

Lesson 10:

The Lord's Supper

Key concept

The Lord's Supper
as sacrament

Bible study

Matthew 26:17-30
John 6:51-56

Memory verses

Hebrews 7:26-27

Objectives

- ❖ Understand the meaning of the Lord's Supper
- ❖ Recognize the significance of the Lord's Supper in the life of faith
- ❖ Understand who should eat the Lord's Supper

Bible Study

Whether you are a brand new follower of Jesus or an old-timer, the Lord's Supper, like baptism, is central to the journey because it is one of the two sacraments instituted by Jesus for your journey. A sacrament, which can seem like a foreign word, is really just a sacred rhythm for your life instituted by Jesus that keeps you centered on Him. Whereas baptism marks the beginning of your journey with Jesus, the Lord's Supper helps you continue your journey with Jesus and demonstrates your continual need to feed on Him. To explore this sacred rhythm of life and how it applies to both new followers of Jesus and to those who have been following Jesus for quite some time, we're going to ask three questions: (1) What is the Lord's Supper? (2) Why do we eat this meal so regularly? (3) Who should eat this meal?

1. What is the Lord's Supper? Let's start by acknowledging that we won't completely answer this question because we're probing one of the deep mysteries of spirituality, and there has been quite a bit of theological disagreement over the finer points of what actually happens during this meal. But that doesn't mean that the meal is incomprehensible; on the contrary, there is much that we do know about this meal, and that will be our focus.

a. Original Audience – A Passover Meal: As we seek to understand what the Lord's Supper is, it is always helpful to begin with the original audience that ate (or read about) this meal and ask what it would have meant to them. Matthew 26 is a good place to explore the original meaning of this meal. Notice that Matthew 26:17 states, "*On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.*" The Feast of Unleavened Bread, more commonly known as the Passover Meal, used unleavened bread because in this meal the Israelites, due to their hasty departure from Egypt, had no time for the bread to rise. The Passover meal is a feast, or meal, that the Israelites celebrated each year to remember the great Exodus from Egypt.

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This exodus happened as a result of the Lord passing over every home in the land (see Exodus 12) and killing all firstborn sons who did not have the blood of the lamb smeared over their doorpost to indicate their trust in God.

Jesus is very clear that this is what He is celebrating in v. 18, where He says to his disciples, *“Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’”*

The disciples would have been expecting a very well-rehearsed meal that they had eaten every year of their lives that always, without fail, was eaten in the exact same manner. Every Israelite family celebrated this meal by having the person who presided over the meal, typically the patriarch of the family, begin the meal by saying, *“This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness.”* However, what we find in Matthew 26 is that Jesus, presiding over this meal as one forming a new family, shocks his disciples by changing the traditional phrase. Jesus gives the bread to his disciples saying, *“Take and eat; this is my body”*(v. 26).

Rather than repeating the old mantra, *“This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness,”* Jesus says, *“This is the bread of my affliction.”* This is the bread through which I will bring you out of a greater bondage that you are under, a bondage of sin and death. He is saying, *“Years ago we ate this supper on the night when God brought us out of Pharaoh’s bondage, but tonight I’m going to liberate you from sin and death itself.”* Jesus is replacing the old phrase about the bread with a new phrase to say that this is the climactic moment in the history of redemption—*“all the Old Testament sacrifices...it has all been pointing to me and my sacrificial death.”*

The same is true of the way in which Jesus shockingly alters the tradition of how wine was served at a Passover Meal. Ever since the Exodus, four cups of wine were passed around to represent the four great promises in Exodus 6:6-7. The first promise is, *“I will take you out of Egypt”*; the second is, *“I will deliver you from Egyptian slavery”*; the third is, *“I will redeem you with a demonstration of my power”*; the fourth is, *“I will acquire you as a nation.”* Jesus, rather than going through the ritual of four cups of wine that celebrate these four promises, raises a cup and says in Matthew 26:27, *“Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”* Once again, Jesus, in striking fashion, is saying, *“This is a new type of Passover meal I am initiating. I am giving of myself in such a way that fulfills the old Passover meal and all the blood sacrifices that have been offered since, through my blood. So drink this cup and know that you are forgiven, once and for all, through my sacrifice.”*

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Yet, as surprising as this meal must have been for the disciples, the biggest shocker was yet to come as the main course was served. The Passover Meal reached a crescendo, as any good meal does, with the main course, the lamb. The lamb, which had been at the center of the meal, literally (as the main course) and also spiritually (as the way to avoid death), was conspicuously absent in Jesus' celebration of the Passover Meal with his disciples. Why? Because Jesus, the lamb of God, was boldly living into the prophetic words of John the Baptist, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29).

