

What is the Lord's Supper?

Feeding Our Hunger for God

Scripture: Matthew 26:26-29

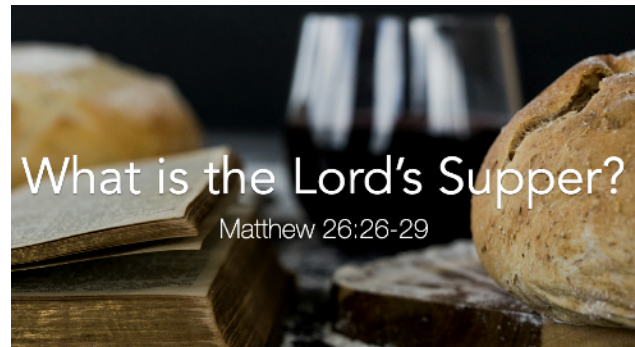
Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist

Introduction

These three verses force us to ask the question, *What is the Lord's Supper?*

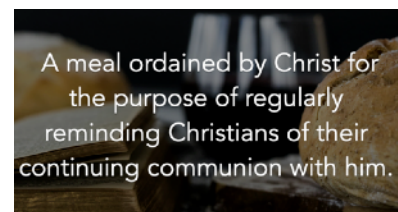
What Jesus says in v.27, "Take, eat; this is my body," may be the most controversial sentence in all of Scripture. Entire denominations of Christians have been founded upon the various interpretations of what these words are understood to mean or not mean. The words before us are those that have been known to Christians for generations as "*the words of the institution*," since by them Jesus instituted a new Christian ritual or ceremony. All three synoptic gospel writers include these words, as does Paul.¹ Paul however, records for us one important additional sentence that the other gospel authors do not include,



"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 1 Corinthians 11:25 (ESV)

Paul alone records Jesus' command that this be done in memory of him, thus Paul sensed this was an important part of this meal which ought not be lost. This meal is variously called The Lord's Supper, Communion, and the Eucharist. It is primarily referred to as the Lord's Supper because that is what Paul call it in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:20).

So, what is the Lord's Supper? It is *a meal ordained by Christ for the purpose of regularly reminding Christians of their continuing communion with him*. Since Jesus commands



¹ Mark 14:23-26; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25.

Christians to regularly “do this in memory of him,” it is often referred to as an *ordinance*—since it was ordained² by Christ, or in some traditions, a *sacrament* (though Protestants—Lutherans and Episcopalians—who use the term do not understand it in the same way as do Catholics³).

From our text this morning, we can see three realities of the Lord’s Supper. It is a meal that is 1) *rooted in the past*, 2) *received in the present*, and one that 3) *reflecting a joyful future*.

A Meal Rooted in the Past

First, we see that the reality that this meal is *rooted in the past*.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it...
Matthew 26:26 (ESV)

1) A Passover Meal

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it (v.26). The meal they were eating was not any ordinary meal. We know this from the previous paragraph. The meal they were eating was the *Passover* meal (Mt 26:17). As we have already seen⁴, this Passover meal was a annual *memorial*⁵ meal by which the people Israel regularly worshiped God for having delivered them from slavery and death in Egypt and into freedom and life with Yahweh, who loved and redeemed them. This meal they were eating was filled with meaning that was rooted in God’s past work of redeeming them from Egypt.

2) A Communion Meal

Additionally one of the often overlooked miracles of the Exodus is the amazing meal that took place at Mt. Sinai. After leaving Egypt, Moses led the people to Mt. Sinai, which is where God had first revealed himself to Moses.⁶ When they arrived at the mountain, God said to them,

⁴ “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples...” **Exodus 19:4-5** (ESV)

God loved and cherished the people whom he had redeemed and *he desired to commune with them*. So he invited the leaders of Israel to share a meal with him in his presence.

² Instituted and officially commanded or decreed.

³ Catholics use the word sacrament in the sense of the Latin phrase *ex opere operata*, which means, “from the work worked,” that is the act in itself conveys grace without requiring any faith on the part of the person participating in the act, while Protestants who use the word understand that that act is only meaningful if exercised in and from faith.

⁴ See Matthew 26:14-25 and the August 10 sermon, “One of You Will Betray Me.”

⁵ Exodus 12:14.

⁶ Exodus 3:1, 12; 19:2-3. Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai are two names for the same mountain.

