

What should I be thinking when the communion trays are passed?

Feb. 7, 2016

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When I was about 13 to 14 years old, I had anxiety when I took the Lord's Supper. Towards the end of the service (like us, usually) the pastor would make his way down to the communion table. His mood would change; the elders would come up and, of course, they were all business. The organist would play softly in the background. And the pastor would do his thing; he would give some teaching kind of like I give teaching before passing out the elements. We'd pray. My pastor would usually include this statement: "Let us all now examine ourselves." That wasn't his idea; he wasn't just making up communion rules. He got that straight from the Bible. In 1 Cor. 11:28 Paul says, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." And this examination is a pretty big deal. We read in vs. 27, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord." That's why you examine yourself.

That warning was enough to make a 13 year-old kid pretty nervous. And when you consider the consequences for doing so it gets even more serious. Listen to what Paul says the consequences were for eating and drinking in an unworthy manner from vs. 30, "That is why many of you are weak and and ill, and some have died." I wasn't wrong to think this was a big deal; it is a big deal! Some have even died because they took the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. This the Bible; the Bible doesn't lie. And when I compared myself to other people holier than me (I thought) I couldn't help but think I was doing everything wrong.

Is that the way it's supposed to be? Were my anxieties and fears justified? Was I just a big screw up that needed to get his act together? Was the Lord's Supper the Holy of Holies of all things church that a foolish 13 year old wasn't fit for? And is that the way God wanted it?

The answer to all of these questions, my brothers and sisters, is in the scriptures. I am where I am today in my thoughts and feelings about the Lord's Supper because I believe in the sufficiency of God's word. God has told us in the Bible what we need to know to worship him through the Lord's Supper. And I hope I've piqued your interest in these questions from my own experiences and sharing with you just a few verses from the Bible. You should care about getting the Lord's Supper right. Not so you can feel good about yourself about being right, but so you can worship God through this common meal and benefit from his grace.

I titled the message, "What should I be thinking when the communion trays are passed," because we have more than enough time to discipline our mind and worship God at that moment. I want our time together around the Table to be a time where our joy in the Lord soars, our confidence in his grace for us is sure and our love for each is pure. Of course, to have that happen we need to go deeper. We need to get some theology in us. So, let's talk about what's true about the Lord's Supper so that our beliefs change. And then, when our beliefs change, our actions and feelings will change, too, by the grace of God.

Jesus himself instituted the Lord's Supper for us to observe. Jesus was celebrating the Passover Feast with his disciples on the Thursday before his crucifixion. The Passover was a special meal that commemorated God's deliverance and salvation for his people from slavery in Egypt. It was a way to remember God's grace. But Jesus improves on this Passover meal by inserting himself as the true deliverer and savior for his people. It's interesting: in Matthew and Mark Jesus simply institutes or establishes the meal. There's not a lot of extra information in those two accounts to help us understand how and why 2000 years later we should observe the meal. Jesus says, "This is my body broken for you... This cup is the cup of the new covenant." But Luke gives us a little more. Luke records Jesus saying those same words "This is my body... This is the cup of the new covenant," but also adds, "Do this in remembrance of me." Maybe Matthew and Mark presumed that was the purpose; after all, that's what the Passover was for, to remember the deliverance of God. But Luke makes it explicit (The main thing John records in his gospel is not the bread, the cup or even the meal, but John highlights Jesus washing his disciples feet... that's interesting, too).

This focus on remembrance is brought up again in 1 Cor. 11; let's turn there and read vs. 23-26 (READ). So, there it is; a clear and direct account that this meal is meant to help us remember the Lord Jesus.

I've brought this up a lot over the last few years; we have a desperate need to remember the Lord Jesus. We are forgetful. We're not forgetful so much to the facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection; I'm not concerned that many of you are going to wake up tomorrow morning and have amnesia. "Jesus? Jesus who?" That's not going to happen. But what might very well happen is you forget how desperately you need him. You and I might very well forget how utterly amazing and breathtaking is his grace. We may just forget his demanding call of discipleship. We easily forget his warning about the faith-sucking power of the world. And it's dangerous for our soul to live with that kind of forgetfulness.

