

Communion: Gathered Around a Table
Stand Alone
Various
11/05/23

Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **1 Corinthians 11:17-34.**

Stand Alones. If you've been coming around Citizens for a little while you know that the regular rhythm of our church is to preach through what we call a sermon series – a collection of sermons based around a similar theme or a book of the Bible or particular passage of Scripture.

But we like to reserve a couple of Sundays a year for stand-alone sermons. One off opportunities to address something targeted and specific in the life of our church. Something we believe the Holy Spirit is wanting to say from God's Word to us as a people.

And in my own time with the Lord over the past couple of months or so I've been in the book 1 Corinthians, and the Spirit has been showing me so many different things, but when I got to this passage in chapter 11, I really had a sense that this was for us as a community.

So where we're going is this, very simple, won't take a lot of time – **I want to help us never take communion flippantly ever again as a church.**

I want to teach on, and then give us a chance to actually walk out, a renewed excitement, joy, and desire around the practice of communion that we do every single week.

Pray.

Communion Overview

Communion, or depending on your church tradition you might have heard referred to as the **Table**, or the **Lord's Supper**, or the **Eucharist** (which is just the Greek word for Thanksgiving) was a practice given to the church by Jesus Himself in **Matthew 26**...

- On Thursday night of Holy Week, a few hours before He would be betrayed and handed over to be crucified, Jesus was enjoying a meal with His disciples.
- And during the meal he gets up, He washes their feet, this shocking act of self-denial and service.

And then the story goes like this, **Matt 26:26-28 – 26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**

And communion from that moment on becomes one of the two ordinances, or sacraments whichever term you prefer (ordinance means something "ordained/instituted by Jesus", a sacrament just means a means of grace – I think both terms are just fine)...

But communion along with baptism, becomes one of the two sacraments that the early church carries on for the centuries to come...

- In Acts 2, the first semi-detailed description we get in the Bible of what the early church did we read – **Acts 2:42 – And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...**
- Later in Acts 20:7, we read – **On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread...**

The act of “breaking bread”, or communion, becomes a weekly sacramental practice for the early Christians. When these first century followers of Jesus gathered together for worship, they took communion – they took of the bread and the cup. It was a formative, meaningful, repetitious part of their gatherings.

And this practice of communion tracks on as you continue throughout church history... you see teachings on it throughout the centuries from folks like Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine, Benedict, Luther, Theresa, and on and on.

It's a sacrament that from the institution of Jesus at the Last Supper onward held and holds a prominent place in the life of the church.

Communion Gone Wrong

But it's also a sacrament, that almost from the beginning has been practiced in troublesome, unholy, improper ways as well.

And that's where we start our passage today...

17 But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.

For a bit of context, this passage today comes at the beginning of a larger section from Paul of instructions to the church in the city Corinth about their Gathered Worship – that's what he means he says “when you come together”.

If you were to read the rest of the letter, you'd see that this church in Corinth is a church gone wild. All sorts of sin and problems and conflict.

And apparently their Sunday worship isn't all that different. So Paul starts by saying – hey when you come together, your meetings do more harm, more damage, than good.

He'll go on to say some of the specifics of what's going wrong in the next few chapters...

- Instead of 1 person getting up to give a teaching, a bunch of people are all fighting for the mic, yelling, trying to just shout their message for the church over one another.
- Some people are mocking others because they think they've got less important spiritual gifts than them (you have the gift of mercy? HA, I've got prophecy, in your face).
- You've got folks speaking in tongues without an interpreter (I'll save that for the next stand alone...you know who you are).

They have a whole host of issues. And one of those issues that he starts by addressing is the way they are taking communion.

Keep reading...v18-22

18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, 19 for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22 What! Do you not have houses 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 commend you in this? No, I will not.

Now, just so you understand what's happening here – back in these days, communion was practiced as an entire meal.

People would sit around a table and they would feast and enjoy good food and good wine. -And then the central part of this larger meal, was a set aside time for the act of what we do today, the bread and the cup. (There's reasons why it has changed and developed over the years, more than we have time to get into today).

