

THE LORD'S SUPPER

What the Lord's Supper Means

The Lord's Supper is one of the least understood elements of Christian worship. We understand why prayer is important. The need to know the Bible makes sense to our logical minds. But, what makes the sacrament of communion anything special? You take a sip of juice, eat a breadcrumb, have a minute of two of quiet reflection, and then you are on your way. What is so special about that?

In liturgical traditions (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and others), the Lord's Supper is central to worship. Yet, among most Protestants, the sacrament of communion is lightly esteemed. There are two reasons for this. First, because of our emphasis on the primacy of faith (Justification is by grace alone through faith alone), we have also emphasized the primacy of the Word. This emphasis is right because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17). The preaching and study of the Bible must be central to the Christian life and central in our worship experience. Yet, our emphasis on the Word has resulted in a trivialization of other aspects of worship, including the sacraments. Just because the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) do not save a person, that does not mean that they are unimportant. The sacraments are *holy* signs given to us by Christ and must be treated with reverence and awe.

The second reason the sacraments (the Lord's Supper in particular) have been trivialized is because they have been so demystified that Christians regard them as mere symbols. In the Lord's Supper, the bread represents the body of Christ and the wine His blood. Yet, the bread and the wine are not *mere* symbols. The Lord's Supper is not merely a memorial. Rather, in the Lord's Supper, a mystery takes place where the believer actually feeds on Christ by faith. Christ is spiritually present in the Supper. By His Spirit, the Christian has real fellowship with the resurrected body of Christ, which is in heaven. The Holy Spirit unites Christians to the body of Christ, which died and rose for their salvation. This mystical union that the Christian has with Christ is beyond human comprehension, but it is real nonetheless. Since the believer is having real fellowship with the real Christ in the Lord's Supper, it would be wrong to trivialize or minimize the importance of Communion. Understanding this mystical union helps us to benefit from the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper and Passover

To appreciate the Lord's Supper, it is helpful to understand the Passover Celebration. You will remember that when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God rescued them by sending ten plagues on the Egyptians. The last plague was the worst of all. God informed Moses that he was going to kill the firstborn son in every household in the land. However, God would not kill any of the Israelites if they celebrated the Passover.

In the Passover, they were to take a lamb and, at twilight, slaughter it. Then they would take the blood of the lamb and put it on the doorframes of their house. They were then to cook the lamb and eat it with unleavened bread. God said, if the blood was on the door of the house the angel of death would pass over that house and all would be spared. That is why it is called the Passover feast.

Immediately, you can see the connection between Passover and the Lord's Supper. Those who celebrated Passover lived because a lamb had died. In communion, we live because Christ, the Lamb of God, died in our place. Just as the Israelites feasted on their sacrificial lambs, we feast on Christ, our sacrificial lamb by partaking of the bread and the wine.

The Lord's Supper is a rather graphic ceremony. After all, we are talking about death and bloodshed, and eating flesh. Why is it so gory? It is gory because it is showing the severity of sin and the extreme holiness of God. The gore of Passover and Communion is a graphic portrayal of our sinfulness. It reminds us how deeply we need a Savior to pay for our sins. When we come to the Lord's Table, we are reminded that we are more sinful than we ever dared to imagine. We are reminded that our sin is so great that God Himself had to become a human being and be crucified to pay the penalty for our sin.

Yet, we are also reminded that we are more loved than we ever dared to hope. God loved us so much that he gave His only begotten Son. The Son loved us so much that he willingly took on the form of a servant and was obedient to the Father, even to the point of death on the cross. In the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that in Christ, we do not get what we deserve. Instead, God himself takes the penalty of our sin. He suffers in our place.

In the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that, just as with the Passover, God has provided a sacrifice for us. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

That is what Jesus meant when, instituting the sacrament, he said that his body is broken for us and his blood is shed for us. That is to be taken literally. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper reminds us of this in a way that mere words never could.

