beginning. The Apostle Paul explains it in **1 Corinthians 11:23-25. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 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." 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.**

Christians all over the world and in all sorts of denominational flavors have been doing that for almost 2000 years. Unfortunately, the Lord's Supper

became an object of what I would call superstition in the early centuries of the church. The popular belief and one which remains the teaching of the Roman Catholic church, is that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus when the priest speaks the words of institution during the mass or worship service.

Many individual Catholics don't believe that, but it is the official Roman Catholic teaching. It is based on Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "This is my body, this is my blood." Maybe even more influential have been Jesus' words in **John 6: 53, 54b So Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.**

Now, this is an example of where it is not good to take a Bible passage literally, when the author intends for it to be understood figuratively. We misunderstand the Bible when we fail to recognize figurative statements as such. The biggest problem is this understanding has led many people to think that consuming the elements, the bread and wine, automatically brings spiritual life or salvation. Now the official teaching of the Catholic church is that the elements should be received with faith to be effective, but that part often seems missed by many.

The leaders of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant reformation all agreed the Roman Catholic understanding was wrong. However, they did not agree about what was the right understanding. Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, saw the Lord's Supper as a symbolic, memorial event. The elements, which are nothing but bread and wine, are intended as symbols that will help us remember what Jesus did for us through His death on the cross.

Martin Luther responded "No." Or in German, "Nein." Because Jesus said, "This is my body." Luther agreed that the elements clearly remained bread and wine, but they were also, at the same time, truly the body and blood of Jesus. Consubstantiation is the fancy name for this view. Thus, there is real spiritual benefit in partaking of the elements, when done in faith, though exactly what those benefits are is a little fuzzy.

John Calvin agreed with Zwingli that the bread and wine were just bread and wine. However, he thought Zwingli underestimated the spiritual value of participating in the Lord's Supper. Calvin said the Lord Jesus is not present in the elements, but He is present in the table. Now, that was a figurative statement, Jesus is not in the wood. Yet, Calvin believed the Lord's Supper is a time not just to remember, but to experience communion with Jesus Christ. Yes, it is a time to focus on Jesus' death, but it is also a time to focus on all the gospel blessing that flow from His death.

For many years, I held the Zwingli view, and thought of the Lord's Supper as a memorial, just a time to remember Jesus' death. That is what I was taught growing up and I never really thought much about it. Yet, in recent years, I realized that the Bible indicates there is really something more going on when we come to the Lord's table. Now, this is not an essential doctrine. If you disagree, we disagree as friends. Here, however, are four reasons why I believe there is more to the Lord's Supper than I used to think.

#1 – The Bible speaks of this as a time of communion with the Lord, **1 Corinthians 10:16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?** Other versions say “participation in” or “communion in” the blood of Christ. The Greek word Paul actually uses is “koinina,” which is usually translated as “fellowship.”

David Torres writes: *The Holy Spirit acts to grant us real spiritual fellowship with Jesus Christ when we partake of the Lord's Supper with faith. Nothing magical happens when we eat the bread and drink the cup as a ritual only. But when the Spirit grants us faith in Christ as we eat and drink, we are actually feeding on Jesus spiritually and enjoying fellowship with Him. Jesus is nourishing our souls.* He adds; *We get spiritually drained. One of the ways we are nourished by the Spirit is through the gospel feast of the Lord's Supper.*

The wonderful truth is that we as believers are able to enjoy fellowship or communion with the Lord Jesus at any time and in any place. However, most of us realize that corporate worship times often provide an environment where we are more likely to experience that communion and will maybe do so at a deeper level. I would suggest the Lord's Supper

may provide an even better environment for this to happen. This is one ordinance or sacrament that the Lord commands us to practice on a regular basis. I think He intends that our spiritual health will be enhanced as we participate. He uses the bread and wine/juice to engage all our senses, pointing us to Jesus and what He has done for us. The Holy Spirit can use that in a wonderful way in each of our lives.

