

## **SURGERY IS THE ONLY WAY**

1 Corinthians 11:27-28

There are some things that we all think we understand, but upon further review may learn that we are mistaken. For instance, due to our recent bat encounter I found out a little about bats. I was surprised to learn that they are not “as blind as a bat.” In fact, larger bats, such as the one we encountered, can see almost as well as humans.

Another common misconception is that Napoleon was short. In fact he was about average height for his day. It is likely that the story of him being short came from the fact that at his death his height was recorded as 5 feet 2 inches. However, that was using a French scale in which an inch equaled 2.71 centimeters. In the scale we use today where an inch equals 2.54 inches that works out to 5 feet 7 inches. The average man back then was 5 feet 5 inches, so he was actually a bit tall.

Finally, there are fortune cookies, the staple of Chinese restaurants. No Chinese meal is complete without a fortune cookie, right? Only it turns out that fortune cookies were both invented and brought to America by the Japanese, not the Chinese. In China today fortune cookies are a symbol of American cuisine!

I mention these things because there is something else that is commonly misunderstood. It is a familiar part of Christian worship. But I have heard many people, often pastors, say things that reveal they completely misunderstand its real meaning. The thing I refer to is the Lord’s Supper, communion. Sometimes the misunderstanding stems from the passage we will look at briefly today, 1 Corinthians 11:27-28.

### **DON’T TAKE THE WRONG EXAM**

Typically communion is a quiet, solemn ritual. Throughout my years in the church it has been a rather formal occasion where serious faced leaders of the church pass out the elements of communion and everyone tries not to do something dumb or disruptive like drop the plate full of crackers or spill that little cup of juice. As a kid I was always worried about that because I did it once and found out that grape juice really stains, so this is something to be real careful about. When I was a kid, parents were really cruel. They made little boys go to church wearing a full suit and tie and be there for like 3 hours. Spilling grape juice on your suit was a total disaster.

These verses are often cited when we take communion. They are used to emphasize how solemn this occasion actually is. Unfortunately the church has always been prone to go the way of religion, which means kind of ritualistic, frowny-faced and condemning. Especially churches have tended to use guilt as a motivator. And man, are these verses loaded with potential for guilt. You'd better make sure you're not unworthy as you take communion. People have gotten sick and died from doing that. This is serious business. You'd better look at your life. Are you being really good? Are you coming to church regularly and giving enough money? You'd better not have any hidden ugly sins in your life when you take this stuff, and if you do you'd better confess it right now and clean up your act. You'd better promise to God that you're going to do better. This seems like the perfect opportunity to play the guilt card and let people know they're not measuring up. They'd better be more faithful and clean up their lives immediately.

The irony is that this is not the point of communion at all, and it comes from failing to understand these verses. In fact, to think that we need to make sure that we are worthy, that we deserve to take communion, actually denies the very meaning of communion. It is the very opposite of what this tradition is all about.

What did Paul mean when he warned that we should not take communion in a way that is not worthy? It always helps to keep a passage in its context. So what was the context here? It goes back to what was happening in Corinth when they celebrated the Lord's Supper. Verses 20-21 say, "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." Does that sound like a solemn occasion to you? They were having a party! They were having a party because they had reason to do so. The party wasn't the problem, it was the way they were having the party. They were just having a party without regard for one another, so that some people brought a big feast, eating and drinking their own personal food and drink so much they got drunk, while others had nothing to eat at all. Verse 18 tells us Paul's concern was that there were divisions among them, and the supposed Lord's Supper was a cause of division. They were divided by selfish behavior that stood against everything that Jesus Christ both demonstrated and taught.

To put this in our cultural context, let's imagine that we are going to have our annual church anniversary party. It usually has a potluck element as everyone brings a salad, side dish or dessert. Imagine that you are having a tough time financially, and it's a stretch for you to even bring a bag of potato chips. When it is time to eat you are seated at a table with a family that doesn't even bother with the food everyone else is eating. They don't even look at your chips. Instead they have

brought food just for themselves. They have an incredible surf and turf dinner of lobster and filet mignon, with spectacular side dishes. They have dessert that is to die for. They don't share with anyone. How does that make you feel? You would feel maybe a bit excluded, possibly even put down a little. The whole point of the event is to enjoy and celebrate the unity and fellowship we have in Christ, but what those people have done is communicate that they are better than others and that they are going to take care of themselves with zero interest in what happens to anyone else. That's a bit like what was going on in Corinth, and that was what was unworthy about how they were partaking of communion.

So yes, examine yourself when you partake of communion, and make sure that you are not just coming and stuffing your face while rubbing the plenty you have in the face of brothers and sisters who have nothing. In the way we do communion today it is not possible to make the mistake that the Corinthians were making, unless you rush to the elements and try to gobble up all the crackers and guzzle all the juice before anyone else can get to it. So your examination is probably going to be pretty quick and easy. We're not doing that, so these verses don't exactly apply to us.