But what's happening in Corinth, is that when they're getting together, some folks apparently have nothing to eat, while others are just getting absolutely blitzed on the communion wine and stuffing their faces with food.

And Paul says – this is not right. You want me to clap for you? No way. You can't even call this the Lord's Supper because of how inappropriately you're acting towards the table.

This is meant to be a sacred act of unity and remembrance for the people of God and you're taking it in an unholy and improper way.

Taking Communion Improperly

Now, as far as I know, this is not our specific problem here today at Citizens. I have not heard of anyone getting drunk from the communion. If that did happen, I'd have some questions...mainly because we use grape juice.

This is just not our problem...but it doesn't mean we are necessarily exempt from taking communion in an unholy and improper way. In the words of v27 – from eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner.

The specifics might be different, but the threat could be all the same.

The corrective, or warning, needed for us in regards to communion would not be drunkenness, but indifference.

We take communion every week. And I love that we do it this way. It's the plan for the foreseeable future.

And the big reason why we take it every week is because we believe in what philosopher James KA Smith calls the power of repetition.

He argues, in his incredible book *Desiring the Kingdom* that the power in Christian liturgy (what we do when we gather on sundays – call to worship, singing, readings, silence, teaching, communion, benediction, all of that - that's our liturgy), the power in it is not that it is continuously novel and new, but that it is the same old, same old.

He writes, **"One of the most crucial things to appreciate about Christian formation is that it happens over time...There must be a rhythm and a regularity to formative practices in order for them to sink in – in order for them to seep into our kardia (heart, core) and begin to be effectively inscribed in who we are, directing our passion to the kingdom of God and thus disposing us to action that reflects such a desire...Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies."**

So the power and hope of weekly communion is that as we come to the table over and over and over again it shapes our hearts and our loves and our very being to not be a people who *come to* the table, but a people *of* the table.

A people shaped and molded and formed by the very essence of what the table represents, and what it means and who it points us to. That by *taking* communion at the table, we become a people *of* communion with the God of the table.

But while that is the potential power of weekly communion, the potential danger of weekly communion is that it would have the opposite effect.

That the monotony of weekly communion would lull us into indifference. Because we live in a culture that hates repetition. We long for novelty and new – new iphone models, new diets and workout plans, new home, new career, new city, new partner, new car. We like new things. We think there is excitement and life in the new and the novel.

And so the struggle becomes that doing communion week in and week out might not infuse it with formative power and meaning in our lives but make us indifferent to the rote repetition of the same old, same old.

4 Directions of Communion

So what Paul does for the church in Corinth, I want to do for us. To take notice of how we might approach the communion table in an unworthy manner (for us – indifference), and then lift up the beauty of communion by just spending a few moments meditating on what this table actually means and what it represents.

And to help us do that, I want to keep going in the passage, and I want to show us **4 directions of communion.**

1. Backward

This is perhaps the one we are most familiar with. Look with me at **1 Cor 11:23-26...**

23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper at the Last Supper, he told his disciples that part of this act is in *remembrance of Him*. When we, as his disciples, eat, Jesus wants us to think backward and remember something. And while the disciples at the time didn’t fully understand what Jesus was alluding to in saying that, it would soon become very evident.

- **In the symbolism of the bread, Jesus was talking about his own body, which would be beaten and torn on the cross, for them and for us.**
- **In the symbolism of the cup, Jesus was talking about his own blood, which would be shed on the cross, for them and for us.**

When we eat of the bread, and drink of the cup, Jesus wants us to remember that moment in history when his body and blood were given up to pay the penalty for sin and sinners to freely come to Him.

But not just the death *itself*, specifically what that death *accomplished* for us.

In Matthew's telling of the Last Supper, he is careful to emphasize several times that Jesus and His disciples were gathering to celebrate a meal called the Passover, a Jewish feast going back hundreds and hundreds of years. The Passover was a time for the Jewish people to remember God's deliverance for them from evil and oppression.

