

18. We believe in the open table at the Lord's Supper.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on August 14, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'" In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep" (1 Corinthians 11:23-30).

A little girl was watching her mother prepare dinner one day and said, "Mommy, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?" Her mother told her that she figured it added flavor to the meat by allowing the meat to absorb the spices, but if she really wanted to know for sure she should ask her grandmother since that's the person she learned from. So this curious little girl called her grandmother and said, "Grandma, why do you and Mommy cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?" Her grandmother thought a moment and said, "I think it allows the meat to stay tender and moist, but why don't you ask your great-grandmother? After all, I learned from her and that's the way that she did it." So the little girl called her great-grandmother and said, "Nana, why do you and Mommy and Grandma cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?" Her great-grandmother said, "Sweetheart, I'm not sure why they do it; I did it because my pot wasn't big enough."

Isn't it true that we do a lot of things in life simply out of habit and tradition, many times not really knowing why we do what we do? And there's no place that is more true than in the church. With that in mind, let us examine the Lord's Supper and attempt to explain why we do some of the things that we do.

Why Do We Believe In The "Open Table" As We Celebrate The Lord's Supper?

I grew up in a church where communion was open to all believers that wished to participate, whether they were members of our church or not. Many of you probably grew up in similar churches and yet I know that many of you grew up in churches that only permitted members of their church to participate. In some churches, some denominations, you can only partake of the Lord's Supper if you officially join the church, go through membership classes, be affirmed by the board of deacons, and take the pastor to Tony's for lunch. Well, that last part might not be true—but hey, it's not a bad idea!

The reason that many churches do not have an "open table" at the Lord's Supper has a great deal to do with verse 29 of 1 Corinthians 11, where it says, *"For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."* But who, in his or her own righteousness, is truly worthy to come to the Table of the Lord? The answer: No one! I'm not worthy, you're not worthy, the Apostle Paul wasn't worthy... The only One the Bible describes as worthy is the Lamb. "Worthy is the Lamb" the Bible declares over and over again, but it doesn't say, "Worthy is the Apostle Paul, or Simon Peter, or John the Baptist..." does it? If it's purely a matter of worthiness, none of us measure up and none of us would be qualified to partake at the Lord's Table. That is one of the reasons Jesus died. That is one of the reasons Jesus shed His blood on our behalf. Had we been worthy in our own righteousness, there would have been no need for Calvary's Cross. But thankfully, Jesus did come and pay for our sins by giving His life at Calvary, and now He showers us with something called grace so that we might come before the Father through Jesus, the only One truly worthy!

There are churches that won't permit people to share in the Lord's Supper if, for instance, they've been divorced. I think that's sad, and frankly, wrong. It seems inconsistent to me to suggest to people that if they are hurting or weak, they can't come to the Table that's intended to give them healing and strength. The primary purpose of the Lord's Supper is for us to receive from the Holy Spirit strength, forgiveness, encouragement and spiritual nourishment, if you please. And to exempt people from His Table would be like saying to a person who is dying of malnutrition, "After you get over that, we'll let you have some food."

Now in order to properly understand what Paul is saying here, one must understand the context of his letter to the church in Corinth. Simply put, the church was a mess! Though Paul had founded the church and served as its pastor for about eighteen months, he had been gone for nearly six years and over that period of time several problems had developed. In the 11th chapter of this epistle he deals with one of them—The Lord's Supper. It had become a picnic, a feast, and eventually a fiasco. Essentially there were three basic problems. There was a problem of ignorance, a problem of irreverence, and a problem of indulgence.

Paul told them they were not "discerning the Lord's body." In other words, "You are not evaluating this thing properly. You are not appreciating the value or the worth of what this represents." Communion paints the picture of the greatest sacrifice ever made in human history, but these folks were ignorant of that and missing the entire point.

On top of that, they were irreverent. It had become nothing more than a party, a picnic, and a church pot-luck dinner. That is why, in verse 22, Paul says, *"Eat at home, but come to the Lord's Table for spiritual reasons."*

Not only were they irreverent, they were indulgent—self-indulgent! People were bringing picnic lunches to church and if you didn't bring one, you didn't get anything. There was no sharing, no generosity, and no charity. On top of that, plenty of folks were bringing wine for the Lord's Supper, but instead, they were getting drunk.