However, the very fact that we tend to worry about whether we are worthy before God when we partake of communion, or when we pray, go to church or do anything else, tells us we badly need to understand the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

### DO GET THE POINT

Mary Poplin is a professor of education at Claremont Graduate School. As a child her family attended a Methodist church, but she found no real faith there and eventually wandered from that tradition. She began to explore other ideas of spirituality such as Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and other New Age and eastern paths. When she got to Claremont a Christian friend there encouraged her to continue her spiritual quest for truth and lovingly, quietly, gently pointed her toward Jesus. At one point she was visiting her mother in North Carolina and they went to church, not to worship but to see friends there. However, that day they were having communion. The pastor said, "You don't have to be a member of this church. You don't have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus lived and died for your sins and you want him in your life." Mary suddenly realized she believed that. She wanted Jesus in her life. She was so moved that at that moment she found herself thinking, "I'm going to take that communion. Even if a tornado rips through this building, I'm going to get that communion." She knelt down and all she said was, "Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me." She says that when she said

that and took communion she felt like a ton of weights had been lifted off of her. Communion is about Jesus coming and getting us when we could not help ourselves.

The Lord's Supper is about the body and blood of Jesus. It is about remembering that his body was broken and his blood was spilled so that we could enter God's kingdom. 1 Peter 2:24 says, "He Himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness." Our sinfulness is the thing that blocks us from being in God's presence, forgiven, totally accepted and loved. But Jesus took all of our sinfulness on himself and paid for all of it. He thus has removed the only thing that stood between us and God. It is gone forever.

Partaking of the bread and juice is symbolically saying, "As I am utterly dependent upon food and fluid to sustain my physical life, so I am utterly dependent on Jesus' body and blood to sustain my spiritual and eternal life. It is all I need. I have this life solely because of the work of Jesus.

You all know that for several years I had a problem with what I thought was tennis elbow. That sounds like a kind of minor problem, but it was really painful. Shaking hands with people hurt terribly, turning a doorknob was excruciating, and it hurt all the time. I tried everything to treat it. I rested it, iced it, elevated it. None of that helped. My doctor gave me cortisone shots that hurt like crazy. They would relieve the pain for about 2 months, and then it would be back as bad as ever. I tried stretching. I tried a program of exercising the arm. Nothing helped. I went to physical therapy where they applied heat, then massaged it, then gave me more exercises to do, then they iced it. I went for two months, a couple of times a week. It did zero good. Finally I tried an exotic new treatment, a platelet rich plasma injection. That works really well on my injury. It has a 93% cure rate. I'm in the 7%. It did no good whatsoever. Finally the only option was surgery. I had to go to a surgeon because there was no other alternative. Nothing else worked. I learned nothing worked because the problem was I had a tendon in my arm that was torn so badly the doctor described it as shredded. There was nothing I could do that would make that better. I needed help, and the help was the radical treatment of cutting my arm open, cutting away damaged tissue, sewing the tendon back together and putting a screw in to anchor it back to the bone. It took a skilled doctor to do that.

When we partake of communion we are admitting our souls were like my arm. We knew something was wrong. We felt it. We knew our guilt and our distance from the God we were created to be connected to, we knew that we had no hope. We

had tried everything to fix it and nothing worked. So we were left with one radical alternative. For God to come in and do what we could not, which was to bring about that forgiveness we needed, to connect us back to him and give us hope, healing our souls. There was nothing we could do to make all that happen, just like there was nothing I could do to fix my arm without dramatic help from someone else. For us to approach the Lord's Supper worrying about whether we are worthy would be like me thinking I somehow have to make my arm better so it is worthy of the surgeon fixing it. If it was better, the surgeon wouldn't need to fix it. The whole point of the surgery was I had no other hope and all I could do was trust in the surgeon's work. If we were worthy of the Lord's Supper, then we wouldn't need Jesus' work, thus would not need the Lord's Supper at all! So there is no need to fear whether we are worthy. The point is to proclaim and remind ourselves that God has helped us, because we have the tendency to keep going back and trying to make ourselves deserving. The point is to thank God for the thing he was done for us when we were helpless even though we are unworthy of it.

There has not been a single moment since that surgery that I have stressed over whether I am now worthy of the surgeon fixing my arm. I just try to take care of it. So we do not need to worry about whether we are worthy of what Jesus has done for us. We aren't. That's the point. But now we think about taking care of the gift he has given us.

When we partake of the Lord's Supper we remember that God has done something incredible, something of immeasurable price for us. It is not about what we do or have done, but all about what he has done. He has rescued us and brought us into a promised land. And there we live in relationship to him. We are his people. Revelation 2:17 promises to those who continue to trust in Jesus, "To the victorious one I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it."