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel... they beheld God, and ate and drank. **Exodus 24:9-11** (ESV)

This is amazing! God invited Moses, Aaron, his sons, and seventy elders to a dine with him on the mountain. Sharing a meal together is a sign of trusted friendship and sweet communion. God delivered the nation of Israel from the slavey and idolatry of Egypt so that they could enjoy true communion with God himself and he signified this by inviting them to a meal. This communion between God and his people is what is later pictured in all of holy days and sacred ceremonies prescribed in the Mosaic law. Consider the fact that all of the sacred ceremonies of Israel were feasts⁷ before the Lord. All of the national holy days were meals with the Lord.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts." **Leviticus 23:2** (ESV)

God goes on to list all the days of holy gatherings, and they are all ***holy feasts!*** There are eight. They are the Sabbath, the Passover Feast⁸, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feasts of First-fruits, Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Booths. All the holy ceremonies are holy feasts before the Lord. *God enjoys communion with his children and he invites them to experience his presence over meals!*

This is the backdrop of this meal Jesus is eating with his disciples. This meal is ***rooted in the past*** and ***rooted*** in God's redemptive work and his desire to ***commune*** with his children.

A Meal Received in the Present

Second, we see the reality that this is a meal ***received in the present***.

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. **Matthew 26:26-28** (ESV)

1) Received by Believers (v.26)

Jesus took bread, ... and gave it to the disciples (v.26). Note that this meal is shared by Jesus with his disciples. Just as Passover is a family⁹ meal, so too is the Lord's Supper. Jesus shared this Passover meal with his disciples. Therefore the Lord's Supper should be understood to be a

⁷ Leviticus 23.

⁸ Exodus 12:14.

⁹ Exodus 12:13, 22.

family meal. It should only be received by those who are in the family of Jesus, that is, by those who are his followers by virtue of their faith in Jesus as God's chosen and anointed Messiah.

2) Received as a Covenant (v.28)

Take, eat; this is my body. Drink... for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (v.26, 28). Jesus took the bread and broke it while saying, "*this is my body*." He then took the cup of wine saying, "*this is my blood of the covenant*." He mostly likely said this while taking the third cup of wine of the Passover meal, which is "the cup of redemption" and corresponds to God's promise when he said to the people of Israel, "...I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment" (Ex 6:6).

In the Old Testament covenants almost always involved the offering of a sacrifice. They were made, literally "cut," when animals were cut in half and the promises of two parties were made by walking between the two halves of animals. This communicates the idea that both parties were promising to keep the terms of the covenant, or else to be cut in half as the animals were cut in half.

Jesus is here once again revealing to his disciples that he will certainly die soon. His body will be broken like the bread was broken and his blood will be poured out like wine is poured out. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb saved the people from the judgment of death, so Jesus' blood will save his people from eternal death. Just as God's first and oldest covenant with Israel was put into effect with the shed blood of the sacrifice (Ex 24:5-8), so now this new covenant would be put into effect with the shed blood of Jesus.

This new covenant that was about to be put into effect, would come at the cost of Jesus' life. This is the price of *forgiveness of sins*. Thus, when Christians observe the Lord's Supper, we do so while remembering that our forgiveness of sins was purchased at great cost; it cost Jesus his life. This is why Paul writes,

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. **1 Corinthians 11:26 (ESV)**

The Lord's Supper is to be received as a *covenant*, remembering that the promise of God in this covenant is that if you look in faith to Jesus as your Passover lamb, then his shed blood will save you from God's judgment against your sin, as God passes over your sins and gives you life. This cost nothing less than the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.

3) Received as a Sign

This is my body, this is my blood (v.26, 27). What did Jesus mean by these words? Did he mean the bread actually became his body and the wine actually became his blood? Or did he mean that the bread and the wine *signified* his body and his blood. The central question relates to how Christ is present in the Lord's Supper? There are essentially three views.

1. The Roman Catholic View: Transubstantiation. *Christ is really, truly, and bodily present.*

According to official teaching of Roman Catholic Church, the bread and the wine *actually*

become the body and blood of Christ. At the moment the priest lifts up the bread and says, "This is my body," at that moment, there is substantial transformation.

By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.¹⁰

This begs the question, did the disciples sitting with Jesus and listening to him at that moment, believe that he meant to communicate that the bread and the cup had suddenly and actually were transformed into the same substance as his physical body? Or did they understand Jesus to simply be using the bread and the cup as a *sign* or *symbol* of his body and his blood? It seems most natural to think that they understood Jesus to be speaking symbolically, just as he previously had done when saying, "I am the door,"¹¹ or "I am the true vine."¹² It seems most reasonable to think that they understood Jesus to be speaking symbolically and to be using the bread and wine as signs pointing to his body and his blood.

