

Why and How We Celebrate the Lord's Supper

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the significance of the Lord's Supper as a sacred act of remembrance and proclamation for believers.

Duration: 34:10

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:16

Topics: "Lord's Supper", "Communion Sacrament"

Description

This sermon delves into the significance of the Lord's Supper, emphasizing the historical origin, the importance of believing participants, the physical and mental actions involved, the spiritual significance of partaking in Christ's body and blood, and the sacred seriousness of approaching the Lord's table with reverence and discernment.

Transcript

Let's pray together. Lord, these are amazingly sobering words. You despise the Church of God.

Some of you are weak and ill and some have died so that they might not be condemned with the world. So I pray, Lord, that there would be a seriousness now in this room and in the North Campus, a seriousness, Lord, that comports with this table of the Lord. Would you help me open its meaning in Jesus' name.

Amen. So before we move into Romans again, Lord willing, next week I want to take a week that is this message and talk about what we're doing and why we're doing it when we eat the Lord's table together, the Lord's Supper. So I'm going to preach first and then we'll move into the Lord's Supper.

After the Bible, which is the infallible foundation for our life and church here, one of the most important documents in the life of Bethlehem is the Bethlehem Baptist Church elder affirmation of faith. And paragraph number 12.4 is the paragraph that states the summary of the doctrine concerning the Lord's Supper. And I want to read you that paragraph so that you can hear what the elders are committed to believing and teaching and then spend some time giving it biblical foundation.

Here's what's written there. We believe that the Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the Lord in which gathered believers eat bread signifying Christ's body given for his people and drink the cup of the Lord signifying the new covenant in Christ's blood. We do this in remembrance of the Lord and thus proclaim his death until he comes.

Those who eat and drink in a worthy manner partake of Christ's body and blood not physically but spiritually in that by faith they are nourished with the benefits he obtained through his death and thus grow in grace. What I want to do is try to put biblical foundation under that paragraph in six headings. One, the historical origin of the Lord's Supper.

Two, the believing participants. Three, the physical action. Four, the mental action.

Five, the spiritual action. And six, the sacred seriousness of the Lord's Supper. So number one, the historical origin of the Lord's Supper.

In all three of the first Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they all report the Last Supper. They all say that Jesus gathered that night before he was crucified with his disciples. They all report that he gave thanks for the bread and the cup.

They all report that he blessed and that he gave them to his disciples saying this bread is my body and this cup is the new covenant in my blood or the cup of blessing. Luke 22 19 says do this. Jesus said do this in remembrance of me.

John's Gospel doesn't report the eating and the drinking of the elements, but describes the action like the feet washing and the teaching that surrounded that event and filled that evening. As far as we know from the earliest records, and Paul is the earliest record, the early church did what Jesus said to do. They reenacted that supper over and over again.

Paul here in chapter 11 verse 20 of 1st Corinthians calls it, verse 20 notice it, the Lord's Supper. So we're not making that phrase up. That's a biblical phrase, earliest phrase that the church used to describe it.

When you come together, it's not the Lord's Supper that you're eating. They were really making a mess of this which we'll come back to in a few minutes. Then Paul records what he received from the Lord.

He said, verse 23, I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he took bread, on the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said this is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. So Paul restates that statement from Luke 22 19 and obeys it.

Do this in remembrance of me. So the historical origin of the Lord's Supper is the last supper that Jesus ate with his disciples the night before he was crucified and the meaning of it and what we're doing in it is all rooted there in what he did and what he said about this bread being my body and this cup being the new covenant in my blood. He is the focus.

It originates historically with Jesus on that last night from his words. That's why we do it. Number two, the believing participants of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is eaten, is celebrated properly by the gathered family of those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It's called the church here. It's not an act for unbelievers.

Unbelievers should not eat and should not drink at the Lord's Supper. However, we welcome any who do not believe to come in among us. I think there's biblical warrant for that welcome.

The Lord's Supper is not a secretive, cultic ritual with magical powers done in dark rooms with blood and bread eating a person. It got that reputation in the early church. It's not that way.

It is a public act of worship with a public meaning of which there is nothing to be ashamed and Paul puts it like this in verse 26, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim. You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. So there's proclamation in this supper and the note to be struck is not privacy, but proclamation.

So if you're a seeker, an unbeliever, somebody who, whoa, they're doing this thing here tonight. I didn't know they're gonna do that. I wouldn't have come.