The Mystical Union

Yet, how does the death of Christ benefit us? How in the world can a just God let an innocent man die for the guilty? After all, if you committed murder, there is no way a judge would let me go to the electric chair for you. Not just anyone can die for a crime, but only the guilty party. For Christ to die for us, he had to become guilty with our guilt and we had to become righteous with his righteousness. Yet, how does this happen? How can our guilt be transferred to him and his righteousness to us?

This is where the mystery comes in. The Bible says that as Christians, we are in Christ and Christ is in us. This is known as the mystical union. We cannot fully comprehend this, but we can appreciate it. Sometimes, when we explain to people how to become a Christian, we say something like, "Ask Jesus into your heart." What does that mean? Does Jesus literally inhabit you? If so, how?

If you have put your faith in Christ, then the Bible says that God gives you his Holy Spirit. That means that your body is now the temple of the Holy Spirit. You now enjoy a mystical communion with the Holy Spirit. He is with you at all times.

Since Christ and the Holy Spirit are two persons of the Triune God, Christ lives in you. Therefore, your body is now Christ's body. Whatever you do with your body, you do with Jesus Christ. This is why holiness is so important for the Christian. We need to use our body for godly purposes because Christ is always in us. Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20

¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. ¹⁸Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. ¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (NIV)

Paul says that if you engage in an immoral act with your body, then you are taking Christ into an immoral act because Christ is in you. Jesus is with you at all times. Your body is his. When you sin, he takes on the guilt of your sin because your body is his. Every sin you commit, past, present, and future, was imputed to Christ on the cross because your body is his body, not just figuratively, but literally.

By the same token, his body is ours. Because the Holy Spirit lives in you as a Christian and unites you to Christ, then not only is Christ in you, but you are in Christ. Jesus Christ paid for our sins with his human body. For that to be beneficial for us, then that body had to become our body. Through the Holy Spirit, you are united to the body of Christ. When the Bible says that we have fellowship with Christ, we do not just enjoy the fellowship of Christ's Spirit, but we fellowship with the whole Christ, who is body and Spirit. Just as your body is his, his is yours.

Union with Others

Not only does the Lord's Supper show us our union with Christ, it also shows us our union with other believers. The reason the Apostle Paul gives us instructions on observing the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 is because the Corinthian church was observing the sacrament in a way that contradicted its meaning.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22:

¹⁷In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. ²²Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate

*those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this?
Certainly not!*

The Lord's Supper is supposed to symbolize the unity and love of the church. However, when the Corinthians came together, rather than coming as one body, they came with divisions. Rather than loving one another, it was another occasion for the rich to humiliate the poor.

The Lord's Table is not a sacrament for individuals. It is a sacrament for the Church. It is as the body of Christ that we come to the Table. We are one body with many members. Because we all are united to Jesus, we therefore are all united to each other.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17:

¹⁶The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? ¹⁷For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

In the Lord's Supper, we celebrate that we are all one body, that we have an intimate, vital union, not only with Jesus, but with each other. Even though we may be very different—racially, economically, socially—we are all one in Christ. Therefore, the needs of the one are the needs of the many. We are all part of the body of Christ and are therefore part of each other.

The Bread and Wine

When Jesus served the bread, he said, "This is my body." What did he mean by that? First, let's say what it does not mean. Jesus is not saying that the bread is literally his body broken into tiny bite size pieces that taste like bread. The bread is not literally his body. It is bread. And when we bless it and when we eat it, it will still be bread. Nothing magical happens to the bread and the wine in communion. It remains bread and wine. It is also important to know that we are not re-sacrificing Christ. This is not a sacrifice. Christ already sacrificed his life. He died once for all. The penalty has been paid. We are not again breaking the body of Christ or shedding his blood. Since the resurrection, Christ's body has been in heaven, where it will remain until he returns. If it is in heaven, then it cannot be this bread. So, this bread is not literally the body of Christ nor does it become the body of Christ when we eat it.

