

THE LIFEGUARD

1 Corinthians 11:20-28

A woman named Sherri Yates wrote to the magazine, *Christian Reader*, and told this story about something that happened in their family. Her son, Seth, was five at the time. They were having a communion service at their church. Seth watched her as she received the elements then bowed her head to pray. She took a peek to see what he was up to because he had gotten unusually quiet. He was watching his dad, Sherri's husband, intently as he was praying after taking communion. She says she was delighted to see that Seth was observing his dad's example and learning about the solemnity of communion. She thought it was great that her husband was being such a good example for him. The thought didn't last long. Seth leaned toward her and whispered, "What's in that stuff? You eat it and go right to sleep."

Seth clearly got the wrong impression, didn't he? The Lord's Supper truly is powerful, but it's not supposed to be a great sleeping potion. Unfortunately, I believe that many, maybe even most, Christians get equally wrong impressions about the Lord's Supper. They're confused about what it means and what it is supposed to do. Yes, it is powerful, but how is this ancient ritual supposed to be powerful? How should it affect us? Too often it doesn't affect us at all because we're just doing some religious ritual we know we're supposed to do, though not quite sure why. Jesus didn't tell us to do this because he wanted us to have one more duty, another item on our spiritual to do list that we check off then move on to whatever is next. He had a point in this thing. Today, let's think about the significance of this ceremony by looking at 1 Corinthians 11:20-27.

COMMUNION SHOULD BE A CELEBRATION

Communion is usually a particularly reverent time. It is almost always seen as a solemn occasion. This is understandable because the night Jesus instituted it was his last night before his death. However, notice what was happening in Corinth. Their celebration of the Lord's Supper was quite different than our usual ritual. In verses 20-21 Paul said, "It is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk." Wait, they were getting drunk at communion? What was going on here?

In the first century, communion was not a ritual shoehorned into a worship service where the people eat a crumb of a cracker and have a sip of grape juice. When they had communion it was an actual meal. People would bring their own food and drink for the meal. You can see that Paul pointed out they were eating their own private suppers. This was intended to be a feast. Think of it like a Thanksgiving feast. Only it was BYOT, bring your own turkey. Are your Thanksgiving feasts solemn occasions? Do they feel like a ritual to you? If that's the case you're doing it wrong. You should do it like we do in our family. It is not solemn and has no ritual involved. It is one of my favorite times of the year. We are thanking God for his goodness to us, and it is always a rollicking good time.

The Corinthians got that, but they messed up essentially by being selfish. We will come back to this idea later, but their problem was not that they had a joyful feast, but that they only cared about themselves. They had no regard for others who might be poor and have no food to bring to eat. We are going to look at what it meant shortly, but for now think about what communion points to. It is about how God has rescued us out of darkness through our Lord Jesus Christ. Think of movies that you have seen that involved rescuing people. An excellent recent one is *Argo*, based on the true story of the rescue out of Iran of some American Embassy personnel who were trapped there. The emotion most obvious after the rescue is accomplished is relief and joy. Those rescued are not solemn.

Because of the cost of our rescue there will always be a sense of solemnity attached to remembering it. But the Corinthians understood that they should be experiencing relief. They had been freed from death. There was cause to rejoice. There was something to celebrate. The same most certainly is true for us.

COMMUNION SHOULD BE A REMINDER

Throughout history, and continuing into today, Christians have disagreed over exactly what the Lord's Supper is. Some talk about the elements actually becoming the body and blood of Jesus or Jesus being present in them in some mystical way. They argue about transubstantiation and consubstantiation. At times I find myself wondering, "What am I missing here?" Perhaps I am too simplistic in my thinking, but it sure seems to me like Jesus told us what this whole thing is and Paul refers to that in this passage. This is a remembrance.

Webster's Dictionary says a remembrance is, "something that serves to bring to mind or keep in mind some person, event, place or thing." In other words, remembrance is another word for a reminder. So, Jesus told his disciples, "Do this as often as you eat of the bread as a reminder of me." We need a reminder because we tend to forget.

