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'Doctrines That Will Change Your Life' Series  
#9

## "The Lord's Supper and God's Grace" Matthew 26:17-30

### Introduction

One of the sad realities of history is that one of the things God has given to the church to bless her has been a source of great debate and division. The Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus on the same night in which he was betrayed. He gave this meal to the people of His church to help them grow in their faith and to help them remain focused on the heart of the gospel. And yet down through ages there has been great debate on the nature of the Lord's Supper and the particular applications of its practice.

Around here you will often hear us talk about Communion as a *means of grace*. But even the meaning of that phrase is not always easy to discern.

We've just got a couple of weeks left in this series, *Doctrines That Will Change Your Life* and so this morning we want to take a look at this subject that is such a big part of the life and worship of the church. And as always in this series, we will focus our attention on the practical aspects of the Lord's Supper. What difference does it make what a person believes about this doctrine?

Our hope today is that we will see that there is nothing magical about communion. Rather, like all of the other appointed means for God giving us help in the Christian life, so too in the Lord Supper, if

we understand it and have faith, the Holy Spirit will indeed give us special grace that will help us in our faith. To put it very clearly, partaking of the Lord's Supper will help you grow strong in Christ.

### [Matthew 26:17-30]

The Lord's Supper is something God has given us – we call it a sign of the covenant – to remind us of His grace. The particular focus of the Lord's Supper is, of course, the atonement. We have visible signs of the crucifixion – broken bread representing the broken and sacrificial body of Christ. And the cup, the fruit of the vine, to remind us that Jesus' blood was shed and penalty of death was fulfilled for our sin by our Savior.

We don't believe these elements are the actual physical presence of Christ. We believe that He is present spiritually and by faith we receive and feed upon Him spiritually so that the benefits of His death are made all the more real to us. The Lord's Supper, as we've seen here in Matthew, has a connection to the Passover. The Old Testament Passover meal was a reminder of God's deliverance of the people of God from certain death in Egypt. The rescuing of the nation from captivity was a vivid picture and promise of the greater deliverance God brings us in Christ from our sins. So Jesus connected the two, replacing the Old Covenant sign with the clearer sign of the New Covenant.

It's not uncommon for us to talk about the Lord's Supper being a *means of grace*. But what does that mean? What is a means of grace?

When we talk about a means of grace we are talking about particular things that God has promised to use to give us special grace. In other words, God has said *Here are a few things you can*

*count on to help you. Here are some things that I am going to give to you and bind myself to, so that if you practice them with understanding and faith, you can be sure I will give you grace that you need.*

And when we talk about this special grace of God, we're not talking about common grace – things available to all men – but grace in things like the removal of sin and the changing of our lives so that we become more like Christ. These are things that are only important to Christians.

Let me give you some examples. The Word of God as it is read and preached and meditated upon is a means of grace. If you are Christian you know this. If you spend time in the Word you know that God will change you. There are lots of promises that God has made about this. Acts 20:32 is one of them. *And now I commend you to God and to **the word of His grace**, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

Prayer is another means of grace. If you come into the presence of God and pour out your heart to Him, you can expect to be met with special grace. Listen to Hebrews 4:16. *Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

The church and fellowship with the people of God is also a means of grace. If you spend time worshipping God and living in community with other Christians, God will use them to build you up in your faith. Ephesians 4:16 reminds us that *the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*

These things are talked about so much in the Christian community that we take them for granted.

We know God will give us grace through them. But for some reason, when it comes to the Lord's Supper we don't think the same way.

Whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper we read from I Corinthians 11 where Paul gives instruction about the seriousness of the sacrament. Much of that passage is warning. But just one chapter before chapter 11 Paul gives other words concerning communion. (Turn to I Cor. 10)

In I Corinthians 10 he is writing about the struggles of Old Testament Israel to internalize their faith. And he's trying to help the Corinthians see that they don't have to live that way – they can have victory over temptation and sin.

It's in that context that he brings up the Lord's Supper. Look at I Corinthians 10:16-22. The Lord's Supper is designed to be a meal of blessing and growth and sanctification – but only for those who have a living faith in Jesus Christ. There's no special magic in just eating. It's not like medicine. There's nothing inherently holy in the bread and cup – they are signs and symbols that point us to the reality of Jesus' work on the cross 2000 years ago. So, rightly taken, they become a blessing – a means of grace to us that will help us in our battle against worldliness and sin.

