

The Sacrament of Communion

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Jesus declared to his disciples, and to all who would listen, "I am."

Jesus declares to you, "I am."

Do you believe him?

The Apostle John lays out his entire Gospel according to several of Jesus' "I am" statements. I am living water. I am the bread of life. I am the good shepherd. I am the light of the world

The world responds to Jesus, "No, you are not."

But where are you today?

Are you discovering more and more that Jesus really is your "I am"?

Or is the flame of your faith in Jesus barely flickering?

John 16:33 ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

1 John 5:4 ⁴ For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith.

The world is full of problems.

Corona virus, Economic woe, Black Lives Matter, Anarchy, Political striving.

Even if these global issues don't always impact us personally, there are countless other issues that do. Who does not struggle with some sort of health-related issue?

But more than health, who is not struggling with some family issue? Young people, who does not struggle with friendships? Who does not have some struggle with finances?

Even if externally things are going well, many of us struggle inwardly.

Anxieties and depression press against many of us.

We struggle inwardly to find true joy, or some degree of happiness.

We all on some level lack contentment.

In the face of every tribulation, Jesus speaks to your soul, "I am."

Do you believe him?

Today, we are going to talk about the Sacrament of Communion.

By sacrament, I mean "Holy Action."

It is a symbolic ceremony in which we participate that is given way more value by God than actions themselves would indicate.

Let me try to illustrate.

Jesus and the disciples were facing the injustice of a corrupt Roman Empire.
Jesus and the disciples were facing betrayal among their closest friends.
The disciples would soon face the loss of their beloved Leader.
They would soon be feeling alone and abandoned in the world.

How does Jesus solve these problems?
He institutes the Sacrament of Communion.

He did not teach his disciples to form political action committees.
He did not set out a strategy for them in how to protest.
He did not give them a plan to fix the problems of this world.
He gave them a Sacrament that would lead his disciples to himself as the I AM and to his wonderful words of life. And through their right participation in the sacrament, Jesus would enable his children to overcome the world.

As Jesus ascended into heaven, he gave orders for the disciples to preach and to teach the Word of God. And Paul, after contemplating this strategy saw in it the power of God. He called it the foolishness of preaching. Why foolishness? Because apart from a real God actually working in the hearts of the hearers, preaching has no power whatsoever. If the Spirit of God, does not grab hold of your heart and make real to you the reality and importance of the spiritual over the physical, nothing that I say will be of any value to you. But, when God does work, those who believe can lose everything of value in this world, and they will continue to have joy. God, not just the thought of God, but the very presence of God spiritually received by faith, will be enough.

None of us wants to lose everything in this life. No one asks for a life of tribulation. But for the one who has been gripped by God, they will sing "I would rather have Jesus than anything this world has to offer." Can you say in your heart, "Take it all Jesus. All I want is you."?

Amazingly so, this is what the Covenant Sign of Communion declares to your heart. In Jesus, we have everything. And having Jesus, I have more than everything else in this world.

The Sacrament of Communion makes clear to us what is our true and desperate need:
Fellowship with Jesus Christ and fellowship with other believers.

Read I Corinthians 11:23-26.

As I came to this passage in preparation for this sermon, I was struck with its utter foolishness. How completely ridiculous to think that this simple ceremony could actually fix anything or be helpful to anyone!

Think about it... Jesus tells his disciples, "I want you to do this simple ceremony over and over and over again."

If I were there on that night, knowing myself, I probably would have objected, “Surely you don’t mean that? Are there not plenty of other things that we could be doing? Why do we need to keep doing this simple ceremony?”

I am a man of action. I do not like wasting time for no apparent purpose. Doing the same thing over and over again is difficult for me. I find myself getting very fidgety. Hearing Jesus’ words “Do this” would have certainly been a challenge for me.

“How is this possibly going to help things?”

But the wisdom of God is often foolishness, except through the eyes of faith.

So, we must ask ourselves, “What is it about this ceremony that makes it so important that Jesus would tell his disciples to do this over and over and over again, until he returns?”

Prayer: O Father, pour out your Spirit into our hearts. For if you withhold your Spirit our ears will not hear your voice. And it is your voice that we need today.

Three main points to this sermon:

1. This ceremony portrays the Covenant relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ.
2. Participation in the ceremony is itself a renewal of our faith in Jesus Christ.
3. Jesus has promised to impart grace to his people through their participation in the ceremony.