That's informative about what we should be thinking about when the communion trays are past and how to make the most of this meal. Remember Jesus. Make a point to recall to mind the reality of all these things. God has mercifully provided us a sensory experience that wakes us up to remember. Let the sweetness of the cup remind you just how sweet the grace of Jesus is. Let the bread getting stuck in your teeth remind you how sin clings so closely to us that we need the sanctifying grace of the Lord Jesus.

Now, that takes some effort; I mean to say, it takes some intentionality on your part to discipline your mind in the midst of our common meal to go there. If you just give into your flesh and let your mind wander, you'll remember different things:

- Boy, I'm sure hungry. And this little cracker is not going to do the trick. I hope Pastor hurries up.
- If the Packers lose today, I'm going to be so angry.

- I wonder how busy it's going to be at camp? It's a beautiful day; I bet the ski hill is going to be packed. I better get there early.

Without the grace of God, that's where our thoughts go, right? The grace and mercy of God stokes faith in us to see and remember Jesus. Leverage the meal; take advantage of your senses being stimulated and go back to the grace of Jesus when we take this meal together.

There's more, though, that the scriptures teach about this meal that informs us about how it serves our common faith. Turn with me to 1 Cor. 10. I first need to set the stage. There are a few dominating themes that run through 1 Corinthians. One is idolatry and another is unity (or division) in the body of Christ. These two themes collide in chapter 10. Paul is wrapping up a discussion with this church about their participation at pagan temples and meals. The Corinthians thought that it was no big deal that they still practiced their former way of life after they became Christians. Look how Paul corrects the church (READ vs. 14-22).

Paul is clearly talking about the Lord's supper; the cup of blessing is a reference to the blood of Christ. The bread that's broken is the body of Christ that's illustrated in the Lord's Supper. And he says two things that are significant. The first thing he says is that eating isn't just eating, but it's a participation, it's a sharing together. That word for share is the Greek word *koinonia*, which the NT writers use to describe Christian fellowship within the church. This fellowship happens whether you're eating a pagan meal or the Lord's Supper. These meals mean something; they point to the common faith or belief you have together. You can't eat the meals without affirming what the meals signify and how it unites people together.

Imagine when God saved you to a living hope in Jesus Christ you were rescued from worshipping the pagan god Mario (PIC). One of the important rituals of worship in Marioism is eating a bowl of pasta every week with your fellow worshipers (let's call them gamers). Marioism teaches that only when you eat the pasta does the spirit of Mario protect you from all evil. It's a fundamental doctrine of the faith. So, you'd go to the Princess' Castle every week to eat together as was prescribed. But, by the mercy of God, you were saved and rescued realizing that only by the blood of Jesus Christ are you saved. You repent and convert. But what are you saying if you still eat the bowl of pasta every week with the rest of the gamers? You've learned that Mario is no god; you've learned that eating pasta provides no protection. Maybe you think, "It's no big deal." But by virtue of your participation in this meal you continue to affirm the false beliefs of Marioism. It's not like Mario is real; right, it isn't real, but there's something dangerous and sinister under Marioism. It's demonic power. The forces of Satan are at work in this meal and event because it points people away from Jesus Christ, the only one who can save. And so your participation in that meal is a continual participation in this satanic activity. Eat the bread; drink the cup of the Lord and proclaim his work, his salvation, his power to rescue not foreign gods. Eating the meal matters.

The second thing we learn is that the *communal* act of eating is significant, too. Look at vs. 17, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the

one bread.” By virtue of our common faith in Christ and the common practice of sharing this meal together in faith, we are linked together in one body. The meal - or more rightly said, the one who instituted the meal - binds us together in an intimate fellowship. We see in the Bible all of the metaphors to somehow describe this intimate sharing. We are a body. We are a family. We are a common loaf of bread. This meal speaks to that; this meal that we share together with faith in Christ - not faith in the meal - links us together in a holy way. By virtue of our unity together we proclaim the power of the atoning work of Christ.

