

April 13/14, 2019

Palm Sunday 2019

Pastor Bryan Clark

In just a few minutes we're going to partake of communion together. The apostle Paul says when we do that, we should examine ourselves. What exactly does that mean and what does that have to do with what we've been learning in the book of Hebrews?

I want to share just a few thoughts related to that from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 11. A big problem with the Corinthian church was their spiritual arrogance. It manifested itself in a number of different ways. In chapter 11 their arrogance has led to treating one another in pretty destructive ways, at what they refer to as their *love feast*. Their love feast was kind of a potluck that was experienced together before they would head into communion. Whenever there is spiritual arrogance, it's always, always indicative of a deficient theology of grace. You just can't really understand grace and come out arrogant. So that's the problem in the Corinthian church. Paul deals with the love feast; then he moves into this discussion of communion that was intended to remind them of what clearly they have forgotten—which was at the root of their arrogance. Verse 23:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed 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."

(*NASB, 1 Corinthians 11:23-24)

When we get down to verse 26, you see there's a little bit of a play on words. There's a reminder that when we gather, we are the body of Christ. We are to judge ourselves rightly and in a very real sense, we are a broken body. That's why we need the broken body of Jesus—because we ourselves are sinners in need of a savior. So the order of the elements matters. We first come remembering we're a broken body which is why Jesus' body had to be broken for sin. Verse 25:

In the same way *He took the cup also after supper, saying...*

Now just a word here. Sometimes people refer to the *juice* or the *wine*, but biblical language is **the cup**, and that actually matters. **The cup** is a reference in the Old Testament to *the wrath of God*. You hear that language from the prophets. So you think about when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, just hours after he had uttered these words to His disciples, and you remember in the garden of Gethsemane He was praying to the Father and He said, "Father, if possible, remove this what? Cup! So He was clearly referring to the wrath of God that would be poured out on Him in payment for sin. Now this is what we learned in the book of Hebrews—that Jesus became the propitiation. He became the mercy seat. He was the offering to God—the ultimate offering—that the wrath of God would be poured out on Him, that it might be satisfied, that He might offer us forgiveness freely as a gift.

So, we first acknowledge we are a broken body. Therefore we need the broken body of Jesus and we need the shed blood of Jesus to experience righteousness. So he quotes Jesus saying,

"This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (Vs. 25b)

So again, what we learned in Hebrews is this is the ushering in of the new covenant, the fulfillment of the promise. The ultimate priest made the ultimate sacrifice of Himself—of His own blood—to satisfy the wrath of God, to offer salvation to us. So these are the things we must remember. Verse 26:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Now it's an interesting verse. When we gather and experience communion together, who are we proclaiming the message to? It's not to the unbelievers. Communion is not an outreach event. We are proclaiming it to ourselves because there's always the danger of turning this new covenant salvation into a spiritual arrogance and reverting back to a works-based righteousness. So when we partake of the elements, we're proclaiming...we're reminding ourselves of what's true of the basis of our salvation. Now there are those who would teach us that you actually have to partake of the elements of communion to be saved. Now stop and think about that. We've taken the reminder that it's Christ and Christ alone, and actually turned that into some sort of a religious work necessary for salvation. That's how subtly these things happen. But I don't think most people in our circles struggle with that. Where we get confused is on the idea of **examine** yourself. Verse 27:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. (Vs. 27-29)

So there's that little bit of play on words. So, what does he mean by **examine**? I would suggest to you that there are many, many, many Christians in our circles who, when they hear that, what they think is, "I must examine myself to make sure I am worthy to partake in communion." So let me rephrase that a little bit. Here's what we're saying when we think that: "I need to assess my performance to make sure I have made myself worthy to partake of communion." When I say it that way, do you hear what I just said? We have reverted to a works-based righteousness in order to make ourselves worthy before God. This is where the spiritual arrogance comes from. To partake of communion in an unworthy manner is to revert back to thinking that somehow, on the basis of *my* performance, *I* have made myself worthy to partake of communion. When Paul is saying, "Examine yourself in a context of spiritual arrogance," he is saying what we must remember is the basis of our righteousness is the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus. Whether you've had a great week as super Christian or whether you've had a lousy week and messed up, your worthiness to stand right before God does not come from your performance; it comes from the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus Christ—and Christ alone!