Since the Catholic Church views the bread and wine as being actually transformed into Christ's body and blood, they consequently hold that Jesus is actually again and again offering himself as a propitiatory sacrifice. Thus, as often as the Mass is conducted, Christ is a repeatedly offering himself as a sacrifice. However, this view does not accord with the fact that Jesus himself said on the cross, "*It is finished*" (Jn 19:30). And, as we know that Christ is now seated at the right hand of the Father, this indicates that his atoning work is complete and accepted. Thus, the writer of Hebrews says, "*After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...*" (Heb 1:3). And again

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.
Hebrews 10:14 (ESV)

Thus, the Roman Catholic view of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is insufficient and lacks agreement with the biblical teaching of the total sufficiency and complete efficacy of Christ's sacrificial, atoning death.

2. **The Lutheran View: Consubstantiation.** *Christ is truly and substantially present.* In reaction against the Roman Catholic view, Martin Luther developed a view that is called *consubstantiation*, wherein he described the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper as being "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. The prefix 'con' means 'with' and thus

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1224, quoting *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1375-6.

¹¹ John 10:9.

¹² John 15:1.

Luther wanted to affirm the true and actual presence of Christ in the bread and wine, but he also wanted to maintain that the bread was still bread and the wine was still wine.

According to this view, Christ is truly and physically there in the bread and wine in the same way that water is truly present in a saturated sponge. But how can the physical body of Christ be in two places at the same time? How can Christ be physically seated at the right hand of God and yet also physically present in the bread and wine? Luther could not sufficiently answer this question. It seems the best answer is that the third view.

3. **The Protestant View.** *Christ is symbolically and spiritually present.* In response to Luther, John Calvin and other Reformers argued that the wine and the bread did not *transform* into the the body and blood of Christ, neither did they somehow *contain* the body and blood of Christ, but rather they *symbolized* and *signified* the actual *spiritual* presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Surely this is the whole point of Jesus in John 6:38-59. Many have and do stumble over his words,

"...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life..."

John 6:53-54 (ESV)

Many walked away from Jesus after hearing him say this. However, he then went on and said to his disciples,

"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." John 6:63 (ESV)

This makes clear that Jesus was speaking about spiritual reality, not fleshly reality. This must be true, for no one actually ate his physical body. What he was meaning was the fact that he and he alone is the source of eternal spiritual life. He alone has come down to us from the Father in heaven. And he alone is one who died and was resurrected. Thus, Jesus is teaching that without *believing*¹³ in him—without receiving him into one's heart and soul and mind—one cannot have eternal life. Without trusting in his physical death for the atonement and in his bodily resurrection from the dead, no one will enjoy eternal life with God.

In the Lord's Supper we are in faith acting out physically the reality of what happens spiritually in order for eternal life to be granted to us. If we fail to eat the proper physical food, then our physical bodies will die. If we fail to receive the proper spiritual food, then our souls will die. We do not have eternal life in ourselves, so taking the bread and wine into ourselves, is a confession of the need to receive again the fullness of the Holy Spirit of Jesus into ourselves in order to remain spiritually alive healthy.

¹³ John 6:47 "Truly, Truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me has eternal life."

The bread and wine are **signs** that point us in our minds and hearts to the necessity of the Lord Jesus himself. Salvation was accomplished outside of us by the work of Jesus on the cross as he offered his torn body and shed blood as an atoning sacrifice that accomplished the forgiveness of sin for all those who put their faith in Jesus. The regular sitting at the Lord's Table is a reminder of our ongoing need of and his continual provision for our spiritual nourishment through the spiritual presence of and communion with Christ.

4) Received with Thanksgiving (v.27)

The Lord's Supper is to be received with thanksgiving. Jesus himself models this for us. We see this in verse 27.

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you..."

Matthew 26:27 (ESV)

The word 'thanks' is the Greek word *eucharisteō* (εὐχαριστέω), which is where we get our word eucharist. The word means, "to express gratitude for benefits or blessings—to thank, thanksgiving, thankfulness."¹⁴ The *Didache* (~A.D. 90 - 120), the earliest church manual, uses the word Eucharist to refer to the Lord's Supper¹⁵.

