

THE GIFT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER
(SUNDAY, MAY 2, 2021)

Scripture reading – 10 Words; Matt. 26:17-30

INTRODUCTION

In our Book of Church Order we have the following statement about the Lord's Supper and who we believe should receive the elements of communion.

Those eligible to participate in the Lord's Supper must have a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ, which means they must be capable, at least at some rudimentary level, of remembering and understanding the significance of Christ's broken body and shed blood and of examining their own conscience.

I can remember conversations with students in the past, and these were very intelligent students, who could not express why the Lord's Supper was important.

Maybe you have met other Christians who could not express much about the Lord's Supper. Sadly, there are Christians who rarely even participate in the Lord's Supper.

Contrast this with the time of the Reformation and the story of a young Huguenot named, Theodore Agrippa d'Aubigne, who was born in 1550.

This prodigy was able to read Greek, Latin, and Hebrew when he was six.

He was translating the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato into French before the age of eight.

At the age of eight years old, he went through a town with his father where he saw a group of Huguenots who had been brutally executed.

Seeing their decapitated bodies, he swore an oath at the request of his father to avenge them.

Two years later, when Theodore was only ten years old, he himself was captured and was threatened with death at the stake. Yet his reaction to this threat was a dance of joy.

He said later that the horror of the Roman Catholic mass took away his fear of the fire.¹

Such a mature reaction from a ten-year-old not only shows how the Lord had blessed him with an astonishing intellect but also shows how much the Huguenots appreciated the truth concerning the Lord's Supper.

After many years of being under the errors of the Roman Catholic Church and its doctrine of the mass, there was an incredible joy when the truth of the Lord's Supper was again taught and when the Lord's Supper was again celebrated as it should be.

I have talked before about how unfortunately there was disagreement among key Reformers regarding the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

This is the source of some of the major divisions today among Protestants, though all the division certainly cannot just be blamed on the Lord's Supper.

It is a shame that a meal given by our Lord to speak of the unity of His people has become grounds for such division.

This division is not going to be solved by ignorance or simply pleas for unity.

Ultimately, the division must be remedied by God in His grace as His people are guided by Scripture and the Spirit.

And part of unity is to appreciate and understand what Scripture teaches.

Only when Christians take seriously the gift we have been given are we motivated to continue to search the Scriptures.

We are to receive the Lord's Supper as one of the precious gifts that God gives to us.

¹ R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, 196. Rushdoony here was citing Jan Hendrick van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man* (New York: Dell [1961], 1964), 21.

The meal speaks of our salvation through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
The meal testifies to the continued fellowship we enjoy with the Triune God.

Why do you need the Lord's Supper?

Because it is a gift given to us by God the Father, through Christ the Son, applied through the working of the Holy Spirit.

You need the blessing found in the Lord's Supper.

1] GIVEN BY GOD THE FATHER

Throughout the gospel of John especially, Jesus many times showed that His work and teaching were not His own, but came from what His Father had given and told Him to do.

John 5:30 I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the **Father** who sent Me.

John 6:32 Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My **Father** gives you the true bread from heaven.

John 6:57 As the living **Father** sent Me, and I live because of the **Father**, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

In previous sermons on 1 Corinthians 11, we have noted the abuses of the Corinthian Church in their practice of the Lord's Supper.

Because of their abuses, Paul said that they were not even truly celebrating the Lord's Supper, even though they called it such.

As a result, Paul gave very specific instructions for them. And we do well to consider the instructions of God's Word.

But in considering your responsibility and the responsibility that we have together as a congregation, we must never forget that the Lord's Supper is not just something we do, but first it is a **gift** that has been given to us by our Father who knows our needs.

Listen to the beautiful words of the Belgic Confession of 1561:

“We believe that our good God, mindful of our *crudeness and weakness*, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith. He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by His Word and what He does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.”

You need the blessing of the Lord's Supper because it is a gift given to us by God our Father.

What should be our first response is thanksgiving?

We give thanks for the gift of Christ, His Son.

We give thanks for the message of the gospel.

We give thanks that in this meal God strengthens us because of Christ's perfect sacrifice and the continued ministry of our Lord on our behalf.

We give thanks for the true bread from heaven.

2] THROUGH CHRIST THE SON

We know from the Gospels and other places in the New Testament that Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples before he was betrayed, arrested, beaten, and crucified.

Some of the traditions of the Passover, as we know them, come from a time well after the crucifixion, but likely some of these traditions were part of Jesus' celebration with his disciples.²

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haggadah> - “The Haggadah could not have been written earlier than the time of Rabbi Yehudah bar Elaay (circa 170 CE – A.D. 170) who is the last [tanna](#) to be quoted in the Haggadah.”

It is stated that at the Passover meal “in every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt.”³

One of the important parts of the retelling of the Passover story is the declaration: “**This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt.**”

But at the last, true Passover, Jesus instead declared, “This is **my body** for you or *broken* for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And after supper, Jesus took what was likely the third cup⁴ of the Passover ceremony and declared, “This cup is the new covenant in **My blood**. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Think of the incredible change that Jesus made to the retelling of the Passover story!

My body and my blood.

We need the blessing of the Lord’s Supper because it is a gift given to us by God our Father received through Christ the Son.

Now we can be confident that when Jesus declared the bread to be his body and the wine to be his blood, He in no way was stating that physically the bread and the wine changed.

The Lutheran position that the physical body of Christ is everywhere also cannot be supported with Jesus’ words or with other Scripture.

But the gift of the Lord’s Supper is not merely a little bit of bread and wine.

³ Cited by Thiselton, 876-877.

⁴ Thiselton, 883. Some argue that it was the fourth cup. I am certainly not able to judge this issue. I am following Thiselton and others on this issue.

