

# Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

## 26:26-35

by J.C. Ryle

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### Transcript

These verses describe the appointment of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Our Lord knew well the things that were before him, and graciously chose the last quiet evening that he could have before his crucifixion as an occasion for bestowing a parting gift on his church. How precious must this ordinance have afterwards appeared to his disciples when they remembered the events of the night! How mournful is the thought that no ordinance has led to such fierce controversy, and been so grievously misunderstood, as the ordinance of the Lord's Supper! It ought to have united the church, but our sins have made it a cause of division. The thing which should have been for our welfare has been too often made an occasion of falling. The first thing that demands our notice in these verses is the right meaning of our Lord's words, "This is my body" and "this is my blood." It is needless to say, that this question has divided the visible church of Christ. It has caused volumes of controversial theology to be written: but we must not shrink from having decided opinions upon it because theologians have disputed and differed. Unsoundness on this point has given rise to many deplorable superstitions. The plain meaning of our Lord's words appears to be this: "This bread represents my body. This wine represents my blood." He did not mean that the bread he gave to his disciples was really and literally his body; he did not mean that the wine he gave to his disciples was really and literally his blood. Let us lay firm hold on this interpretation: it may be supported by several grave reasons. The conduct of the disciples at the Lord's Supper forbids us to believe that the bread they received was Christ's body, and the wine they received was Christ's blood. They were all Jews, taught from their infancy to believe that it was sinful to eat flesh with the blood (Deuteronomy 12:23-25); yet there is nothing in the narrative to show that they were startled by our Lord's words. They evidently perceived no change in the bread and wine. Our own senses at the present day forbid us to believe that there is any change in the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper; our own taste tells us that they are really and literally what they appear to be. Things above our reason the Bible requires us to believe; but we are never bid to believe that which contradicts our senses. The true doctrine about our Lord's human nature forbids us to believe that the bread in the Lord's Supper can be his body, or the wine his blood; the natural body of Christ cannot be at one time in more places than one. If our Lord's body could sit at table, and at the same time be eaten by the disciples, it is perfectly clear that it was not a human body like our own. But this we must never allow for one moment. It is the glory of Christianity that our Redeemer is perfect man as well as perfect God. Finally, the genius of the language in which our Lord spoke at the Lord's Supper makes it entirely unnecessary to interpret his words literally. The Bible is full of expressions of a similar kind, to which no one thinks of giving any but a figurative meaning. Our Lord speaks of himself as the

«door» and the «vine,» and we know that he is using emblems and figures when he so speaks; there is therefore no inconsistency in supposing that he used figurative language when he instituted the Lord's Supper. We have the more right to say so when we remember the grave objections which stand in the way of a literal view of his words. Let us lay up these things in our minds, and not forget them. In a day of abounding heresy, it is good to be well armed. Ignorant and confused views of the meaning of Scripture language are one great cause of religious error. The second thing which demands our notice in these verses is the purpose and object for which the Lord's Supper was appointed. This is a subject again on which great darkness prevails. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper has been regarded as something mysterious and past understanding. Immense harm has been done to Christianity by the vague and high flown language in which many writers have indulged in treating of the sacrament. There is certainly nothing to warrant such language in the account of its original institution. The more simple our views of its purpose, the more scriptural they are likely to be. The Lord's Supper is not a sacrifice. There is no oblation in it, no offering up of anything but our prayers, praises and thanksgivings. From the day that Jesus died there needed no more offering for sin: «by one offering he perfected forever them that are sanctified.» («Hebrews 10:14»). Priests, altars and sacrifices all ceased to be necessary when the Lamb of God offered up himself. Their office came to an end; their work was done. The Lord's Supper has no power to confer benefit on those who come to it if they do not come to it with faith. The mere formal act of eating the bread and drinking the wine is utterly unprofitable unless it is done with a right heart. It is eminently an ordinance for the living soul, not for the dead; for the converted, not for the unconverted. The Lord's Supper was ordained for a continual remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ's death, until he comes again. The benefits it confers are spiritual, not physical: its effects must be looked for in our inward man. It was intended to remind us, by the visible, tangible emblems of bread and wine, that the offering of Christ's body and blood for us on the cross is the only atonement for sin, and the life of a believer's soul; it was meant to help our poor weak faith to closer fellowship with our crucified Saviour, and to assist us in spiritually feeding on Christ's body and blood. It is an ordinance for redeemed sinners, and not for unfallen angels. By receiving it we publicly declare our sense of guilt, and our need of a Saviour—our trust in Jesus, and our love to him, our desire to live upon him, and our hope to live with him. Using it in this spirit, we shall find our repentance deepened, our faith increased, our hope brightened, and our love enlarged, our besetting sins weakened and our graces strengthened. It will draw us nearer to Christ. Let us bear these things in mind: they need to be remembered in these latter days. There is nothing in our religion which we are so ready to pervert and misunderstand as those parts which approach our senses. Whatever we can touch with our hand and see with our eyes, we are apt to exalt into an idol, or to expect good from it as a mere charm: let us specially beware of this tendency in the matter of the Lord's Supper. Above all, «let us take heed,» in the words of the Church of England Homily, «lest of the memory it be made a sacrifice.» The last thing which deserves a brief notice in this passage is the character of the first communicants. It is a point full of comfort and instruction. The little company to which the bread and wine were first administered by our Lord was composed of the apostles whom he had chosen to accompany him during his earthly ministry. They were poor and unlearned men, who loved Christ, but were weak alike in faith and knowledge: they knew but little of the full meaning of their Master's sayings and doings; they knew but little of the frailty of their own hearts. They thought they were ready to die with Jesus, and yet that very night they all forsook him and fled. All this our Lord knew perfectly well. The state of their hearts was not hid from him, and yet he did not keep back from them the Lord's Supper! There is something very teaching in this circumstance. It shows us plainly that we must not make great knowledge and great strength of grace an indispensable qualification for communicants. A man may know but little, and be no

better than a child in spiritual strength, but he is not on that account to be excluded from the Lord's table. Does he really feel his sins? Do he really love Christ? Do he really desire to serve him? If this be so, we ought to encourage and receive him. Doubtless we must do all we can to exclude unworthy communicants: no graceless person ought to come to the Lord's Supper. But we must take heed that we do not reject those whom Christ has not rejected. There is no wisdom in being more strict than our Lord and his disciples. Let us leave the passage with serious self-inquiry as to our own conduct with respect to the Lord's Supper. Do we turn away from it when it is administered? If so, how can we justify our conduct? It will not do to say it is not a necessary ordinance: to say so is to pour contempt on Christ himself and declare that we do not obey him. It will not do to say that we feel unworthy to come to the Lord's table: to say so is to declare that we are unfit to die and unprepared to meet God. These are solemn considerations: all non-communicants should ponder them well. Are we in the habit of coming to the Lord's table? If so, in what frame of mind do we come? Do we draw near intelligently, humbly and with faith? Do we understand what we are about? Do we really feel our sinfulness and our need of Christ? Do we really desire to live a Christian life, as well as profess the Christian faith? Happy is that soul who can give a satisfactory answer to these questions! Let him go forward, and persevere.

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