You are really welcome here and you don't have to be afraid that we're gonna somehow embarrass you. We like it when people watch us do this. I think that is a biblical thing to happen.

I'm stressing that we do it properly in the gathering of believers. However, we do not forbid at Bethlehem that the pastors take the Lord's Supper to the nursing home for one of our members. We do not forbid that a terminally ill patient in a hospice could not have a pastor come and eat and drink.

We don't take the normative way of celebrating the Lord's Supper so far that it forbids that kind of celebration. But I am underlining that normally the Lord's Supper is not to be celebrated in little isolated one-on-one or two-on-two. It's the gathering of God's people.

Now here's the reason for that in chapter 11. Five times it says in this chapter that this was happening when they came together. Let me point them out to you.

Verse 17, end of the verse, when you come together, it's not for better but for worse. He's talking about the mess they're making of this gathering. Verse 18, for in the first place when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.

Verse 20, when you come together, it's not the Lord's Supper that you eat. They're so messing it up that he doesn't even want to call it that. Verse 33, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

Verse 34, if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. In other words, they were so debasing the Lord's Supper by the way they were mixing it up with their regular supper, that some had lots to eat and some had nothing to eat. The rich were bringing their big picnic baskets, evidently, and the poor brought nothing, and they were going before each other.

It didn't look like love at all, and here in this context they're gonna do Lord's Supper. Paul's really upset about this, and he says, don't you have houses? Eat at home, then come and do this. That's the gist of the chapter.

Come, come together as church. So that's why we do it the way we do it. I would not encourage you to regularly do this in small groups.

If I heard that it happened on some special occasion, I wouldn't do church discipline. I would just say, hmm, I think we need to have a normative way of gathering. There are all kinds of blurry lines here, so I'm not gonna get bent out of shape by periodic exceptions.

Just let's make this the norm, since it seems like that was the stress in chapter 11. Number three, the physical action of the Lord's Supper. The physical action of the Lord's Supper is not a seven-course meal.

It's a two-course meal, and it's really simple. You may wonder, why do you call this a meal? A little chip of bread and a tiny, tiny little cup, and you call it a supper. It's because Paul wanted us to split off our big

meal, which we eat enough to satisfy ourselves physically and do serious spiritual business with some emblems by which we satisfy ourselves spiritually.

That was physical. This is spiritual. Verse 23, he took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink, as you drink it, so we have eating and drinking.

Those are the physical actions of the Lord's Supper, eating some bread and drinking from this cup. I don't find anything in the Bible that specifies what kind of bread, how big the piece of bread should be, whether it should be a loaf of bread. I don't think there's any command that you use one kind of bread over another kind or that it look a certain way.

I just think there's lots of freedom about that. With regard to what's in the cup, there is one hint and only one. It's in every one of the three first Gospels.

Matthew 26, 29 would be what's in all three of them. I tell you, I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in my Father's kingdom. That's all we have.

That's all we have. It's not called grape juice and it's not called wine. It's called fruit of the vine and it's not commanded that it be wine or that it be grape juice.

And so again, I want us and other churches to feel freedom here. I don't find anything in the Bible that either commands or forbids wine or grape juice. And so you just make a judgment call as to what would be appropriate for your situation and I just don't think we should spend a lot of time thinking or worrying about that.

I do think we should spend a little bit of time thinking and worrying about cavalier playful experimentation with the Lord's Supper, like bagels and coke around a campfire. I think the Lord's Supper is not a plaything and that there should be a kind of weightiness about it and seriousness about it that I'll get to in a moment. So I wouldn't encourage that kind of silly playful experimentation.

One other little practical thing, how frequently should a church do the Lord's Supper? I don't see anything in the New Testament that mandates quarterly, monthly, weekly, or every time you get together, it says as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, do it in remembrance of me. I wonder if the Lord didn't arrange for that and God in inspiring the Bible didn't arrange for that precisely so that there could be some flexibility. It seems to me that I grew up in a church where they celebrated the Lord's Supper quarterly and I know that many churches do it weekly and there's some who mix it up and it seems to me the questions would be something like this that you'd ask to settle that question.