The feast of Passover was so named, as a reference back to the 10th and final plague that God brought upon Egypt because they would not let the Israelites go free from their slavery, bondage, and oppression.

So God brings judgment upon the land of Egypt, but he promises to spare all of those who would kill a spotless lamb, and spread its blood on the doorposts of each house. Then the wrath of God would "pass over" that house and they would be spared.

So the Jewish people would commemorate this every year through the Passover feast.

In fact, in traditional Passover meals, it was expected for the presiding leader of the dinner to explain the bread and the cup and its symbolism to the spotless sacrificial lamb.

But, track with me – the passover was just a foreshadowing. There are a lot of helpful tools and tricks for reading the OT, let me give you the #1 key – Jesus Himself says everything in the OT points to Him. It is all leading to Him, alluding to Him, promising Him.

Passover is no different. While it was a meal of remembrance, it was also a meal of foreshadowing, that one day a true and better sacrificial lamb would come. That the lamb's blood would not be spread on a doorpost but on a cross.

And so Jesus, when he gets up and he shows that for all of history what these symbols were pointing to was the one who now holds the bread and the cup, he is saying – I am the sacrificial passover lamb. The once and true sacrifice for sin and sinners.

The bread and the cup will no longer, from the Last Supper onward, point backwards to a spotless sacrificial lamb in Egypt, but to a spotless sacrificial lamb at Golgotha.

So when we take communion, we are celebrating a Passover of our own. We're celebrating that God's anger and wrath for our sin, though we deserved it, did not land on us; but instead passed over us and landed on Jesus.

And because of that, we get to experience forgiveness and life with God forever.

And when we come to the table to eat, we're commemorating that. Celebrating that. Proclaiming that. We're remembering Jesus' body and blood, broken and poured out for us, for our sins. We're looking **backward** to what happened on the cross and we are proclaiming – ***Jesus died for my sins.***

2. Forward

Look back at v26 – **26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

"Until he comes." There is an end date to the practice of communion. Though the church has been practicing this since Jesus commanded, and will continue to do so further into history, there will come a day where we will no longer celebrate communion.

Jesus Himself speaks about this day in **Matthew 26:29** – **“I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s Kingdom.”**

We believe there is a day coming in the future, where Jesus, who is right now seated at the right hand of God the Father, will return. And when He returns He will usher in God’s forever Kingdom and set the world back right.

And the bible uses a lot of different imagery to describe the day when that happens. ***But one of the images it uses regularly is that of a feast, a meal, a marriage reception of food and wine and celebration.***

Look with me for example at **Isaiah 25:6-8**:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

The future we are heading to is a feast. There’s a new feast coming.

Now, here’s why that matters in regards to communion – it means that when we eat this meal, we’re not just looking backwards to the day when Jesus rescued us. We’re also looking forward to the day when God rescues the world.

Life is hard, amen? When we come in here on Sundays, at least a lot of us are very aware of the “veil that is spread over the nations.” We come in very aware of all the things in our world/families/relationships/lives/hearts that just aren’t as they should be. We come into this room every Sunday very aware that the version of the world we live in isn’t the world God intended.

But we know a day is coming. A beautiful, wondrous, promised day. There’s a day coming when Jesus makes all things back to the way they should be. And on that day, we will celebrate. We will feast. All who know and follow Jesus will sit at a table with him eating the best of meats and drinking the finest of wines.

So when we come to these tables to eat, we are remembering that that world has an expiration date. That it won’t be that way forever. The Lord’s supper is an appetizer for the marriage supper of the lamb that is to come. And this table is a chance every week to turn our gaze forward to the feast of the kingdom that is to come.

3. Inward

Let’s keep going in 1 Cor 11...

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 31 But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Before participating in communion, Paul wants each of us to “**examine**” ourselves. He wants us to look inward.

In context, he's calling out wealthy members of the Corinthian church who were going ahead and eating without considering or waiting for poorer members of the church to arrive. Which in Paul's mind, is a sin against those poorer members of the church, and therefore against God himself.

