

“The Gospel in a Meal”
Matthew 26:17-30
December 15, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus will be dead in 24 hours, and the Passover meal will be the last meal he will eat. If you knew your last meal was coming and you could invite anyone you wanted to eat that meal with you, who would you invite? I suppose we would all invite those closest to us, those we love. We would invite family and close friends. That’s what Jesus does. That little phrase at the end of verse 18 is not without significance: “with my disciples.” Jesus wants to eat his last meal with his disciples, because he loves them. While this phrase has clear reference to the twelve disciples, it is not wrong to see it as referring also to all Jesus’ disciples. The Lord’s Supper is Jesus saying to us, “I love you and want to dine with you, now and forever.” The Lord’s Supper is Jesus’ explanation of the meaning of his death. We can learn at least three truths about God’s love for us in the Lord’s Supper.

I. It Is an Illustration of Foundational Gospel Truth

While the Lord’s Supper is more than an illustration, it is not less. God communicates the truth of the gospel to us through both word and sacrament. Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper at a Passover meal to teach his disciples the similarity between the two. The Lord’s Supper is something of a New Testament version of Passover. Just as Israel was delivered from their Egyptian bondage through the Passover event, so we are delivered from our bondage to sin through the death of Christ. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and delivers us from eternal judgment. In the Passover, a lamb died so that Israel’s firstborn sons might not die. In the Lord’s Supper, God’s only begotten Son dies so that all God’s sons and daughters might not die.

So the Lord’s Supper is a reenactment of the gospel, and it shows us three main components of that gospel: preparation, forgiveness through the death of a substitute, and faith. We see the importance of preparation when Jesus announces that one of the twelve disciples will betray him. Notice the response of the disciples. They don’t all say, “It must be Judas; we always thought there was something not right about that guy.” On the outside, Judas looked the same as the rest of them. Instead, they all come to Jesus with the same question: **“Is it I, Lord?”** They believe that the capacity to betray Jesus lies within them all. This is a moment of rare humility within the disciples, and their judgment about themselves and their capacity for evil is not far off. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, nine of them ran away terrified. Peter stayed

close by, but then we all know what happened to him. He denied even knowing Jesus three times. Only John refused to abandon the Lord.

This incident teaches us the importance of doing something in association with the Lord's Supper that Paul makes explicit. We are to examine ourselves for the presence of sin. More accurately, we are to recognize that our sin is such that we lack even the ability to see it without God's help. We are to do what the disciples each did here and go to Jesus, saying to him those famous words of Psalm 139: **"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me"** (139:23-24). We have a huge capacity for self-deception. Someone reads an article online about the evils of the sex trade and gets all bothered by it, and then in the next moment opens his internet browser to a porn site, without ever seeing the contradiction. Another person is always ranting about freeloaders who take government benefits, while at the same time cheating on his own taxes. We must do what the disciples all do here when they acknowledge their own capacity for serious sin. We don't do this in order to make ourselves worthy to take the Lord's Supper. We do it in order to see our own unworthiness, to increase our hunger for the grace he offers to us. The only worthiness he requires is to see our unworthiness. Many have found it helpful to prepare for the Lord's Supper by praying the prayer above from Psalm 139, followed by a time of quiet listening to the Lord.

The next central gospel truth revealed in the Lord's Supper is that of forgiveness through the death of a substitute. That can be seen particularly in his statement about the wine: **"for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"** (v. 28). Why does he call the wine "my blood of the covenant"? He does so because blood was the way Old Testament covenants were authenticated and ratified. Just as we ratify a contract with a signature, so biblical covenants were done by blood. It has a sobering meaning, saying essentially, "May I lose my life if I fail to keep the promise of this covenant!" We are the covenant breakers whose blood should be shed, but his is shed instead. And what is it Jesus promises to us here? It is nothing less than full forgiveness. So he died as our substitute in order to provide our forgiveness and now promises to provide this forgiveness to us.

The only way for sins to be forgiven is for the debt of the sin to be paid in full, and that is what Jesus has done and what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper. Suppose you have credit card debt of \$20,000. You find out the name and address of a top executive in the credit card company and do something nice for him in order to persuade him to cancel the debt. You make him a nice big tray of sweet rolls and take them to his house. Will he forgive your debt? Of course not. Nothing less than a check for \$20,000 will satisfy that debt. Someone might say, but I was very sincere in my kind act of baking those sweet rolls for him to enjoy. Sincerity is not sufficient for an earthly debt, and it is not sufficient for a debt to God. Only payment in full is sufficient, and such

payment has been made by the blood of Christ, without any necessary contribution at all from the humble sinner.

The third gospel truth we see in this concerns the one thing that is necessary for us, and that is faith. We can see this faith illustrated here in the three commands Jesus gives when he institutes the Lord's Supper. The three are "take," "eat" and "drink." In all three of these, the thing of value has been provided by Jesus, and all we do is receive it. Eating and drinking is a very clear illustration of faith because all the merit, all the work so to speak, has been done by someone else. Our mode is simply that of receiving. Faith is about receiving, not achieving. Whenever we take the Lord's Supper, our dominant attitude should not be that of making promises to God to do better, but that of simply receiving the complete forgiveness he has for us.

