

T. Shane Martin
 Green Run Baptist Church
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What Happens at the Lord's Table 1 Corinthians 11:23-32

INTRODUCTION

Having just celebrated Thanksgiving, I thought it would be appropriate to preach on the Lord's Supper because it is such a concentrated time of giving thanks to God for what He has done for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Lord's Supper is often correctly called the Eucharist. The word Eucharist comes from the Greek verb *eucharisteo* which means "to give thanks". Our Lord Jesus used this very word when He instituted the Lord's Supper and Paul reminds us of this in 1 Corinthians 11:24; *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."* This sacrament goes by many titles: the Lord's Supper (John 13:2), the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:24), Communion (1 Corinthians 10:16, NKJV), and it is often called The Lord's Table (1 Corinthians 10:21). The name we use for this event is not nearly as critical as our understanding of what transpires at this Table. Here in our text, the Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus entrusted him with the true meaning of this sacrament and that Paul is now delivering that sacred message to the Church (v23). We must have this accurate understanding because Jesus commanded us to continuously observe this event until He returns and ushers us into the full realization of The Kingdom.

1. WE REMEMBER JESUS (11:23-25)

Paul makes this point very clear; a central purpose of coming to the Lord's Table is to intentionally remember Jesus. It's humiliating to think that we can, and often do, forget Jesus. In our flesh we easily become obsessed with our immediate surroundings and we lose sight of Jesus. Knowing this, God commanded a time of remembrance built into the very fabric of the Church. This is one reason that we should come to the Lord's Table often; the repetition of remembering is helpful because we easily get distracted. The Old Testament is filled with festivals and feasts that served this same purpose; to encourage remembrance of God's mighty deeds on behalf of His people. We often sing, *"Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart. O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above."* The Lord's Table is an ordained place of sealing our hearts for God as we remember Christ.

In this age of individual expression, it probably needs to be said that we cannot walk in obedience to Christ if we neglect the Lord's Table. Someone may say, "I can remember Jesus anytime and anywhere. Why must I come to the Lord's Table with other believers to do this?" The clearest response is that we must observe the Lord's Table because He has commanded that we do this. We are not free to choose how we will worship Jesus. Jesus has commanded us to observe this sacrament on a continual basis. He has commanded us to worship Him through eating and drinking as we call to mind who He is and what He has done. Another answer to our hypothetical question is that we do more than remember Jesus when we gather at the Lord's Table.

2. WE PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL (11:26)

Not only do we remember Jesus, but we proclaim the Gospel. The congregation preaches a "visible sermon" to use Augustine's concept of Communion. When a sermon is preached from

the Bible, the Gospel enters through our ears. When we eat and drink at the Lord's Table, the Gospel enters through our eyes; it is a visible presentation of the Gospel. This is why Paul describes Communion as a proclamation of the Lord's death (v26).

One aspect of the Lord's Supper that often disturbs us is that some persons are asked to eat and others are asked to abstain. In other words, if Communion is done as the Lord intended, all believers partake and all unbelievers abstain. This sacrament draws a clear picture of those who are in Christ and those who are not. Eating and drinking are acts of worship which serve as a sign that believers are continuing to participate in Christ and receive the full benefits of His life, death and resurrection. We eat broken bread reminding us of Jesus' broken body. We drink from the cup that reminds us that Jesus drank from the cup of God's wrath (Matthew 20:21-23). We drink the fruit of the vine that reminds us of Jesus' blood; His life offered in the place of sinners. At this Table, eating and drinking are powerful rituals which communicate the Gospel and our participation in it.

God summons redeemed sinners to His Table. This Table is for sinners who need spiritual nourishment. This meal is for those who have fled to Christ as their only hope of salvation. This is why faith is required for this meal to be eaten in a way that glorifies God and strengthens us. Eating and drinking in faith sounds the Gospel loud and clear for the world to hear.