There are at least four reasons to receive the Lord's Supper with thanksgiving.

1. **Christ's substitutionary death.** All Christians ought to give thanks because Jesus died so that we could live. The apostle Paul writes, "**Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed**" (1 Cor 5:7). He died in the place of the elect sinners. The blood of the Passover lamb was required in order life to be given to us and death to be taken away from us. Thus, the lamb died on our behalf so that those under his blood could live. And as Peter wrote, "**For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that he might bring us to God...**" (1 Ptr 3:18). For this great gift, we ought to *eucharisteō*, give thanks.
2. **Christ purchased forgiveness of sins.** By his death and his resurrection on the third day, Jesus has paid the price for our sin. His blood has been shed to purchase forgiveness of sin. This is "**the new covenant in his blood which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**" He did this for all who will go to him in faith and ask for the gift of this forgiveness. For this great gift, we ought to give thanks.
3. **Christ demonstrated his love for us.** On this very night (the night on which Jesus instituted this meal), he later said, "**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends**" (Jn 15:13). In this supper, "we proclaim the Lord's death," and his death is

¹⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 427.

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 2nd ed. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 190–192.

his own proclamation of his love for his children. It was understanding the personal love of Jesus that made the difference in **Jean Randlett's** life. Jean passed away this past Tuesday afternoon. Steve wrote in the eNews last Friday that one day after several years of us raking leaves at Jean's house she finally understood that us raking leaves and painting her house was not merely good people doing good deeds, but Jesus showing his love to her personally through his people. For this love we ought to give thanks.



4. **Christ gives spiritual nourishment.** By holding up bread and wine, he points us to the necessary food that sustains our physical lives. By then connecting the bread and wine with his own body and blood, he points us to the truth that he is the source of our spiritual lives. Just as bread and drink nourishes physical life, so Jesus nourishes our spiritual lives and the Lord's Supper is continual reminder that he feeds and nourishes our souls. For this we ought to give thanks.

Thus, the Lord's Supper is a meal to be received in the present. It should be received by **believers**. It should be received as a **covenant**. It should be received as a **sign**. And it should be received with **thanksgiving**.

A Meal Reflecting a Joyful Future

Third, and finally, we see the reality that this meal **reflecting a joyful future**. Jesus concludes this meal with a promise of waiting.

"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." **Matthew 26:29** (ESV)

It is polite and pleasant when someone waits to begin eating until everyone is at the table. This rule of manners communicates that communion with good company is more important than selfishly filling our own stomachs. Jesus is polite and he is not selfish. He promises to postpone his enjoyment of this meal again until all his disciples are with him at the table in the Father's kingdom. He is speaking of what we know as The Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Jesus has said,

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, **Matthew 8:11** (ESV)

And the end of the book teaches us,

And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."
Revelation 19:9 (ESV)

Every time we share the Lord's Supper we are reminded that there is yet a better meal to come. This meal is merely a foretaste of the future joy of joining Jesus at his table and sharing a meal with our Messiah and our heavenly Father. He is waiting to enjoy this meal until all his children arrive.

Will you be there with him at the table?

Conclusion

The Lord's Supper is a meal rooted in the past that reminds us of God's great redemptive work of setting his people free from slavery to sin. Jesus accomplished this deliverance. He did this so that we could enjoy sweet communion with God our Father.

[There is more that could be said about the meal signifying communion with one another, which Paul writes about in 1 Cor, but that is another sermon for another day.]

The Lord's Supper is a meal to be received only by those who are **believers** in God through Jesus, who praise God by remembering this **covenant of forgiveness**, who receive this supper as a **sign** of Christ's past death and present **spiritual nourishment**, and do so with glad **thanksgiving**.

The Lord's Supper is a reminder that there is yet a better meal to come when we finally and fully enter into the kingdom of God our Father.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you explain the meaning of the Lord's Supper?
2. What is the difference between ordinance and a sacrament?
3. What is the connection between Passover and the Lord's Supper?
4. Who should participate in the Lord's Supper?
5. What is the covenant of which Jesus spoke in this passage (Mt 26:27-28)? What did this covenant accomplish?
6. In what way is Christ present in the Lord's Supper?
7. Did you learn anything new about the Lord's Supper? If so, explain.
8. What is most meaningful to you when you remember the Lord Jesus' death?
9. In what way, if any, will you approach the Lord's Supper differently in the future?