So what did Jesus mean when he said, "This is my body?" First of all, it is a picture. Just as this bread is broken, we are reminded that Jesus' body was broken for us. It is a visible demonstration to us. But it is much more than that. It is a memorial of Christ's death on the cross, but it is not a mere memorial.

When we celebrate communion, a great mystery takes place. Christ is spiritually present in the Lord's Supper. So, when we feed on the bread and the wine, we feed on Christ spiritually and we are spiritually nourished. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we receive by faith the body and

blood of Jesus Christ. In the sacrament, a great mystery takes place where Christ is spiritually present in a special way. That is why we must always treat the Lord's Table with such reverence.

²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. I Corinthians 11:29-31 NIV

Paul says, because some people come to the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner, some were sick and a number fell asleep, which is a euphemism for "died." In other words, God brought judgment upon people for treating the Lord's Table as something less than holy. This is no mere symbol. It is not just a neat little ritual. Something high and holy takes place in this sacrament unlike any other event and we dare not treat it lightly.

We serve bread and wine for communion. Does what we use matter? Could we just as easily serve bananas and apple juice? Not at all. First of all, we are not free to worship God any way that pleases us, but only as He has prescribed. Jesus, when He instituted the Lord's Supper said that we should use bread and wine.

Secondly, if we change the elements, we would lose much of the symbolism. Jesus did not choose bread and wine arbitrarily. He did not choose them simply because they were available. He chose them for the richness of the symbolism.

The Bread

Communion is celebrated with unleavened bread. The reason is that when Israel celebrated the first Passover, they had to leave Egypt in a hurry. They did not have time to allow the bread to rise. God was so insistent that they always celebrate the Passover with unleavened bread that, not only must the bread be without yeast, but there could not even be any yeast within the borders of Israel when the Passover was to be celebrated. Anyone found with yeast was to be put out of the community. Why did God make such a big deal about yeast? Leaven, throughout the Bible, represents sin. Unleavened bread, therefore, is a symbol of purity. So, as you receive the unleavened bread, remember that you are receiving Christ, who is completely without sin.

Bread also is a reminder of manna. Manna was called the bread of heaven. It was the food that sustained Israel for forty years while they wandered in the wilderness. In John 6, Jesus says that he is the true bread of heaven, the true bread of life. Real bread only sustains you for a while, but Jesus, the true Bread of Life, is the source of life eternal. Bread is the staple of life. It represents the substance that you cannot live without. By eating bread, we are feasting on Christ and saying, "You are my life. Without you, I could not live. There are other reasons bread is an important symbol that we cannot go into right now. There is the consecrated bread of the temple, the bread offering, and others, all of which point to Christ. One of the ways we can benefit from communion is by meditating on the richness of this symbol.

The Wine

The other element is wine. Again, you cannot replace any other beverage for this without losing some of the symbolism. While the grape juice often used in communion is close to wine, even it does not carry the full symbolism as well as wine does. Nor is it what Jesus used.

Wine, by its color, symbolizes the blood of Christ. When you see the deep richness of the red, you are reminded that it is his blood that was shed for you. As you drink it, meditate on the truth that Christ shed his blood for you and that you are made holy by being washed in his blood.

Also, throughout the Scriptures, wine is a rich symbol. In Genesis 14:18, Melchizedek serves Abraham bread and wine in blessing Abraham. We know from Hebrews that Melchizedek was a type of Christ, if not an Old Testament appearance of Christ. His use of bread and wine prefigures the Lord's Supper where Abraham came and fellowshiped with the priest of God. There are several examples where wine is viewed as the cup of blessing. When the cup is blessed and someone drinks from the cup, they are receiving the blessing.

Beyond that, though, is an element of communion that we often forget. In communion, we not only look back at the sacrifice of Christ, but we also look forward to the coming of Christ. Paul says that when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. It has a forward-looking aspect.