One, what frequency or infrequency, we do it monthly by the way, it's usually on the first Sunday or Saturday of the month this time because of last week's service it was moved, and then we have Maundy Thursday and things like that thrown in, but I think the questions would go something like this, what frequency and infrequency corresponds to the proper importance in relationship to the ministry of the Word? Or, second question, what frequency or infrequency helps us feel its value rather than becoming callous to it? Now those are not easy judgments and I do not condemn churches for doing it differently from us. I don't claim to have the perfect way, it's just the way we do it for now and if we were to change it would be fine to change for me. I wouldn't want to do it any less frequently, I think that would probably go

the wrong direction.

I'm very happy with the way we do it. If there would be moved to do it otherwise I would be listening and praying with you. Those are the kinds of judgment calls that I think are left to a church's wisdom.

Number four, the mental action. We're moving closer and closer to the center of what this is about, the mental action of the Lord's Supper. The mental action is foundationally remembering.

Physically it's eating, mentally it's remembering. Verse 24 and 25 in chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians says, do this in remembrance of me. I take that to mean that as you eat, your mind should not go into neutral.

You should not be dreaming, channeling, listening, coasting. You should be directing your mind back in history to Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, on a cross, rising, triumphant. In other words, the events surrounding Good Friday and Easter is where your minds are going during communion.

Do this remembering, remembering. This is not a passive activity waiting for something to fill your brain. You are consciously moving your brain towards reality, namely historical reality in Jesus Christ.

It's amazing, isn't it? The stark reminder, this is one of the reasons the Lord did this, the stark reminder time after time as we gather at this table, this is history, blood, skin that bleeds, body that gets nails run through it and sword and spear run into it. This is history. This is not spirituality.

This is not New Ageism. We're not kind of massaging each other's religiosity here to see if we can get in touch with some reality inside. It has nothing to do with what grips America in terms of spirituality and religion.

This is an outrageous claim that God became a Jewish man, condemned under Pontius Pilate, ripped to shreds on a cross, three days later rose as the Lord of the universe, watches us do this here tonight, fills us with His Spirit. These are realities. If you didn't believe them, they'd be true as ever.

So there's a mental action and it's mainly, I'm going back to what happened for me because my life hangs on that moment in history when Jesus died for me. Fifth, the spiritual action and here we're at the all-important act, the spiritual action of the Lord's Supper. The reason we need to go here is, of course, that the Bible goes here, but we need to go here because unbelievers can do the first two.

The devil could do the first two if he put on a body. He can eat, he can drink, he can remember and admit that the facts are true. All that an unbeliever can do and the devil can do.

So that's not a very good way to celebrate the Lord's Supper, to only do what the devil can do. So if all you do here is eat, drink, and remember, you're just acting like the devil. Isn't that amazing? You thought, whoa, I thought that was the essence of it.

I thought remembering was the key. It's not the key. It's essential.

It's essential. This is history. It's not the key.

Let me read that last sentence from the affirmation of faith again. Here's the key sentence. It was an effort of the elders to put in a sentence what I'm about to show you from the Scriptures.

Those who eat and drink in a worthy manner partake of Christ's body and blood, not physically, and thus we're distancing ourselves from the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Not physically, but spiritually in that by faith they are nourished with the benefits he obtained through his death and thus grow in grace. Now here's the biblical question.

Where does this idea of partaking of Christ's body and blood spiritually come from? Where are you getting that? I don't know that. This is new to me. And the answer is chapter 10.

So if you have your Bible still open, turn the page, if it's not on your page, to 1st Corinthians 10, 16 to 18, and I'll show you where we got that. Let's read 1st Corinthians 10, 16 to 18. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? So there's where we get it.

That's the language we're trying to understand and use properly. Is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? All of you know this Greek word, by the way. It's koinonia.

Is it not a koinonia in the blood of Christ? Next phrase. The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. And then an important verse, 18.

Consider the people of Israel are not those, he's using an analogy here, are not those who eat the sacrifices, participants in the altar. That word participants there is a form of the same word, participation in the blood, participation in the body. And so there's an analogy.

When the sacrifices were killed and then the worshippers ate the sacrifices, he says they are participating in the altar. Just like when we eat this, we're participating in the body, the blood of Jesus. So a key question would be then, that's an analogy, what does participating in the altar mean? You're not eating the altar.

The sacrifice, the blood and the meat didn't turn into an altar. I think it means that when you eat of this, you by faith appropriate, receive and joy are nourished by what happens on that altar. Namely forgiveness of sins, restored fellowship with God.