Did you take a foreign language when you were in school? Are you fluent in it today? Perhaps a better question is, do you remember any of it now? I took German in school. Don't ask me why. Was it so I could communicate with the flood of German immigrants coming into the country? Not exactly. Today I can count to 10 in German. I can say, "Guten tag. Wie gehts? It means, "Good day. How's it going?" About the only other thing I can say is, "Warte mal, ich habe meine heft nicht." That means, "Wait a minute, I don't have my notebook." Now, if I am captured by a German-speaking terrorist who has a bomb and threatens to detonate it unless I give him my notebook, I'm in good shape. Otherwise that is totally useless, and, as I said, that's about all I have left. I've forgotten all the rest because I have not been reminded of it by using it. Things we are not continually reminded of fade from our consciousness.

Do you remember how you used to study hard for an exam and get all those facts memorized and a week after the test you couldn't recall any of them? Forgetfulness is much a part of our experience. I have forgotten my wallet, including my ID on our way to the airport for a trip. I have forgotten one of our suitcases, a crucial one, when we were going on a trip. Last year, one

month I forgot to pay our mortgage until after it was due. I *never* do that. That reminded me that I can and do forget almost anything. I'm the living, breathing proof of something Vice President Dan Quayle once said, "A mind is a terrible thing to lose."

Forgetfulness is very human. We need reminders. Oddly, we have a tendency to miss the point of reminders. For instance, our nation has just recently had a big reminder. On July 4 we celebrated the birth of our country. The standard way to do that is with fireworks. Now fireworks are cool things, but they are explosives, a fact that a couple of NFL players learned in a costly way this year. They originally mimicked to some degree explosive devices used on the battlefield. They are intended to remind us of the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air. They are a reminder of the fact that wars have been fought to obtain and to protect the freedom we have. Unfortunately, we end up mostly just evaluating how good the fireworks show was and forgetting the point of the reminder. That same thing happens with communion when we go through the ritual of the Lord's Supper and forget the point of the reminder.

This ceremony speaks to a crucial issue. We are very much prone to have a "What have you done for me lately?" attitude when it comes to God. It is far too easy for us to forget what God did for us at the cross and to take it for granted. When things get difficult in life, and our prayers are not answered the way we want, we start questioning God's love, his goodness and his faithfulness. Hey, if he's really there, and he loved me, he sure wouldn't let this happen, would he?

We need a reminder. We need to remember that God has done something incomprehensible for us through our Lord Jesus. Something more important and more valuable than anything else that will ever happen to us. In his book, *Doubting*, Alistair McGrath says that he had an aunt who died some time ago at the age of 80. She had never married. When they were cleaning out her stuff they came across a battered old photo of a young man. It turned out that his aunt had fallen madly in love with this young man when she was young, but that ended tragically. She never loved anyone else, but she kept that picture for the rest of her life. Why did she keep it? To remind herself that she had once loved, and had been loved... that there once was a young man who saw her as everything. The photo reminded her that it wasn't an illusion, she was loved. The picture would comfort her in her old age that she had once been treasured. Communion is a little like that photo, a reassurance that we are loved and valued in a time when it can be easy to lose sight of that reality. How does it remind us of that?

The bread and the juice remind us of the body and the blood of Jesus, broken and spilled for us. As he says in verse 26, it speaks of his death. Jesus intentionally chose food and drink as an illustration. What do food and drink mean to us? They mean life. Without food to eat and liquid to drink we will die. Jesus was saying that his death was the thing that was necessary for us to live. Without it we will die. There is no substitute.