All along, the people of God must have been thinking, "We know that some furry little animal can't save us from our sins, but we also know that God is going to save us. How will He do it?" God's plan was now unfolding. Jesus, as a man, was going to present himself as the substitutionary sacrifice for all mankind, so there would be no lamb needed in this meal in the days to come. The Lamb of God had come to die for the sin of the world, which is why Paul says, "*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been slain, therefore, let us keep the feast*" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Jesus came to inaugurate a whole new feast that the Passover only points to, which is the great wedding feast of the Lamb. Revelation 19:9 says, "*Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!*" But, to secure the invitation of His bride (the church) to the wedding supper of the Lamb, the Lamb of God wasn't simply celebrating the Passover, but rather He was going to be passed over by the Lord. Oh the glory of the gospel, that God's only begotten Son was passed over by the angel of death for us and now calls us, his bride, to the great wedding supper of the Lamb. May the Lord's Supper be just that—a chance for you to knead into every part of your life what Christ did for you on the cross AND what Christ will do for you one day at the great feast.

b. 21st Century San Diegans: A symbolic meal?

Now we must ask the question, "So what does the meal mean for us living in the 21st century in San Diego?" Historically, as we alluded to earlier, there has been quite a bit of controversy over exactly what this meal means to us as we practice it on this side of the Resurrection.

- (1) **The Roman Catholic view** (sometimes referred to as transubstantiation) is that the bread and wine actually transform into the physical body of Christ.
- (2) **The Lutheran view** (sometimes referred to as consubstantiation) is that the bread remains bread, and the wine remains wine, but at a certain moment, the actual physical body and blood of Christ become present "in, with, or under" the bread and wine. It is like heat becoming present in an iron bar when it is placed in the fire. Just as there is a real presence of heat, so there is a "real presence" of Christ.

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(3) **Zwinglian view:** The other major way to understand the meal, historically, is the Zwinglian view, named after Huldrych Zwingli. This view holds that the supper is done in memorial only, because Christ's body is not present in actual substance at the Lord's Supper. Zwingli agreed with the Reformed view that Christ's presence was symbolic, but he was much more hesitant to affirm the real spiritual presence of Christ.

(4) **Reformed View:** Our tradition, the Reformed tradition, has held that, while the bread and wine remain physically bread and wine, all those who receive the Lord's Supper in true faith partake, spiritually, of the benefits of the one sacrifice of Christ. The Holy Spirit raises the believer through faith to commune with and delight in the presence of Christ in a mysterious and real way to nurture and grow in grace.

John 6:53-63 bolsters the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper. Jesus says, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (v. 53). Jesus clarifies what the disciples consider to be a "hard teaching" in v. 63 when he states, "The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life." Rev. Tim Keller explains that by this Jesus communicates the significance of this sacrament: when we understand the words of Christ, and eat and drink the bread and cup by remembering and thinking about His death through faith, the Spirit of God, in a more profound way than anywhere else (even reading the Bible and praying), takes the cross and shapes our hearts with it and brings it into our experience. That is a bold statement. Keller states that this meal, more than any other spiritual discipline or practice, allows you to experience the joy and wonder and glory of the cross.

Rev. Keller illustrates how this plays out in your heart with a scene from the book, *Lord of the Rings*. Pippin, one of the hobbit heroes, stands at the gate of the fortress that has been broken through by the enemy, and the demon is about to swoop down and destroy everyone in the fort. Yet, just as they are about to meet their death, Pippin hears horns in the distance, the horns of the cavalry. The King of Rohan comes and rides to his death, but saves the city and Pippin. From then on, whenever Pippin hears a horn, he burst into tears. Why? Because he received a living memory of his salvation.