1. This ceremony portrays the Covenant relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ.

The Sacrament of Communion shows to your heart the very essence of your relationship with God.

It is like a play in which you are one of the actors.

If you want to know what Christianity is all about, then look to Communion, and you will know its essence.

As soon as I make this statement, I have to qualify it. The signs and symbols are vague enough that it is possible to find whatever meaning you want in them.

Take for example Jesus’ statement, “This is my body.”

Is there a statement of his that has been more debated by the Church throughout history?

Jesus also says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

But he never defines the New Covenant in this ceremony.

If all you had was the ceremony, you really could define the Covenant any way you like.

Jesus never intended that we give our own meaning to the sacrament.

But in order for us to understand the signs and symbols correctly, we must interpret them through the lens of biblical doctrine.

It is biblical truth from all of Scripture that forms our understanding of the symbols. The symbols take the shape in our minds of our theology.

So, every time I look at the symbols, I am reminded of certain truths about my relationship with God that I have learned through my study of the Scripture. Without the ongoing study of Scripture my participation in the sacrament will be shallow at best. And at worst, I will give meaning to the sacrament that was never intended by our Lord.

This is why, in our particular tradition, the sacrament is never to be administered apart from the preaching of the Word of God. Gaining a blessing in Communion is dependent upon the faithful preaching of our New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

But, even though the sacrament is dependent upon the Word of God, its value is its ability to communicate to the worshipper vast amounts of theological truth in very simple symbols.

There is a popular phrase that we use: A picture is worth a thousand words. This is true of the sacrament of Communion. The very simple symbols portrayed in Communion ought to evoke all sorts of biblical truths in your heart and mind.

But they don't do it in the same way as a wonderful, hour-long Bible Study, or a powerful sermon. The sacrament communicates vast and complex truths in the simplest of symbols.

As I have given my life to the study of the Bible, all of its teachings revolve around one simple concept: Death.

And death is at the very heart of Communion.

Your eating of Jesus' broken body...
And your drinking of Jesus' poured out blood...

Do you realize that every time you partake of Communion, you are feeding upon death?
To say this just sounds morbid.

John 6:53-57 "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.

Eating and drinking Jesus' flesh is powerful imagery. You are so accustomed to the symbolism that you may miss just how powerful. Remove the theological truth of the symbol and you have an image of cannibalism. The concept of feasting upon the flesh and blood of another human being in every other context is horrid to us. And yet, this is what we do.

Do you not think Jesus wanted you to feel the depth of what you are doing every time you partake of the sacrament?

Of course, we are NOT literally eating Jesus' literal flesh or drinking his literal blood. Nor were the first disciples. Remember, when they ate the bread and drank from the cup, Jesus was still standing there intact.

But eating flesh and drinking blood powerfully communicates the embracing of Jesus' death.

In fact, this is what Jesus intends. He says that in our repeated participation in the sacrament we are "proclaiming his death until he comes."

Again, volumes and volumes of theological truth in very simple symbols.

The broken body and the shed blood of Christ.
As believers we are to meditate upon the crucifixion.
And then we are to feast upon that crucifixion.

What is it about the crucifixion that Jesus wants us to embrace?

You can only find life through death.
The path to life leads through death.

It leads through Jesus' death.
And it leads through your death.

First, the path to life flows to us through Jesus' death.

Jesus died so that we would not have to.
In as much as death means curse, Jesus bore the curse for us.
He was crushed so that we could be free from the curse.

Galatians 3:13 ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" -

When we eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood (symbolically/sacramentally) we are embracing for ourselves that Jesus' death was sufficient to completely remove the condemnation of God's holy wrath.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we¹ have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is no one else who is capable of giving you peace with God. Only Jesus. And only the death of Jesus is able to give you freedom from the curse and full and complete peace with God.

Sin separated you from God. But the death of Christ has reconciled you to Him. I am taking the time to say these things again, not because you do not already know them, but because you need to continually be reminded of them.

The fact that Jesus would care enough about me to die for me in my sin, not after I have reformed myself and somehow made myself more presentable to him. No, while I was still a sinner, Christ died for me. You can never meditate on that truth too much.

And I believe that for most of us, this is where our meditation on the Sacrament ends. But...

In the Greek there are several words for our conjunction “but”. Some of them do not speak of a hard contrast. But there is one Greek word “allos” that is emphatic. It is used when the contrasts is stark.