I have a problem. I am a supertaster. Research has proven it's not my fault. A certain percentage of the population, a minority, have more taste buds than the average and they taste

things far more acutely and powerfully than most people. I am in that minority. Spices like garlic, oregano, rosemary, that so many of you think add a nice hint of flavor to various dishes, turn them into something horrific for me. We in this minority group are subjected to ridicule, being called, “picky eaters” for instance. I get called, “Vanilla Rick,” and tagged with other pejorative and demeaning labels. Could we be honest here and just call that what it is? It’s hate speech. My civil rights are not being protected. I get overwhelmed by all these spices that most of you think are delicious. I say again, this is not my fault. I didn’t choose this. It is the way God made me. I want to start a new movement. It’s time my oppressed minority rises up. It’s time for a Supertasters’ Rights movement in our nation. I’m pretty sure based on its recent rulings I can get the Supreme Court on my side. Legal experts I have consulted agree that I have a good chance of getting cilantro, possibly the worst offender, banned in our nation because it is offensive to an oppressed minority.

Unfortunately, my daughter is a member of the oppressive majority. She loves these perverted foods that are so foully poisoned by offensive mixtures and spices. She was in town for just a few days this week. She grieves that she lives in a part of the country where Supertasters actually can find sanctuary, where the food in nearly every restaurant would be a delight for people like me, so when she comes here she always wants to go to one of those den of iniquity restaurants whose every dish is an offense to nature. Well, at least to my nature. So we took her out this week, and of course she chose such a place. At one point she took pity on me and said, “I’m sorry you can’t seem to find anything you like here.” I said, “It’s just food.” People turn what we eat into some crazy obsession. In the end, it doesn’t really matter what it tastes like. I just need it to provide me with enough nutrition to sustain my life, because food and drink are the only things that can do that.

In John 6:48, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” Then he said in verse 51, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” This caused some consternation among his listeners, but he continued. He pushed them over the edge in verse 53 when he said, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” His audience was repelled by what they interpreted as his insistence that they become cannibals. They were being intentionally obtuse. Jesus had already told them precisely what he meant by the metaphor of eating and drinking. In verse 35 he said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Eating and drinking of him meant believing in him. It meant depending on him to give and sustain life just as we depend on food and drink to give and sustain life physically.

Wait a minute. There are billions of people who don’t believe in Jesus who are living. How can you say that believing in Jesus is necessary for life? Jesus is claiming that living is more than merely existing. He said he came to give abundant life, life to the fullest. He said in that passage he was the source of it - the only source of real life, of life to the fullest. What is that life? It is a life that is brimming with love for other people, even people who are unattractive or unkind. It is a life at peace, the peace that people are desperate for. It is a life connected to God.

It is a life full of meaning and hope. It is a life of joy. It is life that won't end; it is eternal. If you do not have food and drink you die physically. If you do not partake of Jesus, if you do not believe in him, you do not have the abundant, eternal life that we all desire and that Jesus came to give. That is what eating and drinking of the bread and juice of the Lord's Supper tells us. It reminds us of this abundant life we have, and of the fact that we only have it through Jesus.

No amount of intelligence, achievement, ability, talent, popularity, attractiveness, physical prowess, approval of people, or pleasure can ever connect you with God, give you eternal life, give you hope, cause you to love others, bring peace - true peace - to your soul. People do not believe that, but it is true. Trying to find life in all those things is like trying to sustain your life by eating Cheetos. It may taste good at first and it may seem to work for a bit, but in the end you will never get what you need.

These elements are powerful for they remind us of a number of hugely important truths. First, observe Colossians 1:13, which says God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." He rescued us. He rescued us from death and darkness. He rescued us from a life that is existence, but an existence of fear, guilt, hopelessness, conflict and anger. He has brought us into a life of peace, meaning, hope, joy and love. Notice that is past tense. It's a done deal. The word, "rescued," is crucial. If you have been rescued, that means someone else has saved you. You do not rescue yourself.

Suppose an inexperienced tourist gets caught in a rip current and finds himself farther from shore than he wanted to be, unable to fight the current and swim back to the beach. Never a strong swimmer, he exhausts himself trying to swim back ashore. Now out of strength, he is drowning. Can he rescue himself? Is he going to grab himself around the neck like a lifeguard would and tow himself back to the beach? No, he can't! He is helpless. He needs someone to rescue him because he cannot do it himself. That's the point of a rescue.