The Lord's Supper is a horn blowing in the distance reminding us of that great day in the past when Jesus was victorious over our sin and our ultimate death by being killed Himself. Moreover, the horn also reminds us of the trumpets that will blow one day when Jesus comes back riding on the clouds and puts the whole world to rights. So, Rev. Keller concludes, "it isn't enough for us to be involved in small groups, to read the Bible, to pray. You won't have benefits of the death of Jesus in your life and have that transforming reality in the center of your life unless you eat and drink of the Lord's Supper."

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2. Why do we eat this meal so regularly?

Therefore, we eat this meal every week, unless we're celebrating a baptism, because we believe that Rev. Keller is right when he says that this is the best way for us to experience, mystically and supernaturally, by faith, the transforming reality of the cross and the Resurrection. In the same way that we would be malnourished if we failed to eat food regularly, we will be malnourished spiritually if we fail to eat the Lord's Supper regularly.

Second, we eat this meal so regularly because Jesus commanded us to. The importance of regularly eating this meal by faith is underscored by the reality that this is one of the few things Jesus says to do over and over again. I Corinthians 11:24-26 states, *"This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* Jesus is saying, "This is the central way that you will remember my death on your behalf."

We're physical, sensory people and so Jesus gives us a physical, sensory way to experience the spiritual reality that He was broken to make us whole. Obviously, he wants us to remember his sacrificial death frequently, for it is the central event that sets us free from the bondage of our sin. This is why he says, *"whenever you drink,"* or *"whenever you eat,"* to show us that we should be doing this regularly. Many Catholics do it daily. At Harbor Mid-City, we remember Christ's death and resurrection in a sacramental way every Sunday, either through baptism or the Lord's Supper, because these are the central ways that help us connect with what is true and right and beautiful about us and the world.

3. Who should eat this meal?

a. Those who have trusted in Jesus: If you haven't trusted in Jesus, then this meal will be an empty ritual for you. Moreover, you are potentially subjecting yourself to harm. I Corinthians 11:27-29 states, *"Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."* This meal is special. It cost Jesus His life. There were real consequences for Him, and there can be very severe consequences for those who eat it in an unworthy manner.

b. Those who are repentant: The main thing that makes you worthy to come to this meal is that you acknowledge your sin and you are actively repenting of your sin and trusting Jesus for salvation. If you aren't willing to repent of your sin, then you shouldn't partake of this meal.

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c. Those who are in good standing (i.e. not under discipline): If you are not willing to repent of your sin and, when confronted, you remain unrepentant, then you will not be in good standing in our church, meaning that you will eventually go through a process of church discipline. I Corinthians 5:11 describes an unrepentant person, and then says, *“With such a man do not even eat [the Lord’s Supper].”*

d. Those who have done everything they can to be reconciled: Jesus boldly states in Matthew 5:23-24, *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”* As we come to worship, particularly to a meal symbolizing our reconciliation with God, we should think about our relationships. If we remember someone who has something against us, then we should refrain from eating the meal and go and seek reconciliation. Our responsibility is to live into Paul’s command in Romans 12:18, *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”* As long as we are doing everything possible to be reconciled (including involving the church), then we can take the meal.

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Memory Verses

Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.
-Hebrews 7:26-27

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Followers Forming
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Individual Study and Group Discussion

Opening Question

Based upon the reading, what did you find most helpful? Was anything confusing? What was most challenging?

Study and Discussion Questions

1. Describe the exodus of the Israelites that was celebrated in the traditional Passover Meal (Exodus 12).
2. What is the significance of Jesus using new phrases about the bread and the wine in the Passover Meal? (Matthew 26:26-28)
3. What is the relationship between the system of Old Testament sacrifices and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross? (Hebrews 7:26-28; 9:24-26)
4. Does Rev. Tim Keller's image of the Lord's Supper as a distant horn reminding us of things past and things to come change your view of the Lord's Supper in any way?
5. Have you experienced the Lord's Supper as spiritual nourishment that is as necessary to your spiritual life as food is to your physical life? If so, share what you have learned from these experiences with the group.