Now this is the setting that Paul finds the church when he writes this letter. And it's not as if he's suggesting that the Lord's Supper be gloomy, dark and dreary; in contrast, it appears that Paul wanted them to know that Communion is to be a joyous celebration. However, Paul says that "you are eating and drinking judgment to yourselves because you are not properly discerning the purpose why we do this." When Paul says, "*Let a man examine himself...*" that has a twofold meaning: One we will deal with shortly, but the other literally means "passing a test" in the Greek. And what is the test? One is our understanding of why He did what He did for us. The test is remembering what was accomplished on the Cross, so that we can fully experience and fully appreciate all that God has done and wants to do in our lives in the here and now.

As ironic as it sounds, when Scripture talks about partaking in a "worthy manner" it's not talking about the ability to stick out our chest and somehow "feel worthy." As strange as this may sound—the person that "feels worthy" is the person that's unworthy to partake—for that's the person who hasn't properly discerned the Lord's body. Dear one, it's the honest recognition of one's unworthiness that makes one worthy! It's the understanding that you are worthy, not because of any innate worthiness or because you have somehow divested yourself of every failure in your life, but that you are worthy because of the Blood of Jesus and the Cross of Calvary.

Someone may say, "What about verse 30? That really troubles me." It says, "*For this reason many are weak, sick, and some die.*" Let me explain. Isaiah 53:5 tells us that by the wounds of the Messiah we are healed. 1 Peter 2:24 says, "*...who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sin, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.*" The Cross supplies all that we need. On an old rugged Roman instrument that was designed to destroy and devastate came salvation and healing for the brokenness of the human race. That means that when we come the Lord's Table it is right and proper to say, "Jesus, I come to receive the strength that I need to live for You and I come to receive the healing I need my for afflictions—whether they be physical, emotional, spiritual or even financial." And if we don't discern this we are living on the limited resources of the flesh. It's not that God says, "I saw you partake unworthily so I'm going to strike you with a lightning bolt." It's simply a matter of not receiving what's available for you by faith.

Someone described the Christian as one beggar giving another beggar food. All of us come with our own baggage—some of it visible, some of it unseen—and at His Table He invites us to lay it down. We believe that invitation is to everyone, so that is why our table is open whether you are a member or a visitor. Our table is open to anyone who seeks to respond to Christ's love and desires the touch of His Spirit on their lives.

Why Do We Observe The Lord's Supper Each Month Here At Grace Community?

Some churches celebrate Holy Communion every week; others only a couple times a year. We share together once a month and on special occasions because we feel it's a proper balance between the two. The greater question is this: Why the Lord's Supper? Why is this important? I want to give you six very specific reasons why this sacrament is so important.

Communion Is A Time To Remember

Jesus said, "*Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.*" That scripture reminds me of the story about John Gordon, who was one of the most respected Southern generals in the Civil War. After the war was over, he became involved in politics and ran for a seat in the U.S. Senate. At his state's convention, Gordon was at the podium giving a speech when a man came running down the aisle with an "anti-Gordon" placard in his hand; a man that had served under Gordon in the war, a man that had become angry with Gordon after the war due to some particular political stance on an issue. So he was there that day to do all that he could to be sure Gordon was not elected. But as he drew closer to the platform, he realized that John Gordon didn't look like the man he used to know. When he served under him years before, John Gordon was a handsome young man. But Gordon was wounded in battle and the wounds left his face horribly disfigured. So when the old soldier drew near the platform and saw the "scars of battle" he froze in his steps. Stricken by remorse, he shouted, "It's no use. I can't do it. Here's my vote for John Gordon." And then, turning to his old commander he said, "Forgive me General, I forgot the scars."

Seated at the right hand of God today is the eternal sacrificial Lamb that takes away the sins of the world. His name is Jesus. And one thing that makes Him unique is that He will spend eternity with the scars of Calvary. He was wounded—for our transgressions. He was bruised—for our iniquities. His back was laid open with stripes from a Roman whip—for our healing. Matter of fact, Isaiah 52:14 says "*His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men...*" All of this for us!

