

WHAT IS COMMUNION

Every Friday the old man would walk the beach with a bucket full of shrimp feeding the seagulls. His name is Eddie Rickenbacker. In October of 1942 he had been sent on a mission to deliver an important message to Gen Douglas McArthur. With a handpicked crew he flew his B-17 flying fortress across the South Pacific. Somewhere the crew became lost, the plane ran out of fuel and went down in shark infested waters. For eight days the crew survived in a life raft. They ran out of rations and knew that only a miracle would save them. So they prayed. As they prayed Rickenbacker felt something land on his head. It was a seagull. He grabbed the bird. They ate the meat and used the intestines as bait and caught fish. The crew survived thanks to a sea gull hundreds of miles away from the nearest land. That is why years later every Friday, Eddie Rickenbacker would feed the gulls. From a heart full of thanks he would remember the one that had journeyed far to sacrifice its life for his. Like Rickenbacker, we too have reason to look back and give thanks.

1 Cor. 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 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." 25 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." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27 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. 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

What is communion? A little girl who was usually in Sunday School on Sunday mornings, went with her parents to the regular adult service. When Communion was served, she turned to her mother and whispered loudly, "The snack in children's church is much better. And we get a lot more juice." Communion is more than a snack. Let me suggest to you today it is 3 things:

1. Looking Back (Past) - vs. 23-25

There are some moments which become pivotal in our lives. For some it was your wedding day. For some the birth of your child. Everything that came after that moment was different from what came before. Like Eddie Rickenbacker each one of us who is a Christian can say we faced certain death but were rescued miraculously. Our present should be spent in gratitude for what has happened in the past.

For each one of us the greatest pivotal moment in our lives was when we asked Jesus to come into our hearts. The Lord's Table is a time of remembrance of what Jesus did on the cross for us 2000 years ago. He was betrayed. His body (like the bread) was broken and His blood (like the wine) was poured out. The God of all eternity loved us so much that He came to earth to die for our sins. Jesus came and paid a terrible price so that we would not have to.

The problem we have as Christians is that we can too easily forget what God has done for us. We have short memories and, as the old expression goes, familiarity breeds contempt. Over time we can lose sight of what God in Christ has done for us and our relationship with Jesus can move from relationship to empty religion – blindly following a set of rules. E.g. woman cooking the roast.

The Taj Mahal in India was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It is said that during the construction of the building one day the Emperor was walking through the building site and banged his leg on a large wooden box. He ordered the box be removed because it was a hazard to the construction. It was the coffin with his wife inside – the very reason he started the building in the first place.

God knew that we as people had poor memories so he gave us communion as a constant reminder. When we participate in communion we are calling to remembrance on a regular basis what God has done for us in Christ. This helps us not to forget.

Last week we said that baptism is like a wedding. It is a marking point that you look back to. A public declaration that serves as a pivotal moment in your Christian walk. If this is true then let me suggest to you that communion is like a wedding ring. Like your ring, communion is a constant reminder for us of what God has done to save us and of the decision you made to follow Christ. Wearing a ring is an act of remembrance. It is an act of the will which then affects the mind and heart.

You can learn to give thanks even if you don't feel particularly thankful. If God gives a command, he expects obedience, whether you are in the mood or not. Thankfulness, like forgiveness, is not an emotion. Thankfulness is an intelligent response of gratitude to God. -- Erwin W. Lutzer

A few weeks ago I was speaking on What is Salvation and I gave my testimony and got choked up. I hate it when I do that. The reason is because that even after more than 35 years the grace of God still amazed me. That moment has become a deep well for me that I return to often to draw the purpose and passion and strength for each new day. It is still fresh because I have sought to keep it fresh. That is why we come to this table. At it we are taken back 2000 years to the foot of the cross. As we look into the pain but passion in the eyes of Jesus we are changed.