We have been rescued by Jesus Christ. Communion tells us we were helpless, drowning, unable to do anything to save ourselves. Jesus rescued us. He did the work. He did all the work. He's not a lifeguard who sees a person drowning in the ocean, goes and gets him, brings him part of the way ashore then says, "Now swim the rest of the way yourself." He brings you all the way onto the beach where you are no longer in danger. *He* has already done it, not us. He has done it all.

This is crucial for us because if we do not understand this, we're going to keep trying to rescue ourselves. We will think some part of that rescue is up to us. We have to do it right. This creates enormous stress and fear in us. It can even cause us to resent God because we know we're not getting the job done and we think he's judging us.

If you ever think that, picture yourself safe on the beach after being saved by a lifeguard from drowning, worrying that somehow you now have to save yourself from the ocean. How dumb is that? If you saw a guy who had been saved by a lifeguard and brought ashore start freaking out

on the beach, thrashing around in an effort to keep himself from drowning what would you think? “Dude, are you crazy or are you just a total idiot? You’re on the beach. The lifeguard has already pulled you out of the water. There’s nothing left for you to do.” When we eat the bread and drink the cup it reminds us that the work, the rescue, something we could not do ourselves, is already done. It is complete. We do not need to struggle to save ourselves.

Second, the elements remind us that Jesus said he gave his flesh and his blood for us. In other words, he died for us. Why did he have to die in order for us to have this life he came to bring us? There are several aspects to the answer to that question. The first, and really the main part, is that the consequence of not being like God, of not being perfectly good, of sin, is death. That is what the consequence absolutely must be, in order for good to be possible. Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. This is because if we are not perfectly good, we are, to some degree, evil, and evil is always destructive. This is a point we need to grasp clearly. Even the tiniest bit of evil in us will cause damage to us and to other people. People get hurt and die because of evil. All of the pain we humans inflict on each other is because of evil in us. The only hope for good to exist is to make sure that evil dies. Jesus took the death we have earned for ourselves.

Here’s the thing about evil. Evil is like the most virulent, most powerful poison that has ever existed. Though we tend to dismiss the impact of our little evil, we see it as maybe not the best, but not a big deal - what we need to understand is that the tiniest hint of evil does incalculable harm and violence to us and to others around us. Perhaps you might think of it this way. Years ago Laurie and I were out for dinner at a restaurant when halfway through her meal Laurie found a hair in her food. She was immediately done. She wanted no more to eat. Oddly, I was done too. If there was hair in her food there might be hair in mine. Hey, what’s the big deal? It was just one hair. How much hair do you want in your food? That would be absolute zero. Our “harmless” evil is infinitely worse than hair in food. It needs to be totally eradicated. So, God says the consequence for any evil, even the smallest amount, must be death. Jesus took that penalty for us.

It is important for us to be reminded of this because we seem to have trouble noticing and remembering our own evil. Have you ever had that unfortunate experience where you get home after an evening with friends and discover that you have a piece of broccoli stuck between your front teeth? You are mortified, knowing that all your friends were looking at you, thinking, “He doesn’t know. What a dufus.” The problem is, we can’t see it. Others can see what’s between my front teeth, but I can’t. Our evil is kind of like that. All too often we can’t see it at all. But everyone in the spiritual realm, beginning with God, can. And probably a lot of people in the human realm can see it, too.

Sadly, even when we become aware of it, we don’t think it’s so bad. We’re like a guy who says, “What’s the problem with broccoli in your teeth? I think it’s kind of cute.” News flash: you’re the only one who thinks that. Everyone else is thinking, “Dude, that’s awful.”

Every time we look at the cross as we do in communion it is like a mirror that shows us in a most unavoidable way that there is broccoli in our teeth. It says, “This is the result of the evil in you, so don’t excuse it and don’t compromise with it, because the result is death. It is dangerous, it is destructive and it is horrifying.”