And that's what I think this means. I think basically Paul is saying when you eat this bread and when you drink this cup, your faith should be reaching out and embracing all that Christ accomplished for you when he died on the cross. When he shed that blood and when his body was pierced.

Now by faith, eat that. Embrace that. Draw that into your life.

So we speak of a spiritual eating underneath a physical eating. Come to me all you who labor. No, come to me.

I'm the bread of life. Eat, eat. You get these passages in John 6 about eating the body and drinking the blood.

The words that I speak to you are spirit and life, the flesh profits nothing. I'm talking about eating all that I bought for you, accomplished for you. This is why month after month at this table, we who lead, give the table various focuses.

Because when Christ died, he bought for us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Like, I just wrote down a few here, peace with God, joy in Christ, hope for the future, freedom from fear, security in

adversity, guidance in perplexity, healing from sicknesses, victory in temptations, and on and on and on the list goes. Paul said in 2nd Corinthians chapter 1 verse 20, all the promises of God are yes in Christ Jesus.

And they're yes because he shed his blood to remove every obstacle between us and the promises of God. Sinners who are outside Christ cannot count on any of the promises coming true for them. But when by faith you are in Christ, then his purchase and his perfection provide everything you need, every obstacle is out of the way, all the promises of God are flowing like a tidal wave to you, only mercy is your portion, no wrath anymore.

And therefore, amazingly, what we celebrate at the Lord's table is the foundation of every good thing in our lives, which is why we can give it a different focus every month. Because everything is bought by what this table represents. When Christ died for us, he purchased all the blessings that we ever, ever experience.

So, the spiritual action, we've got physical action, eating, we've got mental action, remembering history, and we have a spiritual action by which, through faith, we reach out and we embrace and draw into ourselves. You can use different kinds of images here. You can see eating and drinking and embracing and receiving and believing.

You can use these and draw them in to strengthen your heart as you eat and chew. There are things going on here bigger than we know probably. God means for there to be a correlation between as we eat at the physical level, we feast at the spiritual level on what he bought when physically he put himself on the cross.

I hope you grow in your ability to do that. Now, lastly, the sacred seriousness, number six, the sacred seriousness of the Lord's Supper. I'm going to close with this because Paul does, and I'm basically just going to read slowly these absolutely staggering words.

Because to believe them would be to tremble. Preface my reading of these closing verses in this chapter with just saying, don't come to the Lord's table in a cavalier way. Careless, callous.

Discern, discern what's going on here. Let's read verse 27 to 32 slowly and with prayer that God would help us to come to terms with this and feel appropriately. Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, now, I don't think that means you got to be perfect.

The table exists because we're not perfect. That's why it exists. That means make sure that you're trusting, treasuring Christ as the most precious gift in your life.

Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and the blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself. And I'm going to be quiet in about two minutes and let you do that.

And that testing there, when we're quiet, you're not checking out whether you're good enough. There's nobody good enough, all right? That's not what you're checking out as you do introspection. Checking out whether you're good enough.

Hopefully in your introspection you find yourself way worse than you are. Thinking you are way worse. And then you're checking whether you trust Him.

Trust Him with this. We all would find ourselves worse than we think we are if we had the mirror of Christ in front of us. And so, I'm in the cup.

For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, I think that means this is not a fish sandwich. It's not a fish sandwich. Don't make light of this.

This represents the body of the Lord and spiritually becomes the occasion when you commune with what that body bought. For anyone who eats or drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. Now what does that mean? I thought God loved us and we're His children and He's our Father.

And now we're talking about God judging us? Yes. But now He's very careful to say what He means. That is why many of you, you, you born-again Christians, that is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died.

Not to be sent to hell, which He makes plain in the next verse. Verse 31. But if we judged ourselves truly, judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.

But when we are judged by the Lord, we are, and now He interprets what He means by this judgment, we are disciplined. That is, some are weak, some are ill, some have died. We are disciplined so that we may not be condemned.

That is, go to hell with... Does that stagger you? The Father, our loving Father, takes some of us home because we misused the Lord's Supper. That's what it says. That's serious.

I don't know anything that would make it more serious except to say that you're gonna go to hell if you come to the Lord's table, but Lord's table. So this is sacred seriousness.

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