So let's carefully consider what we've done in each of the messages in this series. Let's consider that so *what* of the Lord's Supper. What difference does it make what you believe and whether you take the Supper or not? Here are three reasons you ought to be faithful in participating in communion.

1. It will help you remember what Jesus has done for you.

The instruction Jesus gave us was to *do this in remembrance of Me*. The atonement of Christ is the central event in all of world history. Paul said that he

would preach nothing but Christ and Him crucified. Without the death and resurrection of Christ you would be nothing. You would have no hope, no salvation, no victory, no forgiveness, and no future.

So when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are instructed to think about these things. It is right for you to remember your sin. It was your sin for which Christ died. It is right to remember the agony of the cross – that was your death that He willingly took on your behalf.

But it is also right to remember the end result – to think about the resurrection. Christ did not stay in the grave. He overcame sin and death and was powerfully raised to life. Remembering these things glorifies God. It is a means of expressing our gratitude. It keeps in our mind and heart the nearness of the cross.

The command to *remember* is a frequent one in the Bible. God does not want us to forget His mighty acts and His gracious works. In the Lord's Supper He has given us a vivid means of remembering.

## 2. It will strengthen your faith.

The very act of remembering accomplishes the work of strengthening. When we retell stories in our family, it reinforces those events into the hearts and minds of our children and our family. The lessons and experiences bind us together and act to give us identity. It's as though the events of our lives when they are retold and relived become a means to build within us the principles and truths they represent. (That's why as parents you need to be careful about what stories you retell.)

When we take the Lord's Supper we are forced to examine our hearts and our lives. We come face to face with the things that took Jesus to

the cross. We are forced back to the cross. This is the difficult work of the Lord's Supper. It is humbling to think about our sin. But it leads us to see the significance of the body and blood of Christ.

Sometimes when we come to the table, we feel weak and defeated. We feel as though our faith is but a flickering of the flame it ought to be. But the Lord's Table is not just for those strong in faith. Its very design is to lift up our faith.

In John 6 Jesus taught at length about Himself, using the metaphor of bread. *I am the bread of life, he who comes to Me will not hunger and He who believes in Me will never thirst.* But He pressed the metaphor further by saying that they needed to eat His flesh and drink His blood.

Clearly what Jesus was teaching about was faith. All through the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter He is calling them to believe in Him. Jesus wanted people to know that just as bread and water are necessary to feed and sustain the body, so too is spiritual feeding upon Christ necessary to give us spiritual life.

In the Lord's Supper our faith grows because as we eat the bread and drink the cup, our feeding upon Christ is symbolized. But more than that, the Westminster Confession says that by faith *we receive and feed upon Christ crucified and all the benefits of His death.*

So here's the deal. Christ has told us when we take the Lord's Supper – *this is my body, this is my blood.* We know that it is not literally His body and blood because Christ was sacrifice once and for all. The elements are symbols – but there is a reality to Christ's spiritual presence in them, so that when you believe this and eat with faith, Jesus promises that it will be a cup of blessing and a partaking of His body and blood.

If you understand and believe that, your faith will grow stronger. You will find yourself hating your sin more and loving Christ more. And you will be motivated and given power to put off sin and put on Christ – and that is what grace is all about.

### 3. It will build your hope.

Paul said that as often as we celebrate the Lord's Supper we *proclaim His death until He comes*.

The reason this sacrament is a supper is because of the intimacy of a meal. In the gospels we find Jesus around the table with His disciples. He brought some of His richest teachings to them at the Last Supper.

A meal is also associated with a banquet. Banquets are celebrations. The Lord's Supper, for all of its focus and remembering of Jesus' death, is not meant to leave us at the cross. It is not a meal of desperation or grief or sorrow. We talk about *celebrating* the Lord's Supper.

- At the Table we must always come to the resurrection.
- At the Table we see the reality of our forgiveness.
- At the Table we know that our sins have been defeated and we can find change and victory.
- At the Table we remember that He is coming again. This meal is but a shadow of a much great banquet that awaits us in heaven.

In urge you to receive this meal as the gift it is intended to be to you.

- Come – make it a priority
- Come when you are weak or strong
- Come in faith

God will give you grace.