This is the way that I am using the word “but” right now. And I am doing it because it is a part of the symbolism of death in the sacrament that too often is lost.

Embracing the death of Christ is the acceptance of Jesus’ death in my place, BUT... contrary to much of our thinking, Jesus did not die so that we would not have to die.

Did you hear that?

Jesus did not die so that you would not have to die.

When you eat of his flesh and drink his blood, you are welcoming your own death.

Feasting upon the death of Jesus Christ is our welcoming our own death with his.

Galatians 2:19 ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ.

Colossians 2:20 ²⁰ If with Christ you died

Colossians 3:3 ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

2 Timothy 2:11 ¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

Romans 6:2 How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Romans 6:8 ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

The goal of the gospel is your death.

Your participation in Jesus Christ is the only way that you will ever die.

By death, I mean death to the control of your own life.

By death, I mean the absolute surrender of your will to that of God.

When Jesus went to the cross, he did what no one else would do. He put the will of his Father above his own will.

Putting the will of the Father above his own is nothing less than dying to one's own will.

You may think that you have the ability within yourself to die to your own will, but I am telling you emphatically that you do not have this ability within yourself.

It is a gift that comes to you through your union with the death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus knows that you will never surrender your will to his on your own.

And so, he unites you to himself in his death.

When you embrace Jesus Christ, you are embracing him so that he will give his attitude to you. And you will be given the ability to surrender your will to his.

Pause for a moment.

How often is your will in conflict with that of Jesus?

I am not talking about the obvious: When you desire something that is just wrong – morally evil.

I am talking about when you desire something that is good, even according to God's standard, and God will not give it to you.

Maybe you desire the salvation of a loved one.

Maybe you desire your parents to love one another.

Maybe you desire for the Church to grow.

Maybe you just want a friend who loves the Lord and wants to spend time with you.

The list is endless. You have fasted and prayed for God to work.

And God has not given you what you ask.

His sovereign will is in conflict with your own will.

What is God wanting from you?

Surrender.

He wants you to surrender your will to his.

That does not mean that you quit hoping for and praying for the desired good. But in your heart, you come to the place where you surrender your will to the will of the Father.

This is what Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane.
“Take this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will but Yours be done.”

In some ways, the first time you believe in Jesus, you have been crucified with Christ. But in another way, your entire life is learning to surrender your will to His.

And every time you eat of the crucified flesh of Jesus and drink his shed blood, you are embracing him to lead you to the death of your own will.

In fact, we will get to this more next week, but if you eat the flesh of Christ without in any sense embracing your own death, God will bring temporal pains upon you.

As those in union with Jesus Christ, we either we will welcome our death, or God will use very difficult discipline to bring us to death. The reality is this, all who partake of Jesus, will indeed die to themselves.

I want to apologize to you as your pastor. I don't think I have made this clear over the course of my time with you administering the Sacrament of Communion. Maybe it is because I too struggle to surrender my own will to the Father. I hope to do better.

Do you have to work through your mind each and every theological point in some categorical way every time you partake of communion?

No. You reflect upon the death of Christ. You reflect upon ways that you have specifically chosen your will over that of Christ's. You embrace his death as truly enough to cleanse you from your guilt. And you embrace the reality that as you abide in him, he will impart to you his own attitude of surrender.

You do all of this in a moment.

The sacrament portrays to your eyes, and your smell, and your touch and your taste the covenant relationship that you have with Jesus Christ.

Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone to the glory of God alone. In the New Covenant, God provides everything that is needed for your death, and for your full and complete enjoyment of God for all eternity.

2. Participation in the ceremony is itself a renewal of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus instituted the covenant sign of Communion as one means by which we regularly renew our faith in Jesus Christ.

Some traditions have altar calls. These altar calls sometimes are an expression of one's conversion to Jesus Christ. But often the pastor will use the altar call as a way to give his hearers an opportunity to renew their faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ.

They are sometimes called re-dedications.

It might be ideal for a person to one day embrace Christ and then to experience consistent, passionate, and uninterrupted devotion to Christ for the rest of their lives. But this is not the norm. Very often our faith in Jesus Christ wavers. We hesitate to surrender our will to Jesus Christ. We are deceived by the world and give in to our sinful desires.

And, when we come to realize what has happened, there is a sincere desire to make clear our renewal of faith and devotion. Jesus has given us the sacrament of Communion as a means to express the renewal of our faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, it is not necessary to have backslidden to renew your faith. Every time that you partake of the sacrament, you are proclaiming the Lord's death, until he comes.