Yes, we understand that the bread is a symbol of Christ's body.

The wine is a symbol of His blood.

But though there has not been total agreement since the time of the Reformation, one of the main truths is that when we properly celebrate the Lord's Supper, we receive not only symbols which do remind us of Christ and His death, **but that we receive Christ Himself, not in a physical way but in a spiritual way.**

The Lord's Supper is also not of course a re-sacrificing of Christ as the Roman Mass is said to be.

Jesus no longer suffers on the cross.

His one sacrifice on the cross was sufficient to turn away God's wrath and pay the penalty for your sin.

The Lord's Supper does not take away your sin or pay the penalty for your sin.

And yet there is in God's grace a real blessing that comes when you eat the bread and drink of the cup in faith and obedience.

There is communion that is enjoyed with Christ who is physically not on earth but in Heaven.

Heidelberg Catechism, Question 75. How does the Lord's Supper remind you and assure you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all His gifts?

Answer. In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat this broken bread and to drink this cup. With this command He gave this promise: **First**, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely His body was offered and broken for me and His blood poured out for me on the cross. **Second**, as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely He nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with His crucified body and poured-out blood.

In similar language the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches us in the section on the Lord's Supper:

“Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but **spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death:** the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, **but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.**”⁵

I realize here that we are dealing with some profound theological statements.

I must confess that I have studied these things for a quite a few years without always understanding every word and phrase.

We all need to grow in these things without becoming overwhelmed.

To try to rephrase this point, I invite you to turn to John 15.

John 15:1 “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. **2** Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. **3** You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. **4** Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

We often speak of our salvation in terms of being saved from our sins, which is certainly true. Another picture or aspect of our salvation is **union with Christ**.

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 29, section 7.

The beautiful truth of John 15 that Jesus gives is that **we as branches abide in Christ the true vine.**

The point that I would make here as it concerns the Lord's Supper is that when in faith and trust in Christ you receive the elements of the Lord's Supper that the blessing is not only being reminded of the sufferings and death of Christ, but that there is real strengthening of your **union and communion with Christ.**

And this is one of the great blessings that you receive in the Lord's Supper.

3] APPLIED THROUGH THE WORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

One of the most essential and precious doctrines we believe is that there is one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We believe this, as difficult as it is to explain and fully understand, because this is the clear teaching of Scripture.

And far from being some impractical doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity guides our worship and understanding of how God works.

In **worship** we come before God the Father, through the intercession of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In our **salvation** we understand that we have been chosen by God the Father, we were saved through the work of Jesus Christ, the Son. And this redemption is applied to us through the working of the Holy Spirit.

We are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And so not surprisingly we understand that it is through the Holy Spirit's working that our celebration of the Lord's Supper becomes of blessing and benefit to us.

Heidelberg Catechism, Question 76. What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink His poured-out blood?

Answer. It means to accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ and by believing to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But it means more. **Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body. And so, although He is in heaven and we are on earth, we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. And we forever live on and are governed by one Spirit, as members of our body are by one soul.**

In some communion services, the words: "Lift up your hearts" are spoken as a reminder that our union is with the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, our Savior and brother in heaven.

In the Lord's Supper, Christ **does not descend physically in anyway to earth**, but we ascend through the working of the Holy Spirit to be a part of the life and worship of our ascended Lord.⁶

One practical consequence of this truth is the simplicity of our worship and celebration of the Lord's Supper.

True worship, though it should be done as best we can, does not need human ideas and inventions.

No, we come simply because our worship takes place through the working of the Holy Spirit.

In a similar way, our celebration of the Lord's Supper is done as simply as we can in following the instructions of Christ.

It is a small meal of just a little bit of bread and a small amount of wine.

⁶ Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper*, 198.

How, we might ask, is there any power in this simple thing we do?

The answer is that God has given us this gift, the gift of Christ Himself, and through faith and the working of the Holy Spirit, we receive true blessing and strengthening of our souls.

CONCLUSION:

In the familiar words of 1 Corinthians 11:26 Paul says that when eat this bread and drink this cup, **we proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.**

There is no way, that you can possibly think about all the different things that communion means at once.

There are also many different proper emotions that are a part of our celebration.

There is true sorrow in thinking about the suffering of Christ and all that he endured.

There is joy also knowing that He has risen again.

There is sorrow in realizing how you have sinned against our Lord.

There is joy in realizing the forgiveness that you have through Christ's death.

We also know that part of our celebration is realizing the unity that we have with each other as members of Christ's body.

So, I don't think the goal is each time we celebrate that we try to possibly think about each of these things or display each of the proper emotions we could have.

Proper celebration isn't because you can do each of these things.

But together we do accomplish the purpose of the meal in proclaiming the **Lord's death till He comes.**

And this means, Lord willing, that we will have many more opportunities in doing this.

And in each time that we celebrate, the Holy Spirit may help you focus on one or more of these aspects.

In some of our celebrations, you may be more aware of your sinfulness and the joy of full forgiveness.

Thankfully the blessing doesn't come simply because you understand how all of these things work.

The blessing of communion is not that as a theologian you can write a 20-page paper on the Lord's Supper.

It is good that we try to mature in our understanding of course.

As husbands and fathers, especially we have a duty in helping our families.

We hope also to be able to give instruction to others.

Yes, there is much for us to learn, but we rest not simply in our own intellect or understanding, but in what Christ has accomplished for us.

We receive this gift given to us by God the Father, through Christ the Son, applied through the working of the Holy Spirit.

"Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling!"

Communion Hymn: 439

BENEDICTION - HEBREWS 12:1-3

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race

that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.