What we need to remember and proclaim to one another when we gather for communion is, "It's on the basis of Christ and Christ alone that I have been made right before a holy God." I can't ever forget that lest I start to become spiritually arrogant. It's good to remind ourselves this morning, that even though you've been a Christian perhaps for forty years, you are no more righteous than the person sitting next to you who's been a Christian for twenty-four hours. It's good to remind ourselves that you may be the most conservative person in the room but you are not one bit more righteous than the Christian sitting next to you that is covered from head to toe with tattoos. You

may be dressed in a suit and tie but you're no more righteous than the person next to you with t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops. It doesn't matter if you're old or young; it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor; it doesn't matter if you're black or white or Middle Eastern. It doesn't matter. What makes us right before a holy God is the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus. *It's Christ and Christ alone* —and that's what we must remember.

Reading – Barabbas

It happened too fast. One minute Barabbas was in his cell on death row playing Tic-Tac-Toe on the dirt walls, and the next he was outside squinting his eyes at the bright sun.

“You're free to go”

Barabbas scratches his beard, “What?”

“You're free. They took the Nazarene instead of you.”

Barabbas has often been compared to humanity, and rightly so. In many ways he stands for us; a prisoner who was freed because someone he had never seen took his place.

But I think Barabbas was probably smarter than we are in one respect.

As far as we know, He took his sudden freedom for what it was, an undeserved gift. Someone tossed him a life preserver and he grabbed it, no questions asked. You couldn't imagine him pulling some of our stunts. We take our free gift and try to earn it or diagnose it or pay for it instead of simply saying “thank you” and accepting it.

Ironic as it may appear, one of the hardest things to do is to be saved by grace. There's something in us that reacts to God's free gift. We have some weird compulsion to create laws, systems and regulations that will make us “worthy” of our gift.

Why do we do that? The only reason I can figure is pride.

To accept grace means to accept its necessity, and most folks don't like to do that. To accept grace also means that one realizes his despair, and most people aren't too keen on doing that either.

Barabbas, though, knew better. Hopelessly stranded on death row, he wasn't about to balk at a granted stay of execution. Maybe he didn't understand mercy and surely he didn't deserve it, but he wasn't about to refuse it. We might do well to realize that our plight isn't too different than that of Barabbas's. We, too, are prisoners with no chance for appeal. But why some prefer to stay in prison while the cell door has been unlocked is a mystery worth pondering.

-From No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, Max Lucado, ©1986 by Multnomah Press

Reading – Giving

In truth, I have nothing but you, O Christ, nothing that I might call my own.

So let that good confession now compel a better stewardship.

First teach me to treasure you, Jesus, above all things. Then let that increasing devotion be increasingly demonstrated in a joyful generosity – for to give is to live out the declaration that you alone are my provision and supply. I need not fear what comes tomorrow.

When I give to meet the needs of others, when I give to the work of those who serve the poor, the sick, the oppressed, when I give to the service of your Body and your Kingdom,

I give not what is mine, but only what is already yours.

With every charitable act, I am simply practicing the fact that nothing which passes through my hands has ever belonged to me. You are my generous master. Make me your faithful trustee, teaching me to live as a wise conduit of this liberal grace, learning to hold loosely the things of this world,

never hoarding that which is yours, never seeking the mean preservation of my own comforts. Rather let me love well in my giving, even as you, O father, have loved me so well by giving me all things in Christ.

Let me make each offering without thought of temporal gain. Let me give precisely because I have believed your promises are true – and let my giving be the proof. If you are my shepherd, then I am freed to live generously, knowing I will never want for any needful thing – knowing that any seeming deprivation is but the work of your Spirit weaning me from a world of things and winning me to greater dependence upon Christ my King.

So why should I grasp at that which I cannot keep? This body will sleep in death and what I now hold so briefly will pass into keeping of another. I own nothing here. I have no claim. Dispel the myth of my possessions, lest they taint that better hope of Heaven.

Rather let me learn, while I draw breath, to live with open hands and joy-filled heart, investing your resources in your good works. Let me plant these mortal seeds in expectation of immortal harvests.

Bless now, O Lord, this gift and its benefits, that it might be received as evidence of your mercies and multiplied in effectiveness for your kingdom. Through this and other acts of giving, train my heart toward a greater generosity, that the habits of my stewardship might be ever more pleasing to you and ever more expressive of your own holy heart and passions.

All that I have is yours, Lord Christ

All that I have is you.

Use then this small gift for works of love and mercy and unto the increase of your glory.

Amen

-From Every Moment Holy, Douglas McKelvey, ©2017 Douglas McKelvey, Rabbit Room Press

Reading – Hill of Regret –

While Jesus was climbing up the hill of Calvary, Judas was climbing another hill; the hill of regret.