During the Vietnam War, a young West Point graduate was sent to lead a group of new recruits into battle. One night during a difficult battle, one of his men was severely wounded and left lying in a ditch. The young lieutenant could hear him crying out in his pain, but he also knew that anyone that attempted to rescue him would be like a "duck in the water" and be shot. Even so, the lieutenant ran and picked up his wounded comrade and took him back to safety; however, in the process he, too, took an enemy's bullet in his back and died the next day. When the war was over, the lieutenant's parents heard the rescued man was in their vicinity so they contacted him and asked him to join them for dinner at their home. Obviously, they wanted to meet this young man whose life was spared at such a great cost to them. But when the young man arrived at their home, he was drunk and throughout dinner he was rowdy, obnoxious, told off-color jokes; and worse yet, showed no gratitude for the man who saved his life. When he left, the lieutenant's parents collapsed into tears and the father said, "To think that our son had to die for someone like that."

That's exactly what Jesus did. He died for people just like that. Let us not forget and let us always remember that He died for people just like that!

Communion Is A Time To Reveal

Verse 26 of 1 Corinthians 11 says, *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."* We call it the "proclamation of the Gospel." That's one of the primary reasons for the church to exist—to tell others about Jesus. And Paul says in verse 26 that one of the ways that we do that is through the observance of the Lord's Supper. It's a sermon; a message; a proclamation to a lost and dying world of what Christ has done. In fact, people used to get mad at John Wesley because he believed communion should be served to anyone, believer or non-believer. He felt it revealed the Gospel in a way that may have been more powerful than any other means.

Communion Is A Time To Repent

Verse 28 of 1 Corinthians 11 says, *"But let a man examine himself..."* I was watching the television program called "Family Feud" a few weeks ago and the contestants were children, not the typical adults that are usually on the show. And one of the questions was: "Name something your mother would say to you before dinner?" And the number one response was: "Wash up for dinner."

That's essentially what verse 28 is saying to us. We need to "wash up" for the Lord's Supper. We need to be sure that our hands are clean, our head is clean, our heart is clean... And if not, now is the best time to allow the cleansing stream of the Holy Spirit to flow over us in order to make us clean. "Search me, O God, and know my heart today," the old hymn says. "Try me, O Savior, know my thoughts I pray. See if there be some wicked way in me; cleanse me from every sin, and set me free." See, it's not enough to simply examine our own hearts; we have to invite the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts as well.

I'll never forget when I worked on my Master's Thesis some years ago. I had spent nearly two years working on this 120 page document: researching, writing, and correcting. And when it came time to turn in the first draft I was pretty proud of myself. I had checked it and re-checked it and examined it over and over for mistakes. And I was certain that it was perfect! I was certain that it was going to be the best "first draft" my professor had ever seen! But when I got it back, it looked like someone had died. In other words, there were red pen marks everywhere (because my professor corrected mistakes with a red pen).

Have you ever noticed how you can write something, proof it time and time again, and yet someone else can come along and find mistakes that you never saw? That's why I need to ask the Holy Spirit to examine my heart; He sees things that I don't see. That's why Jeremiah 17:9 says, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind..."* I need Him to do that because I can't do it on my own. I need Him to "proof-read" my life. And when He takes out His red pen and begins to mark up the pages of my life, it provides me with the opportunity to repent, experience His forgiveness and move forward from His Table with assurance and confidence.

Communion Is A Time To Reconcile

In verse 29 of this same chapter the Apostle Paul says that we are to discern the Lord's body. None of us are an island. We are part of something called the Church, and the Church is described in the Scripture as the "Body of Christ." And in this body we are all equal. Some may have different gifts and hold different offices within the body, but when we come to the Lord's Table the playing field is leveled.

One day the Duke of Wellington was taking communion at his local church when a very poor old man reached the communion table at the same time and knelt down next to the Duke. Immediately everyone in the church tensed up and an usher quickly rushed to the man, touched him on his shoulder and told him to move away until the Duke had received his bread and wine. But as the man started his ascent, the Duke grabbed his hand, pulled him down and said, "Don't move Sir, we are all equal here." Our time at His Table should be a time of not only reconciling ourselves to God, but to others within the body as well.

Communion Is A Time To Renew

As we come to the Lord's Table, it is a great time for all of us to renew both our vows and our vision. For example, a lady called me some time back and said, "Pastor Rick, could you send me a copy of the wedding vows you typically use in a wedding?" She went on to explain that she wanted to give them to some friends that had a very troubled marriage. She felt they had forgotten their vows. Anyone that's been married for very long realizes that there are bumps in the road and that sometimes the only thing that gets you through is by remembering the covenant you made that day with your spouse. In order for a marriage to survive, you've got to "renew those vows" many times! Communion is a great time for us to renew our vows and the promises we've made to God. On top of that, it's the perfect time to ask the Lord to renew our vision to reach the lost and renew our vision to be all that God created us to be because it's so easy to lose sight of that. Isn't it easy to get so caught up in the things of life that we lose our vision? Sure it is. Communion is a perfect time to let the Holy Spirit light that flame once again.