Some years ago, on a hot summer day in South Florida, a little boy decided to go for a swim in the old swimming hole behind his house. In a hurry to dive into the cool water, he ran out the back door, leaving behind shoes, socks, and shirt as he went. He flew into the water, not realizing that as he swam toward the middle of the lake, an alligator was swimming toward the shore. His mother, in the house and looking out the window, saw the two as they got closer and closer together. In utter fear, she ran toward the water, yelling to her son as loudly as she could. Hearing her voice, the little boy became alarmed and made a U-turn to swim to his mother. It was too late. Just as he reached her, the alligator reached him. From the dock, the mother grabbed her little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his legs. That began an incredible tug of war between the two. The alligator was much stronger than the mother, but the mother was much more passionate to let go. A farmer happened to drive by, heard her screams, raced from his truck, took aim and shot the alligator.

Remarkable, after weeks and weeks in the hospital the little boy survived. His legs were extremely scarred by the vicious attack of the animal. On his arms, were deep scratches from where his mother's fingernails dug into his flesh in her effort to hang on to the son she loved. The newspaper reporter who interviewed the boy after the trauma asked if he would show him his scars. The boy lifted his pants legs. And then, with obvious pride, he said to the reporter, "But, look at my arms. I have great scars on my arms too. I have them because my Mom wouldn't let go." Just like a mother who loves her child, so God loves each of you. The scars on the hands and feet of Jesus remind us that God, in His great love for us, could not let us go. Communion reminds us of the cost Jesus paid for our sins.

At the table take time to think of what your life would be like today if it had not been for Jesus. What were you like before Christ found you? I know where I would be had it not been for the love of Jesus. The day Jesus found me will always be the most important moment in my life.

2. Looking Forward (future) - vs. 26

The Lord's Table is not just about looking back but also looking forward. Remembering where you have come from is important but it is hard to walk forward if you are always looking backwards. At the table we also remember that we have a hope and a future before us. Jesus died on the cross, but He didn't stay on it. The cross is empty. Jesus is alive! He is with us here in this room right now. Because of the cross we have a hope and a future.

A pastor was in his office preparing his sermon. His little daughter came in and said, "Daddy, can we play?" He answered, "I'm awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I'm right in the middle of preparing this sermon. In about an hour I can play." She said, "Okay, when you're finished, Daddy, I am going to give you a great big hug." He said, "Thank you very much." She went to the door and but then she did a U-turn and came back and gave him bone-breaking hug. He said to her, "Darling, you said you were *going* to give me a hug *after* I finished." She answered, "Daddy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!"

As we take the bread and the juice today we look forward to the day when Jesus will come again. Not this time as a baby in a manger but as the risen savior. We drink juice and bread now, but then there will be the wedding feast of the Lamb. All that we do today is a foretaste of what is to come.

I remember as a kid at Thanksgiving sneaking into the kitchen and getting a little taste of turkey. It was so good. That was not the full meal, it was just a taste of what was to come. Have you ever received a perfumed envelope promising a future date. The letter is not the date but the fragrance reminds you of what you have to look forward to.

When Jesus broke the bread for His disciples he knew that He would not eat it again until he returned from the dead. Think about this: it could be that you will see Jesus before you have communion again. None of us know the hour He will return or of our own death. Communion reminds us of His coming.

3. Looking Inward (present) vs. 27-30

Lastly, when we come to the Table it is a time for looking at our own hearts. We remember what Jesus has done and we remember what Jesus will do, but we must also examine ourselves to see where we are at. How is our relationship with Christ today. It is important to search your heart as you come.

Naomi and I visited the ruins of Pompeii outside of what is today Naples. The Roman City of Pompeii was destroyed in A.D. 79. The explosion of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden, the residents were killed while in their routine: men and women were at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, slaves at toil. They died amid volcanic ash and superheated gasses. Even family pets suffered the same quick and final fate. It takes little imagination to picture the panic of that terrible day. The saddest part is that these people did not have to die. Scientists confirm what ancient Roman writers record--weeks of rumblings and shakings preceded the actual explosion. Even an ominous plume of smoke was clearly visible from the mountain days before the eruption. If only they had been able to read and respond to

Vesuvius's warning! There are similar "rumblings" in our world. While not exactly new, these things do point to a coming day of Judgment (Matt. 24). People need not be caught unprepared.