"So," Paul says, "everyone ought to examine themselves" before eating.

In other words, we should consider whether or not our lives reflect the significance of the meal.

In other words, we should prayerfully and humbly, with the Holy Spirit, consider, before we come to the table, whether or not our lives reflect the meaning of the meal.

Before we come to the table, prayerfully and humbly, with the Holy Spirit, we should pause and take the time to consider:

- ***This meal is about Jesus redeeming me out of my sin.***
 - Do I believe that He has?
 - Have I put my trust and faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and life forever with God?
 - Am I a Christian? Am I even a follower of Jesus?
 - If I'm not – then I'm taking the table improperly. You'd be examining yourself, seeing how you have not yet surrendered to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. And then saying "No big deal, I'm going to take it anyways." And Paul says you do that to your own detriment. Opening yourself up to the judgment of Christ and eating and drinking judgment on yourself.
 - ***Listen*** – this is why every single week when we take communion we are very clear to insist that this is a meal for Christians. For followers of Jesus. And we say the same thing every time – "If you're not a follower of Jesus, we ask you not to participate because you'd be saying something is true about yourself that is not. So instead we invite you not to take communion, but to take Christ."

But then if we are a follower of Jesus, we keep praying:

- ***This meal is about how God's hatred of sin was so intense that he gave his only son to rescue us out of it.***
 - Does my life reflect that posture towards my own sin?
 - Am I actively confessing, repenting, working to fight against sin, to get out from under temptation?
 - Am I striving for holiness in my everyday life with God?
 - Not perfection, but alignment and desire for the kingdom of God.

Before coming to the table to eat, Paul wants us to examine our lives in light of the meal we're eating.

So we look backward to the cross, we look forward to the feast of the kingdom, that then turns us inward to self-examination. And lastly...

4. Outward

Let's finish up our passage with v33 – ***33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—***

Or as the NIV translation puts it – "You should all eat together."

Part of the problem with what the Corinthians are doing is that they are taking what is meant to be a communal meal – a feast shared among God’s family – and they’re making it about themselves. It’s become a personalized practice, not a communal sacrament, as it was designed to be. They were privatizing the corporate act.

This is a danger for all of the Christian life – that our age of individualism would destroy all of the communal realities of our faith. That life with God was always meant to include life with His people.

And that’s especially dangerous when it comes to the sacrament of communion.

This was a practice given by Jesus to His church. To His people, to do together when they gather for worship. You should all eat together.

- This is why we don’t take communion in Community Groups, it’s a practice meant for the church.
- This is why if one of our pastors officiates your wedding, they won’t lead in communion during the ceremony, because it’s a practice meant for the church.

That was God’s design for communion – that we remember together, not only the individual implications of what Christ has done and what He will do. But also the communal implications of what Christ has done and what He will do.

That God doesn’t just us to himself, He saves us as His people. He saves us into a family.

So communion turns us outward. How?

- First, by leading us to examine our interpersonal relationships. We don’t just examine our own hearts for sin, we also ask the Lord in prayer if we have any unresolved conflict, either because of our sin or the sin of someone else, in our lives. We heed the words of Jesus in Matthew 5 – we leave our gift at the altar, we back away from the table, and we go reconcile.
 - Listen – there are some weeks, where it might actually be inappropriate for you to take communion, because when it comes time to respond you realize – I have bitterness and unforgiveness in my heart towards this other person. I need to reconcile that this week and I’ll come to the table next week. That’s a wonderful response.
- Second, communion turns us outward through the practice of taking it together.
 - Looking around the room as our brothers and sisters in Christ approach the table. Celebrating in our hearts what Christ has done for them.
 - Taking communion together – grabbing some CG members, friends, roommates, spouse – and coming to the table together. Maybe you grab the cup or the wafer and you kind of head over to the side and pray together and take communion as a community.

Practical Application

Backward – Cross of Jesus

Forward – feast in the kingdom

Inward – self-examination

Outward – God’s people

****Give directions on how to respond.**

Pray.