He walked it alone. Its trail was rock strewn with shame and hurt. Its landscape was as barren as his soul. Thorns of remorse tore at his ankles and calves. The lips that had kissed a king were cracked with grief. And on his shoulders, he bore a burden that bowed his back – his own failure.

Why Judas betrayed his master is really not important. Whether motivated by anger or greed, the end result was the same – regret.

A few years ago, I visited the Supreme Court. As I sat in the visitor's chambers, I observed the splendor of the scene. The chief justice was flanked by his colleagues. Robed in honor, they were the apex of justice. They represented the efforts of countless minds through thousands of decades. Here was man's best effort to deal with his own failures.

How pointless it would be, I thought to myself, if I approached the bench and requested forgiveness of my mistakes. Forgiveness for talking back to my fifth-grade teacher. Forgiveness for being disloyal to my friends. Forgiveness for pledging "I Won't" on Sunday and saying "I will" on Monday. Forgiveness for the countless hours I've spent wandering in society's gutters.

It would be pointless because the judge could do nothing. Maybe a few days in jail to appease my guilt. But forgiveness? It wasn't his to give. Maybe that's why so many of us spend so many hours on the hill of regret. We haven't found a way to forgive ourselves.

So up the hill we trudge. Weary, wounded hearts wrestling with unresolved mistakes. Sighs of anxiety, tears of frustration. Words of rationalization. Moans of doubt. For some, the pain is on the surface. For others the hurt is submerged, buried in a rarely touched substrata of bad memories. Parents, lovers, professionals. Some trying to forget, others trying to remember, all trying to cope. We walk silently in single file with leg irons of guilt. Paul was the man who posed the question that is on all our lips, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

At the trail's end, there are two trees.

One is weathered and leafless. It is dead but still sturdy. Its' bark is gone leaving smooth wood bleached white by the years. Twigs and buds no longer sprout, only bare branches fork from the trunk. On the strongest of these branches is tied a hangman's noose. It was here that Judas dealt with his failure.

If only Judas had looked at the adjacent tree. It is also dead, its wood is also smooth. But there is no noose tied to its crossbeam. No more death on this tree. Once was enough. One death for all.

Those of us who have also betrayed Jesus know better than to be too hard on Judas for choosing the tree he did. To think that Jesus would really unburden our shoulders and unshackle our legs after all we've done to him is not easy to believe. In fact, it takes just as much faith to believe that Jesus can look past my betrayals as it does to believe that he rose from the dead. Both are just as miraculous.

What a pair, these two trees. Only a few feet from the tree of despair stands the tree of hope. Life is so paradoxically close to death. Goodness within arms reach of darkness. A hangman's noose and life preserver swinging in the same shadow.

But here they stand.

Once can't help but be a bit stunned by the inconceivability of it all. Why does Jesus stand on life's most barren hill and await me with outstretched, nail-pierced hands? A "crazy, holy grace" it has been called. A type of grace that doesn't hold up to logic. But then I guess grace doesn't have to be logical. If it did, it wouldn't be grace.

-From No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, Max Lucado, ©1986 by Multnomah Press

Reading – Suffering/Roman Centurion –

If it is true that a picture paints a thousand words, then there was a Roman centurion who got a dictionary full. All he did was see Jesus suffer. He never heard him preach or saw him heal or followed him through the crowds. He never witnessed him still the wind; he only witnessed the way he died. But that was all it took to cause this weather-worn soldier to take a giant step in faith. “Surely this was a righteous man.”

That says a lot, doesn't it? It says the rubber of faith meets the road of reality under hardship. It says the trueness of one's belief is revealed in pain. Genuineness and character are unveiled in misfortune. Faith is at its best,

not in three-piece suits on Sunday mornings or at VBS on summer days,

but at hospital bedsides, cancer wards and cemeteries.

Maybe that's what moved this old, crusty soldier. Serenity in suffering is a stirring testimony. Anybody can preach a sermon on a mount surrounded by daisies. But only one with a gut full of faith can live a sermon on a mountain of pain.

-From No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, Max Lucado, ©1986 by Multnomah Press

Benediction:

May the God who works wonders, who has made His strength known among His people. The One whose love has no limit, whose grace has no measure, and whose power has no boundary. May He be your joy and delight always, Amen.

-From Benedictions A Pocket Resource, Robert I. Vasholz, ©2007, 2015, Christian Focus Publications

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