If Jesus were to return today would you be ready to meet Him? We are warned not to take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. What do you think that means? It means you do not mess with God's grace. Jesus suffered and died for us on the cross. You do not take that sacrifice lightly.

Don't ever share the elements with your children. There is nothing magical about the bread and the juice. Catholics believe that in communion the elements themselves are changed but we do not believe that. It is not the elements but what they represent that are important.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush He told him to take off his shoes because he was standing on Holy ground. What did that mean. Was there something special about the dirt? No, the dirt was just dirt. It was the moment that was Holy. It was a place of decision, a moment of transformation. Likewise communion is Holy ground. It is a time we set aside for God. The bread and juice are just bread and juice but what they represent are so precious we dare not tread on them lightly.

Let me put this passage which we have read in context. At the church in Corinth the people were abusing the communion table. In abusing the bread and the wine they were showing contempt for the things they symbolized.

1 Corinthians 11:17-22 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

The people in Corinth were abusing the symbols and therefore they were treating with contempt the things those symbols represented. They were treating the bread and juice like it was just a snack. They were using what God had given as a sacred reminder and abusing it. They had forgotten who it was they were there for.

Hebrews 10:29-31 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. They came with an offering but were really interested in looking good in front of the church. God struck them dead. It says in that passage that "great fear seized all who heard what had happened". I imagine it would. The moral of the story - don't mess with the grace of God. Remember who you are dealing with.

When you come to the table it is important to remember that it is a holy moment. Please don't misunderstand me, that does not mean that everyone has to be miserable. Communion should be a meaningful and joyful time. Holy means that it is set apart for God. It means that you do not just take the bread and juice and treat it in an ordinary fashion.

Communion is never to be business as usual. Have you ever noticed that sometimes when we worship we can be on autopilot? You are saying the words but you do not really mean them. You must never take communion on autopilot. What the bread and juice represent are just too important and precious.

If you come and take communion and you know that your heart is not right with God then you are abusing the communion table. You are just going through the motions or doing it for others to see. If you are committing willful sin and you don't care then you should not take communion. I am not saying that you need be sinless to take communion. If that was the case then none of us could take it. I am saying that you need to take sin seriously.

Let us get our hearts right before Him before we begin. Let me ask you the question again. If Jesus were to return right now – would you be ready to meet Him? Let's take some time right now before we begin to make sure that there is nothing standing between us and God.

I believe we are living in the last days. I would never say that Jesus is coming back on this or that day or even year but I believe we are in the season on His return.

Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

This is the first generation which could say that the Gospel has been preached to every nation. With communications technology and globalization we have seen the idea of the gospel going into all the world become a reality. Jesus COULD return any day now.

Being ready for Jesus means that we do not have anything standing in the way of our relationship with Him. That means actively preparing ourselves. We are told to keep watch and be ready.

Matthew 24:42 Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

We have been told not only to WAIT for His return, but also earnestly WATCH for Him. The difference between these terms is illustrated by the story of a fishing vessel returning home after many days at sea. As they neared the shore, the sailors gazed eagerly toward the dock where a group of their loved ones had gathered. The skipper looked through his binoculars and identified some of them: "I see Bill's Mary, and there is Tom's Margaret and David's Anne." One man became concerned because his wife was not there. Later, he left the boat with a heavy heart and hurried up the hill to his cottage. As he opened the door, she ran to meet him saying, "I have been waiting for you!" He replied with a gentle rebuke, "Yes, I know you have been waiting, but the other men's wives were watching for them!"

Are your bags packed? Are you ready for the moment the trumpet will sound and we will stand before Jesus to give an account of our lives?