When you come to the Table, you are participating in a ceremony of faith. If you have no faith, and are simply trying to fool others into thinking that you have faith, God is not impressed, nor is he fooled.

Hebrews 10:26-27 ²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Communion is for sinners. But it is not for those who go on sinning deliberately. In some sense, all sin is deliberate. We deliberately choose to sin. But that is not the meaning intended here. Deliberately sinning is to reject the very concept that faith in Jesus Christ involves my own death. It is to purposely continue living for my own will with no thought of wanting Christ to conquer me.

For this person, whether they partake outwardly of the sacrament or not, there is only a fearful expectation of judgment.

Participation in the sacrament, for it to have value, must be a renewal of your faith in Jesus Christ.

I would add to this that one does not have to have "perfect faith" to enjoy the sacrament. In fact, the sincere participation in the sacrament can itself bolster faith, much like hearing the Word of God preached can renew faith.

This leads us to the third point:

3. Jesus has promised to impart grace to his people through their participation in the ceremony.

Communion is a means by which we receive help from God to embrace Jesus Christ.

In the sacrament, and through the sacrament, God is actively working. Of course, we have many duties in the sacrament, examining ourselves, repenting from known sin, clinging to Jesus Christ, making things right with our fellow believers, meditating upon the truths of the gospel...

But if our emphasis in coming to the table is all on our duties, we will miss an important aspect of the blessing.

Jesus is the host. He is providing nourishment for you. We come to be ministered to.

Many struggle with seeing the sacrament as a means of grace. It sounds too Roman Catholic. Roman Catholicism teaches that there is grace in the elements themselves. The bread and the wine have power in themselves to impart grace to needy people.

As Protestants, we reject this thinking. It is too mechanical. It is too focused on the elements. The nourishment we need is not physical, it is spiritual, and so it must come to us spiritually, by means of the powerful working of the Holy Spirit.

But, as is typical, when we oppose one falsehood, we often swing the pendulum too far in the other direction. Many evangelicals refuse to acknowledge that in the sacrament of Communion, God is actually working. In fact, to call it a sacrament at all makes many really nervous.

God is actively working in the Sacrament. He has even promised to work in the sacrament. He knows that you are in continual need of nourishment from him. And he promises blessing upon all who sincerely partake of the bread and the cup.

There is truly something special that is going on from the moment of offering thanks to God over the bread and cup, to the point of pronouncing the blessing. Communion is a holy service that is set apart by Christ himself from your regular eating and drinking.

In the sacrament, Christ comes to you and nourishes your soul so that your faith is increased and strengthened. The sacrament gives you strength to embrace your own death.

The grace that Jesus promises in the Sacrament works in much the same way that grace is promised in the preaching.

Preaching is a means of grace. And Communion is acted preaching.
In order for a person to really get out of preaching what they ought, they must listen intently, they must engage the Word in reflection and faith. The hearer must be active.
And simply coming to church is no guarantee that the Word will be heard or engaged in faith. But, anyone who knows their Bible knows that the power of preaching is not dependent upon the hearer. God is active in the preached word. He is powerfully able to reach down and grab hold of a dead heart and bring it to life through the preached word. We believe that God is mystically and powerfully working to save souls through the preached word.

Communion functions in a very similar way. Jesus is acting in the sacrament to renew, and strengthen and nourish the faith of his children through the sacrament. The power of the sacrament is not dependent upon us, its value relies upon the Host, Jesus himself.

On the one hand, you are to make sure that you are believing as you partake.
But on the other hand, you are seeking greater faith from Christ as you partake.

Both are true.

This is the wonder of the sacrament.

When I preach, God works through your ears.

When you partake of the sacraments, God works through all of your other senses.

When you come to the Table, you should hunger and thirst to be fed by Jesus.

1. The ceremony of Communion portrays the Covenant relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ.
2. Participation in the ceremony is itself a renewal of our faith in Jesus Christ.
3. Jesus has promised to impart grace to his people through their participation in the ceremony.

Jesus is the "I AM."

The world responds, "No, you are not."

Where are you?

Are you looking to Jesus' death to free you from an eternal death?

And are you looking to Jesus' death to enable your own death?

What is it that you have been unwilling to surrender to God?

Come to Jesus. Eat his flesh. Drink his blood.

He will enable you to surrender your will to His.

And in doing so, you will find true life, eternal life, and you will overcome the world.

Amen.