II. It Is a Means of Grace

The Lord's Supper is more than an illustration of Christ's death. We believe it is also a means of grace. Let's explore the meaning of that by considering the three main views of the Lord's Supper. The first one, held by the Roman Catholic Church, is called transubstantiation. This view interprets Jesus literally when he says **"This is my body"** (v. 26). They believe that the bread and wine are changed by a miracle of God into the actual body and blood of Jesus. Based on this belief, they also believe that grace is conferred automatically to any who partake. The main argument against this view is that it has Jesus being sacrificed afresh every time the sacrament is observed, something that is in direct contradiction to the biblical teaching about the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus. Another argument worth noting is that the disciples would not have been likely to have interpreted him literally because of the words of the Passover liturgy: "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate when they came from the land of Egypt." They would not have understood that to be the literal bread of 1500 years ago.

The second view of how the Lord's Supper is a means of grace is called the memorial view. It holds that the Lord's Supper is nothing more than an illustration that serves to help us call to mind the central importance of Jesus' death. This view hardly seems to do justice to Jesus' statement, "This is my body," for it would seem that Jesus is not present in any sense in this view. It becomes more about our work in making sure we remember Jesus rather than any real grace he brings to us.

Our view is that Jesus really is present in a special way in the Lord's Supper, but through his Holy Spirit rather than in any literal, bodily way. He is present to bring the blessings of his covenant promises into reality in our lives. Those covenant promises are for forgiveness and for a transformed heart, two

elements Jeremiah listed of the new covenant (31:33-34). God uses the material bread and wine to do this, when we receive them by faith.

Every generation has challenges in receiving certain parts of God's truth. Our modern view that makes a sharp division between the material and spiritual poses such a challenge. The biblical view of reality includes a much deeper connection between these two. That can be seen in our passage in Jesus' simple act of blessing the bread before breaking it and giving it to the disciples. Have you ever wondered why we sometimes refer to the prayer offered before a meal as "asking the blessing"? We ask God to bless the food we eat because the biblical perspective is that good nutrition involves more than eating nutritious food. It requires the blessing of God upon the food, a blessing resulting in the food being of benefit to us. This connection between material food and God's blessing came home to me when I was studying Daniel 1. In that passage, Daniel and his three friends determined not to eat the king's food, but insisted on a diet of vegetables and water. The Babylonian steward in charge of them at first refused to do so, out of fear that such a diet would result in their physical deterioration. But he agreed to a ten day test, after which Daniel and his friends fared better than those on the king's diet. Some have misread that story and have concluded that their superior appearance was due to a diet of vegetables and water. There has even been a diet marketed by some called "The Daniel Diet." I think that completely misses the point. Daniel and his friends didn't fare better because of their diet, but in spite of it. It was due completely to God's blessing upon them.

Something similar is happening in the Lord's Supper. God promises to bless the bread and wine so that these material things bring spiritual blessing to us when we receive them by faith. We should expect to be nourished as we come to experience afresh sins forgiven, Jesus' presence, and renewed strength to follow Jesus. The Lord's Supper is a real means of grace.

III. It Is the Source of Strength and Joy

The two elements of communion are bread and wine, and they speak to two gifts God supplies to us. Bread strengthens the body and wine makes glad the heart of man. These are two of the benefits of the Lord's Supper. More specifically, it strengthens and gladdens by delivering us from some of our greatest fears. There are three fears related to the past, present and future.

Our fear that is related to the past is a fear of punishment for past sins. A guilty conscience is a great enemy to peace and to good mental, emotional, spiritual and even physical health. The Lord's Supper, taken in faith, has divine power to conquer a guilty conscience. Assurance of forgiveness means so much to Jesus that he gives it here a perpetual place in the Church. Forgiveness needs to be both heard and felt. It needs to touch us at this deep

level. It nourishes the soul like nothing else. I am forgiven, not by any merit I might have, but completely by the merits of Jesus.

Our fear in the present is a fear of abandonment. Prisoners put in solitary confinement begin falling apart emotionally. We were not created to be alone, and we fear being abandoned. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus is saying, "I want to be with you, not because I have to but because I want to." Jesus is truly present in a special way when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. He has promised to be always with us in this life, but we sometimes don't experience the sweetness of that. But we should be particularly expectant of this joyful experience of his presence when we gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Our fear of the future is a fear of death and what happens after that. Notice what Jesus says in verse 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."** Jesus here says that the very future we fear will turn out to be a feast of great joy. And he says that he so longs to drink it with us at that great heavenly banquet that he will abstain until then. Have you ever had a family gathering when a prominent member of the family is absent? It just doesn't feel right. I remember when we celebrated a birthday of our son, Matthew, and his mother couldn't make it. She couldn't make it because she was in the hospital after giving birth to Kathryn, our youngest daughter. Jesus is saying here in this verse that without you present, it just doesn't feel right. He doesn't even want to celebrate without you. Frederick Bruner writes of this verse, "This is one more way for Jesus to say, 'How much I love you! My greatest expectation is the meal we will have together. I can hardly wait!'"

CONCLUSION:

We live in the in-between time. Jesus has come to "make his blessings flow far as the curse is found," but there is still plenty of curse left. Life is full of difficult, even soul-deadening challenges. I was on a conference call earlier this week. Two good friends of those on the call, both relatively young men, were dying of cancer. These were two faithful servants of the Lord who love Jesus deeply. Another man on the call told us that his wife had just announced that she had never loved him through their twenty plus years of married life and wanted to separate from him. How do we survive such things? We do so only by drawing strength from our Lord Jesus. And the Lord's Supper is one of the chief resources he gives us for doing so. Matthew mentions that they sang a hymn after celebrating this meal. This is first time Matthew ever mentions singing. Jesus here gives us something to sing about. May he put a song in your heart!