About 150 years ago there was a horrible famine that hit Ireland that resulted in the death of nearly one million people. Because of it, hundreds of thousands fled Ireland and headed for the United States or wherever they could find help. Leon Uris writes about it in his book entitled, "Trinity," and in it he tells about a little orphan boy who hid as a stowaway on a ship bound for America. While in route, the ship hit an iceberg in the middle of the Atlantic and began to sink and people began scurrying into lifeboats. When the boy heard all the commotion he came out of his hiding place only to watch as the captain was about to step into the last seat of the last lifeboat. But when the captain saw him, he stepped back and put the lad in his place instead. And as he pushed the lifeboat away, he told the boy, "Never forget what has been done for you." The little boy came to America and became a successful businessman in New York City, and when asked the secret to his success he always told that story. He would say, "Whenever I get discouraged or feel negative about myself, I recall that vision. I recall what was done for me and it gives me the courage I need to keep on keeping on."

One of the ways that we renew our vision for the things of God is by recalling what was done for us at a place called Calvary. Once we consider that—how in the world can we turn back?

Communion Is A Time To Rejoice

The reason we are to rejoice is because the Lord's Supper not only represents the compassion of Christ and His suffering, but it also represents the conquest of Christ and the fact that He is coming back for us again! Paul tells us that we are to proclaim the Lord's death: *"Till He comes!"* Communion is a time to look back at what Christ has done, but maybe even more importantly it's a time to look forward! When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in Matthew 26, Matthew tells us that He blessed the bread and the cup, and then He gave this promise in verse 29. He said, *"But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."*

Max Lucado, in his book "Six Hours One Friday," tells us the story of a missionary in Brazil who discovered a tribe of natives in a remote part of the jungle living near a river. Many in the tribe needed medical attention because a contagious disease was killing people daily. A hospital was not too far away and they had to cross a river to get there, but the natives would not cross it because they believed it was inhabited by evil spirits. They thought if one entered the water, he or she would die even though the missionary explained to them this wasn't true. So he took them to the bank of the river and put his hand in, but they were not impressed. He walked into the water up to his waist and splashed water on his face, but they still didn't believe. Finally, he dove into the water and swam beneath the surface until he emerged on the other side. He stood on the other bank and lifted his fist in victory! It was his way of saying that he entered their greatest fear and won! And when the natives saw that, they followed him across.

That's exactly what Jesus did! For three years He told people that they didn't need to fear the river of death, but they wouldn't believe. So he touched a dead boy and called him back to life, but they still didn't believe. He whispered life into the body of dead girl, but they still refused to believe. Then He let a man spend four days in a tomb before He called him back to life, yet the people still didn't believe Him. So finally, He entered the river of death, dove in, and came out on the other side victorious! And He shouts to us today, "The river of death has no power over you! As I live, so shall you!" He wants us to rejoice as we remember that we walk under the umbrella of mercy and grace, not the canopy of condemnation. He wants us to rejoice as we remember that we have a future that's alive and exciting because our Savior is seated at the right hand of the Father constantly interceding on our behalf. He wants us to rejoice as we remember that we are children of God, not orphans left to struggle on our own; and as children, we are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. He wants us to rejoice as we remember that within every child of God is the Spirit of God that enables us to move mountains in our life as we exercise childlike faith. And He wants us to rejoice as we remember that the same power that raised Christ from the dead will one day quicken our mortal bodies and we will reign with Him forever with the saints of the ages. The Lord's Supper calls us to remember His compassion, His conquest, and His coming. It points to the Cross, but it also points to an empty tomb. That's why we partake! This is the Table of Triumph! It reminds us of the past, but also points to our blessed future! Charles Wesley's great hymn, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," says it so well: "Love's redeeming work is done, alleluia! Fought the fight, the battle won, alleluia! Death in vain forbids Him rise, alleluia! Christ has opened Paradise, alleluia! Soar we now where Christ has led, alleluia! Following our exalted Head, alleluia! Made like Him, like Him we rise, alleluia! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, alleluia!"