As Christians, we are always looking forward to the day when Christ will bring the completion of his kingdom. The Bible describes us a bride, awaiting her groom. In describing the day when the kingdom of God is consummated, the Bible speaks of feasting and celebration. Wine, unlike any other beverage, symbolizes this celebration. When you think of an extravagant banquet, you don't think of Pepsi. Orange juice just doesn't get the message across the way that wine does.

Throughout Scripture, wine is a symbol of God's blessing and prosperity, which is a key component of Christ's Kingdom.¹ In Isaiah 25 and 55, God describes the day of the kingdom as being a time when we will feast on aged wine in abundance. In Jeremiah 31, Joel 3, Amos 9, and Zechariah 9, the prophetic vision of the fullness of the kingdom is a time filled with abundance of wine. Wine symbolizes this feasting and celebration like no other beverage can.

So, when we taste the wine in communion, we not only think back to the blood which Jesus shed for us, we look forward to the day He returns for us. Just as the sip of the wine is only a taste of the banquet that is to come, we enjoy through the sacrament a taste of what it is like to be united to Christ. We enjoy communion with him now, but we long for the day when we can feast fully on him at the Wedding Banquet.

How To Prepare

In 1 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul gives this admonition about coming to the Lord's Table:

¹Wine was a symbol of God's blessing and prosperity, a key part of the kingdom – Genesis 49:11, Deuteronomy 7:13, 11:14, Joel 2:19, 24.

²⁷Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. ³²When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. (NIV)

Here, the Apostle Paul calls us to judge, or examine ourselves so that we will not incur the judgment of God. This self-examination is to be two-fold. First of all, we should examine ourselves in relationship to Jesus Christ. Secondly, we should examine ourselves in relationship to others.

Relationship with Christ

In preparation for coming to the Lord's Table, the first question one should ask is, "Am I worthy to come?" This is *The Lord's Table*. It belongs to the Holy God, the King of kings. As such, only those who are worthy may come to it. How do you know if you are worthy? Below are a few questions to ask yourself to see if you are prepared to come to the Lord's Table.

- 1) Am I trusting in Jesus Christ alone and not in my own works to make me worthy to come to the Table?

To be a worthy to come to the Lord's Table means that you must be completely righteous, holy, and blameless. Outside of Jesus Christ, we are not holy. We are sinners who have offended God. To be worthy of the Lord's Table means that we recognize that we have no worthiness of our own. It also means to recognize that Jesus Christ lived the holy life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. Because we have trusted in him, we have received his robe of righteousness, making us holy and blameless before God.

- 2) Am I repenting of my sin?

The more we grow as Christians, the more we realize our need for a Savior. Repentance is the acknowledgement of this need. When we repent, we acknowledge our sin, turning from it and turning to Christ. When we come to the Lord's Table, we acknowledge that in Christ, we have died to sin and now live to righteousness. If there is sin in your life from which you are not willing to repent, then you should not come to the Lord's Table. Failure to repent is in effect a denial of the meaning of the Lord's Table.

By acknowledging our sin and acknowledging the grace of God given to us through Christ, we can experience the joy of forgiveness and the delight that God loves us while we are still sinners.

Relationship with Others

In verse 29, Paul exhorts us to recognize the body of the Lord. In the context, the body of the Lord refers not to the physical body of Jesus Christ, but to the body of Christ known as the church. The problem was, in Corinth, the Christians were not recognizing the body of the Lord because they were mistreating one another, particularly the poor (see 1 Corinthians 11:22). Therefore, in coming to the Lord's Table, we should make sure that we are doing nothing to disturb the unity of the body of our Lord, as represented by the sacrament. The following questions may help you in regard to your relationship with others.

- 1) Is there someone in the body of Christ that I need to go to and ask forgiveness?
- 2) Is there someone whom I have not forgiven?
- 3) Am I living independently or does my life express the unity of the body of Christ as represented by the Lord's Table (see 1 Corinthians 10:16-17)?