If you want proof of that the Christ in the meal links us together in a community of love and fellowship you just have to look at chapter 11. Let’s read vs. 17-22 to start (READ). What’s the problem? What does Paul say is wrong in this church? How would you put that in your own words? Let’s just look at some of the words Paul uses.

- vs. 18 ~ there’s divisions among them. What are those divisions about? Look at vs. 20-21.
- vs. 20-21 ~ So, they come together to share the common meal of the Lord’s Supper, but they are disregarding each other when they eat. How so? Well, vs 21 says that some are getting drunk and others are going hungry. But, look how Paul summarizes that problem in vs. 22.
- vs. 22 ~ God’s church is being despised as they disregard each other on the basis of wealth. So, there’s an ugly division between brothers and sisters over economic status.

Jump down to vs. 33 (READ vs. 33-34). It’s a summary, isn’t it? He’s concluding his thoughts on the topic he started in vs. 17. And what’s the conclusion? The specific instruction is “Wait for each other, church!” If I could get behind Paul’s command in vs. 33 I think he’s trying to say, “Christ died to unite you all together; treat each other with love, my brothers and sisters in Christ.” Don’t come to the common meal looking to satisfy your hunger for food; come to the common meal eager to satisfy your hunger for Christ and to serve others. So, it seems pretty clear that this section, vs. 17-34, is about the love and care the body of Christ should have one another, right?

Here’s the deal: the famous instruction on the Lord’s Supper in vs. 23-26 is meant to help this church understand the kind of love, care and unity they are to have with one another. Why? Because of what we also learned in chapter 10; sharing the meal together in faith and, more importantly, professing faith in the one the meal is about (Jesus Christ) links us together in one body. We participate together, by grace through faith, as one family through this meal together. And to despise each other with this meal, to forget about each other, to refuse to care for each other, profanes the body and blood of the Lord. By the forgiving grace of the Lord he unites all men and women together who are in Christ. So eating and drinking this meal when you’re not united is eating and drinking in an unworthy manner.

Read with me vs. 27-29 (READ). Here’s that warning I mentioned earlier. But what’s he warning the church about? What’s eating and drink in an unworthy manner? Vs. 29 says, “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eat and drink judgment on himself.”

The key phrase is *discerning the body*. What body am I supposed to discern correctly? I think it's the church; the fellowship of believers. The reason I believe this is because every time Paul makes a reference to the meal (the bread and the cup and the corresponding body and blood of the Lord) he includes both elements. He never talks about the meal and lists just the bread or just the cup. But when it comes to the body of Christ, the church, we know he referenced the church as "the body" in chapter 10; I think he's doing the exact same thing here in chapter 11.

So, what would that mean, then? How would you do that? How do you discern the body correctly? You do that by rightly conforming your thoughts and actions to what the Spirit says through the scriptures. Since we are all one (male and female; slave and free; Jew and Gentile) show no partiality. Look to do good to each other rather than doing good for you. Live with gratitude for what God has made; a family out of people from every tribe, people language and nation. As far as it depends on you, live at peace with one another; seek reconciliation.

Again, that informs what we are thinking about, what we are focusing on and what we are celebrating when the trays are passed. Celebrate what God has made here; celebrate the family of God! Celebrate the fact that you have brothers and sisters to care for when they are struggling and who will care for you when you're struggling. Rejoice that you don't have to do life alone. Let the beauty of the body of Christ fill your heart with joy when you take the elements. Look around and thank God for the family in front of you; for the family next to you. If you don't know them, make a point to greet them in Christ and learn their name - you're going to spend eternity together! And put to death unforgiveness; put rivalry and conceit away. You can't take this meal and hate your brother or sister in the process. Repent of your sin and be reconciled. Practically speaking, that means you say sorry for a sister you hurt; you forgive a sister who has apologized.

I've given you some ammunition; some things to think about when it comes to communion time. You pick what you dwell on today. And without question, thank the one who has made this all possible.

Key Verse: Luke 22:19 ~ "And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me."

Questions for the week

- How difficult is it for you to keep your mind focused on the right things during communion? Have you ever been anxious about taking communion?
- What was the most helpful idea / verse you heard today? Why?
- Will you observe the Lord's Supper differently based on what you heard today? How come?