3. WE EXPERIENCE THE PRESENCE OF JESUS (11:27-32)

Most of us understand these first two aspects of Communion pretty well. We know that we are to remember Jesus and we get the idea of proclaiming the Gospel. But these things are not all that happens at the Lord's Table. At this covenant meal, Christ dwells with His people in a unique way.

(3.1) There are different understandings of how Christ is present at the Lord's Table

Here are the 4 basic understandings of how Christ is present with His Church at the Lord's Table: (1) The Roman Catholic Church conceives of the presence of Christ as a physical presence. When the priest performs the consecration and utters the words: 'This is my body' the bread and wine change into the real body and blood of Christ. The elements still taste like bread and wine, but the Catholic Church argues that the substance changes. This is called the doctrine of transubstantiation. (2) Martin Luther disagreed with the Roman Catholic position; he did not believe that the bread and wine constitute new substances such as flesh and blood. But Luther argued that we should accept the biblical language [*This is my body which is given for you*] without philosophical interpretation. The bread and wine remain bread and wine. At the same time, they are also the body and blood of Christ. (3) Ulrich Zwingli [and many of today's Baptists] understands this Supper to be a memorial only. Certainly many deny that the physical presence of Christ is the elements, but Zwingli did believe that Christ was present in and through the faith of the participants. In Zwingli's view, he understood the Supper as a commemoration of the death of Christ, in which the church responded to grace already given, rather than a means of grace. (4) John Calvin held that there is a real reception of the body and blood of Christ in the supper, but only in a spiritual manner. The Lord's Supper is a real means of grace, a channel by which Christ communicates himself to us. Calvin understood that after the ascension Christ retained a real body which is in heaven and that body remains in heaven at the right hand of the Father. Therefore, Christ cannot be physically present in the Supper; but when believers respond to the summons of Jesus and gather at the Table, the Holy Spirit nourishes us with the body and

blood of the Lord Jesus. In other words, this Supper is a living link with the absent Lord, a channel whereby His presence is ministered to those who partake in faith. Calvin acknowledged the mystery in this concept because Scripture acknowledges the mystery, *This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32)*. The union of Christ and His people at this Table presents us with the same type of mystery which marriage [two becoming one] offers. These are mysteries, yet realities.

(3.2) Paul explains this teaching to the Corinthians (10:16-17)

I think that the 4th view, Calvin's view best communicates the essence of the Lord's Table. Calvin seems to best reflect the teaching of Scripture. Listen to Paul as he explains their mystical union with Christ; *16Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? 17Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)*. Paul says that when we drink from the cup, we share in the blood of Jesus; and the same sharing takes place when we eat the bread. To partake of the elements of the Lord's table is to come under his influence and power. As we enjoy Christ's abiding presence, we experience in a unique way all those saving benefits and blessings that Christ's body and blood obtained for us.

Christ is not present at this Table in the bread and cup, but He is here. We worship Him through eating and drinking just as He commanded. Like Paul, we must acknowledge the mystery of Christ's presence among us and by faith, we must eat and drink believing that these faithful, simple acts of obedience bind us together with the living Lord. Through this simple covenant meal, the Holy Spirit lifts us into the heavens and enables us to be nurtured and strengthened by Christ's body and blood.

(3.3) The Church must recapture the significance of the Lord's Table

As we read this passage from 1 Corinthians 11, we should note the emphases on the supernatural presence of Christ among His people at this Supper. Notice that Christ is present both to bless (v31) and to judge (v29, v32) those who partake of this meal. To the one who comes, having repented and believed the Gospel, God is present to bless. To the one who comes without any self-examination and filled with rebellion, severe discipline is promised (v30).

CONCLUSION

Do not allow your sin to keep you from this promised union with Jesus at the Table. We all bring sin here with us; we must not add unbelief to our sin by neglecting the promises offered to us here in this covenant meal. Confess your sins and believe that God will nurture and strengthen your faith. The Lord Jesus has prepared this meal for those who are starving for His grace. This Table is for those who need to eat to gain strength for the journey. Will you come and eat in faith? Will you look past the simplicity of the elements and hear the voice of God say *Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?*