Before coming to the Lord's Table, prepare yourself first by reconciling to God. Go to the Father in prayer asking his forgiveness for your sins, not because you deserve his forgiveness, but because Jesus has earned it for you. Secondly, if necessary, go and be reconciled to others, particularly those in the church with whom you may need reconciliation. Thirdly, pray and ask God to strengthen your faith through the sacrament.

HOW TO BENEFIT

Eating the bread and drinking the wine of the Lord's Supper in and of itself does nothing. To benefit from the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine must be received in faith. Whenever the Lord's Supper is served, there is always time for prayer and meditation. Christian meditation is very different from Eastern meditation (e.g. Transcendental Meditation or TM). In Eastern meditation, one tries to empty his mind of all thoughts. In Christian meditation, the believer fills his minds with thoughts of God and His grace. Using the time during the serving of the Lord's Supper for prayer and meditation can greatly benefit one's faith while participating in the Lord's Supper.

Here are some suggestions of how to pray and meditate during Communion.

Time of Confession

Before serving the bread and the wine, the pastor always leads the congregation in a time of confession. During this time, confess your sins to God. The following are some sins you may want to confess:

- Any ways that you have violated his commandments that you have not yet confessed to him.
- Areas of your life where you are not living by faith.
- Those things or people which you treasure more than him.

- The good things that you do in an attempt to earn his favor.
- Your doubts about his love for you.
- Areas where you are being selfish and unloving towards others.

Dealing with Feelings of Unworthiness and Doubts

Often times when Communion is served, some Christians struggle with a dreadful sense of unworthiness. Because they are so aware of their sinfulness and their unworthiness to come to God, they are hesitant to participate in the Lord's Supper.

Yet, the Lord's Table is for those who know they are unworthy. The reason Jesus died on the cross was to save unworthy sinners. So, there is a sense in which the only person who is unworthy to come to the Lord's Supper is the person who actually thinks he is worthy.

If you are repentant of your sin and are struggling with feelings of unworthiness, then, by all means, participate in the Lord's Supper. It is for you! In the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that God's love for us is based on what Christ has done for us, not what we have done. His grace is far greater than any of our sins.

Most Christians struggle with doubts from time to time. When we get a glimpse of our own sinfulness and our unworthiness, it is only natural to wonder how a holy God could ever love us. Because of these doubts, some are reticent to come to the Lord's Table. Yet, the Lord's Supper is for doubters as well. In Mark 9:24, a man says to Jesus, "I believe. Help me in my unbelief." Come, with your doubts to the Lord's Table and ask God to strengthen your faith as you are reminded again of God's amazing love for you.

Serving of the Bread

While the bread is being served, meditate on what the death of Christ means for you. Think of how the sins that you confessed were laid upon him and how he paid for them in his own body. Rejoice that you do not have to suffer God's judgment because Christ suffered his judgment in his own body. Meditate on the truth that you no longer are guilty of any sin because Jesus has taken your guilt away by bearing it in his body.

Serving of the Wine

While the wine is being served, let it be a reminder to you of the banquet that is to come. One day, you will feast with God and all that your heart desires will be fully satisfied. As you meditate on this, ask God to enable you to live by faith so that instead of settling for what this life has to offer, you can live a life of love and sacrifice knowing that God will fully satisfy you. You may want to think of specific things that capture your heart more than God (approval of others, success, your family, etc.) and ask God to show you that what he offers you is far greater than anything this world offers you.

After the Sacrament is Celebrated

It has been the custom of Christians ever since the first celebration of the Lord's Supper to conclude the ceremony with singing. That is because we should always leave the Lord's Table with a sense of joy. Our joy comes from being reminded of all the benefits we have from the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as well as the hope that we have for the future. As you sing, think about what the death of Christ means to you:

- 1) I am forgiven
- 2) I am loved and accepted
- 3) I am not alone—by the Holy Spirit, God is always with me
- 4) I am part of a community of God's people
- 5) I have a purpose for my life—living for the glory of my Father
- 6) I have a hope and a future—Jesus promises that one day we will feast with him