#2 - (This could have even been #1) The Lord's Supper is a time of communion with the living Lord. Whenever I conduct a ratted a memorial service, this is always true: The person being memorialized is not there, and is not there for one reason, he or she is dead. They are dead today and we assume will be dead tomorrow. When we come together to remember Jesus at the Lord's table, He is not dead. He is risen from the dead. And through the Holy Spirit, He is here with us right now.

The Lord's Supper commemorates both Jesus' death and resurrection. It points to the fact that Jesus is not only the crucified and risen Lord, but He is the soon and coming King. **1 Corinthians 11:26 Far as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.** In fact, the Lord's Supper is the link between the Last Supper which Jesus ate with the apostles, and the marriage supper of the Lamb in which all believers in Jesus will share when Jesus the King returns. Jesus told the apostles **Matthew 26:29 I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.** And the Apostle John writes these words, given to him by an angel. **Revelation 19:9 Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.**

Folks, this also points to how the Lord's Supper is not just a time to reflect upon Jesus' death, but a time to celebrate our relationship with Jesus, the crucified, risen and living Lord, who will return and reign as King of Kings.

#3 – The Lord's Supper is also a time of communion with fellow believers in Jesus. **1 Corinthians 10:17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, since all of us share the one bread.** Taking part in the Lord's Supper not only reminds us of Jesus' death on the cross, but also reminds us that through His death Jesus has broken down the walls that divided us and made us one body or one family.

In chapter 11, Paul says the Corinthians are abusing the Lord's Supper by showing favoritism and not treating each other as they should. Paul calls it, 1 Corinthians 11:29, a failure to recognize the body of Christ, which I think means a failure to understand the relationship we have with each other because of what Jesus has done.

Sharing together in the Lord's Supper is a way to express our commitment to, and love for, one another. As we reflect on what the Lord has done for us, it should include how this enables us to love, forgive, and serve each other. This also means the Lord's Supper is intended to be celebrated by a congregation that is gathered together. It is not necessarily wrong for a pastor to share the communion elements with someone in a nursing home, or for a small group Bible study to do so. However, it is when the entire congregation gathers at the Lord's table that we really experience what the supper was intended to be.

#4 – the Bible tells us that the Lord's Supper points us to the New Covenant. According to **1 Corinthians 11:25**, Jesus said, **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”**

Now, **1 John 1:7**, tells us, **“The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.”** The song, “What can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus,” reflects important Biblical truth. However, that is not all Jesus accomplished when He shed His blood on the cross. In the language of the Bible, God seals the new covenant, the New Testament, the new agreement, with the blood of His own Son. In other words, it guarantees the promises He makes. Forgiveness of sins for all who trust in the Lord Jesus is only one aspect of the gospel blessing that are part of this new covenant. We also experience the great privilege of being adopted into God's family as His sons and daughters. We are given spiritual life, born again, as new creatures in Christ. The spirit of God indwells all believers in Jesus. And the list goes on.

My point is that the Lord's Supper is not just a time to remember that Jesus died on the cross, or that He died for our sins. It is a time to remember, and ponder and celebrate all the new covenant, gospel blessings that are part of our lives because of Jesus' death in our place, His resurrection from the dead and promised return.

Okay, those are four truths about what the Lord's Supper involves. Now, let's mention two aspects which I am still trying to figure out. First, how often should we do this? How frequently should we share in the Lord's Supper together? Now, surprise, nowhere in the Bible are we told to observe the Lord's Supper the first Sunday of every month. For whatever reason, that is the habit in many Baptist and other evangelical churches, but there is nothing in the Bible that proscribes that. Rather, it seems partaking of the Lord's Supper was something the early Christians did whenever they gathered for corporate worship, which I think was every Sunday, the first day of the week. I am aware a number of evangelical churches, including some Baptist, that include the Lord's Supper in their worship service every week. Yes, that is what Roman Catholics do, but it does seem to follow a Biblical pattern.