But the death of Jesus tells us something else. It tells us how much he loves us. Have you noticed that most married people wear rings? What’s up with the fact that it is expected that the woman’s ring will have diamonds on it? This can cause a problem for a young man who happily wanders into a jewelry store, a place he has never frequented because he just doesn’t do jewelry, eager to buy the young woman of his dreams an engagement ring, blithely unaware of the shock he is about to experience when he sees the sticker price. Do you know that the average cost of an engagement ring in 2012 was \$4,000? What sense does it make to have a woman walking around with something on her finger that is worth \$4,000? Why would we do such a thing? Isn’t that just asking for a disaster to occur? Rings are all too easy to lose. This is nuts. Why do this?

It says something. It says this person is precious. That absurd bauble on her finger says, “I love this woman so much I would spend outrageous sums of money for an essentially useless item simply because it tells her I love her.” I get a bit concerned about the fact that the rings brides give grooms are typically about five percent of the cost of the bride’s ring. Does that mean the groom is five percent as precious to the bride? But I digress. We get such costly things as a symbol of love because the cost tells us how precious that love is.

The point here is that the fact that God was willing to pay the price of the cross, to have his Son die for us, tells you how precious we are to him. It tells us how much he loves us. Do you ever doubt that God loves you? Do you ever wonder, or do you ever question it, when life seems to go off the rails? The elements of communion shout to you that God loves you to a degree that is inconceivable for humans. We must never, ever forget how much he loves us, even when we feel like we see no evidence of his love in our circumstances, because when we think God doesn’t love us, all manner of spiritual dysfunction starts to happen. Communion is a reminder of God’s infinite love.

How often are we supposed to have this reminder? Was Jesus referring to a meal with the Passover, so it would be once a year? Is it something we do once a week, or once a month like so many churches do? Here’s the answer: the Bible doesn’t tell us, so there is no “right” frequency. I have a suspicion that Jesus might have been saying that every time you eat a meal, you should let it be a reminder of him and your need for him. So it’s not a ceremony at all, but something you remember every time you eat. The point is not to repeat the ceremony at particular times. The point is to remember Jesus and the meaning of this thing.

COMMUNION SHOULD BE TAKEN WORTHILY

Verse 27 causes us all kinds of difficulty. Paul warns that if we take communion in an unworthy manner we will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Jesus. Wow, we

sure don't what that, do we? In verse 28 Paul goes on to say we should examine ourselves before we eat the bread and drink the juice. This leads to Christians worrying that they are unworthy of this ceremony. We examine ourselves to look for possible sin that we have been unwilling to turn from or are unaware of. I have known Christians who have avoided taking communion because they felt unworthy.

This makes sense to us. We reason that communion is about this great thing that God has done for us through his Son Jesus Christ, and so how can we celebrate that if there is some unwillingness in us to obey God, if there is some sin in us that we are harboring? To us that would be like some jerk of a guy proclaiming undying love for his girlfriend while in secret he's setting up a date with another woman. It is dishonest, it is hypocritical and it is undeserving. In fact, what it deserves is total condemnation, so it seems fair to us that Paul says in verse 29 that those who do this "drink judgment on themselves."

But hold on just a moment. What have we just seen was the point of eating the bread and drinking the juice? It was saying that we are in need of rescue, we are helpless. We could not save ourselves. In other words, we are unable to gain the life Jesus came to bring us and we are unworthy before God of his acceptance and love. We had to be rescued from that state because we were totally unworthy and in need. In other words, the whole point of communion is that we are unworthy and undeserving. When it comes to anything before God we do it unworthily. That's why we needed a rescuer, a Savior. That's the whole point of this thing.

Are you aware of the fact that the Greek word for the gospel of Jesus literally meant, "good news." It is good news for flawed, failing, broken, unworthy people. We are unworthy, unable to save ourselves, but Jesus rescued us. The whole point of this ceremony is that it is good news for unworthy, fallen, undeserving sinful people. It is celebration of the unfathomable truth that God in his mercy and grace has rescued us anyway and loves us, no matter how unworthy we might be. It is the news that we are safe on the beach, no longer in danger of drowning, so we can rejoice. We are safe because the Divine Lifeguard has rescued us. Does it make any sense to then try to somehow be worthy when we've just admitted that we aren't?