The primary reason for not celebrating the Lord's Supper weekly is a fear that it then becomes too routine. People will participate without really thinking about what it means. I think that is a legitimate concern, though there are other things we do every Sunday that still seem meaningful. Sometimes pastors fall into a rut and fail to highlight the many dimensions of the Lord's Supper, and thus it does seem kind of routine.

However, if participating in this event offers, as I have suggested, come unique spiritual benefits, then we should at least consider doing so more than once a month. As I said, I am still trying to figure this one out, so I will keep you posted.

The second question I am still trying to figure out an answer to is this: Who should participate in the Lord's Supper? When I was growing in our little Baptist church in Prentice, WI, about a fourth of the people in the congregation would leave at the end of worship service on the first Sunday of the month. This was because they were not members of the congregation. The church practice “closed communion,” meaning only official members of the church participated in the Lords' Supper. That always seemed a little strange to me.

At Chisholm Baptist Church, we practice “open communion,” meaning we invite all believers in Jesus to share at the Lord's table. That makes sense to me. Now, some suggest everybody, including unbelievers, should be invited to take part, because after all, Judas was included in the Last Supper. I

don't think so. The Lord's Supper is for those who He invites, those trusting in Him.

Yet, the instructions the Apostle Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 11, make it clear that sometimes it is important to refrain from taking part in the Lord's Supper. Listen to the verses in **1 Corinthians 11:27-29** **Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drink without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.**

Paul goes on to suggest that some people have gotten sick or even died because the Lord punished them for abusing the Lord's Supper, for eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. The big question is what are we looking for as we examine ourselves before we participate? Some say, "Well, you should examine your faith to make sure it is real, that you are truly a believer in Jesus." Others say, "No, you should examine your relationships with other Christians, to make sure there are not any conflicts that need to be resolved before you take part in the Lord's Supper." That fits with the context of the chapter where Paul is concerned that not everyone in church is being treated fairly.

It also coincides with Jesus' instructions found in **Matthew 5:23,24** **So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.** Or might we add before you participate in the Lord's Supper or maybe even go to a worship service? I do think examining oneself should involve considering our relationships with other believers in Jesus.

The most common idea, however, is that before you take part in the Lord's Supper, you should examine yourself and identify any unconfessed sin in your life and confess to the Lord before you take the bread and wine/grape juice. Yet, I am not sure that is what Paul means.

The fact is, we all come to the Lord's table as sinners. It is a celebration of the gospel, and the grace God shows to us. Even if you confess all of your known sins, there will still be sins of which you are guilty that you are not aware of. Now,

identifying and confessing sin is always a good thing. 1 John 1:9 makes that clear. And I think, 1 Corinthians 5, that when a church disciplines someone in the congregation, who is involved in some egregious sin of which he/she refuses to repent, then it is appropriate for the church leaders to tell that individual to not participate in the Lord's Supper. Otherwise, each person needs to examine himself/herself. You need to decide. If you know you are in rebellion against the Lord, that you don't want to live in a way that pleases Him, then you probably should just let the plates go by when the bread and cup are passed around.

But I don't believe your primary focus as you share in the Lord's Supper should be looking in the mirror, examining your own life and looking for sin to confess. No, you should be looking, not in the mirror, but at Jesus. You should be thinking about Jesus, about what He has done, is doing, and will do for you. That is the gospel. You should be thinking about the crucified and risen Messiah, who will one day return and rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The Lord's Supper is not so much a time to mourn your sin, but an occasion to rejoice that Jesus is the one who loves you, gave Himself for you, and forgives you. Every time you come to the Lord's table, you should rejoice that through the Lord Jesus you are part of a new covenant where all those trusting in Him are made sons and daughters of the living God, are indwelt by His Spirit, and become heirs to eternal life. No, we must not come to the Lord's table casually. It is a time to commune with the creator and sovereign of the universe, but who is, remember, also our loving Father. To commune with the triune God, and your brothers and sisters in Christ, is meant to be a taste of Heaven.

As we come to the Lord's table today, I hope that is what you experience, a little taste of Heaven, as we together with our brothers and sisters commune with the triune God Father, Son, and Spirit.