What then can it possibly mean to partake in an unworthy fashion? It is not about the state of your soul. It is not about making sure that there is *no* sin there, because the whole point is that there *is* sin there. That's why Jesus came to die and save us. What Paul warned against here had nothing to do with the state of our hearts, it had to do with the way the Corinthians were partaking. They were just coming to celebrate themselves without regard for other members of the body. In other words, they were partaking selfishly. They had their feast. Too bad if some others in the church didn't have enough to eat. It was the feast itself that was unworthy, and that needed to stop.

In 1 Corinthians 10:17 Paul wrote, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." We are all brought into his kingdom exactly the same way. None of us are more worthy before God to be in his kingdom than any others. The best of us

are totally unworthy. That means that before God we are one. We are one in Christ, and communion should remind us of that. It should not deny that truth by Christians acting with complete disregard for each other.

Because of the way we observe communion today, this passage does not quite apply directly to us. We don't bring our own personal feasts that we can eat, with no regard for others. In part that's why many years ago Christians came up with observing the Lord's Supper this way, to specifically avoid some having a lot and some having nothing.

What then does it mean for us today to take communion in a worthy fashion? Recognize you are part of a body. You have a responsibility to these people. Accept them for who they are. Like you, they are all unworthy to be God's children, yet he has adopted them anyway, just as he has you. Care for them. This is where the Corinthians really got off track. When we humbly admit our desperate need for rescue, our unworthiness; when we admit we are all in the same place, thus one in Christ; and when we accept one another fully and care for each other we are partaking in a worthy manner.

CONCLUSION

STOP STRUGGLING

We were like the drowning swimmer struggling to save himself. But the Divine Lifeguard has already rescued us. We are on the beach, safe, in no danger of drowning. So we don't need to stress.

In an article some years ago a man named Paul Francisco said that when he was a kid, his church took up two offerings on Sundays when they had communion. They had the regular one early in the service, and then a special offering that went to their benevolence fund right before communion. His parents gave him a dime every week to put in the regular offering. But one Sunday they also gave him another dime for the other offering. When it came time for them to go take communion he stood up with his family but his mother said, "Paul you can't take communion yet." He objected, "Why not? I paid for it!"

We haven't paid for it. God has done an immensely great thing for us through his Son. He did the work, and it is complete. He has given us a great gift. So, we should always rejoice in what he has done for us. We should continually thank God for his rescue of us and for the life, the abundant life, he has given us. As you partake today you should feel relief once again. You are safe, you have life, so rejoice.

DON'T DINE ON CHEETOS

Honestly, I love Cheetos. And I don't think eating them occasionally will destroy me. But I know better than to make them a staple in my diet. I know better than to prefer them to vegetables, fruit, whole grains and healthy meat.

Similarly we need to remember where life is found. The world tells us life is found in finally being recognized, in being somebody, in having stuff, in being rich or talented or beautiful. All of that is “spiritual Cheetos.” It is okay to have a little of it, but it must not be the staple of your life. If you want the abundant life, and you do, then dine on Jesus. Keep believing in him and making him the Lord of every moment of your life. Learn the lesson of the bread and the cup, that life is found in Jesus and nowhere else.

You have life - real life, abundant life - available to you. It comes from keeping your eyes on Jesus; on knowing your security, your worth, your hope, and your meaning are found in him and nothing else.

REST IN GOD’S LOVE

More than anything, the bread and the juice is an explosively powerful reminder that God loves you. When you lose that job and cannot find another, and you pray and pray, and yet no answer comes; it is tempting to grow angry, to accuse God of failing you. It is easy to think he doesn’t love you and is not faithful. In moments like that, remember the lesson of the bread and the cup. He loves you. He has proven his love by giving you the most infinitely costly gift you could ever receive. So believe he loves. When you see how fickle you often are, when you have failed miserably, when you are down and are certain that God could not possibly love anyone as worthless as you; remember the bread and the cup. They are a stark and profound reminder that you are loved more than you can ever imagine. Never quit remembering the lesson of the Lord’s Supper. God loves you with a love that will never stop.