That's a bit mysterious. The hidden manna probably refers to that which can sustain true life. The white stone some think was a symbol used in courts back then. If an accused person was given a black stone that meant he was guilty, if given a white stone he was declared innocent. Others think a white stone was used as an invitation to certain social events, and you needed one to get in. I'm not sure which is correct, but I think the more important issue is that a new name is written on this new stone. God has had a habit of giving people new names. He changed Abram's name to Abraham, Sarai's to Sarah. He changed Jacob's name to Israel. He changed Simon's name to Peter.

We understand that a name represents identity, so God is giving us a new identity. But what does that mean? I like to think of it this way. My name is important to me, but it doesn't mean much in this world. You can Google Rick Myatt and you'll find out there are a bunch of them. More to the point, my name doesn't mean all that much in this world. Who cares about Rick Myatt?

But there are some people in this world to whom I have a different name. To my children my name is Dad. When they were young and began to call me that it was a new name for me. I had never been Dad before. And it meant that there is a special relationship between us. In their travels through this world it is conceivable that they might at some point bump into another Rick Myatt. But no one else will ever be Dad for them.

God is promising that he will give us a new identity and a special relationship with him. It doesn't matter if the world doesn't notice us, or think our identity is to be a zero. We have a new identity as God's chosen child, one with whom he has a special relationship that nothing and no one can ever harm. When we partake of the Lord's Supper we remember that because of what Jesus has already done, and for no other reason, we have this new name, new identity and new destiny.

Something inside of us screams, "But I don't deserve this. I'm not worthy of this. I need to make myself better to deserve it." The Lord's Supper says, "No, you don't deserve it. But that's what the grace of Jesus Christ is all about. It has been given to you because he deserves it, and because he loves you he is giving it to you." There have been many occasions when I have said to Laurie, "I do not deserve you. You should have married someone better, more deserving." I don't just say that. I believe that. I think that every day. To this day I do not understand why on earth Laurie chose me and continues to love me the way she does.

There is a truth that helps me rejoice in her love. No one is ever worthy of love. No one deserves love. Love must be freely given. True love originates in the heart of the one loving and can never be earned, it can only be given. Laurie's love reminds me that we are not loved because we are worthy, we have worth because we are loved. We have value in this world because someone loves us. Communion reminds us we are not worthy of God's love. His love is given to us freely in Christ even though we are not deserving of it. We are not loved because we are worthy. We are worthy because we are loved by God.

Writer Nancy Mairs, who was Catholic, understood this truth. She once wrote, "I don't partake (of communion) because I'm a good Catholic. I partake because I'm

a bad Catholic, riddled by doubt and anxiety and anger, fainting from severe hypoglycemia of the soul.”

The Lord’s Supper is a feast. It is not a physical feast that will sate your physical hunger and thirst. It is a spiritual feast, a meal for our souls. We come to it longing for unconditional love, forgiveness, acceptance, God’s presence, hope and peace, aware of our unworthiness. And here we find all of it, as much as we could ever desire and more. This is the most satisfying feast in all creation. For here we find those desires to be loved, valued, forgiven, at peace and hope, and we receive them to the point where we are so full we couldn’t eat another bite.

Recently our family celebrated Carissa’s birthday. We had a feast. We had barbecued filet mignon, cheesy potatoes, salad, asparagus, delicious rolls and for dessert everybody else had Carissa’s favorite cupcakes, while I had a jelly doughnut from VG’s. It was a terrific meal. We all had all we could eat and more. But it was much more than a terrific meal. I can’t even begin to express how much joy there was for Laurie and me being with Michael, Carissa, Toby, Anna, Ella, Cara, my mother and Jerry. For a good part of the evening we just watched Ella’s antics and laughed until it almost hurt. It was a feast in the best sense of the word, a time of love and rejoicing. I think all of our kids enjoyed it, but I suspect they do not know that we enjoyed it far more than they did, for there is nothing better than to be with our kids and seeing them all enjoying each other.

The Lord’s Supper is the most satisfying feast in all of creation, for here we receive what we most need. And here we are all together as a family in the presence of our Father, enjoying each other and loving each other. What we don’t perceive is that the Father gets more joy out of this even than we do, for he revels more than we can imagine in our being with him and loving each other.

## IMPLICATIONS

### WE HAVE FEASTS TO REMEMBER

When do we have feasts? In our family we have feasts at Thanksgiving to remember that we have much to be thankful for. We have feasts at Christmas and Easter to remember what Jesus has done for us. We have feasts on Independence Day to remember what we have in our country. We have feasts on birthdays to remember the person born on that day.

When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper he said we should do it to remember him. What do we remember about him? That in his love, grace and mercy he sacrificed

to come into this world and take the punishment that we sense we deserve on himself so we could be free of it. So we could have a love relationship with God that will never end. We remember that he has done this great thing for us that we could never do for ourselves.

It is absolutely essential that we remember this, because we have a perverse and seemingly nearly irresistible default of forgetting it and thinking we have to do something to earn what Jesus has already done for us and given us freely. We become like I would have been thinking that somehow I have to make my arm better for the surgeon to work on it. Weirdly, it would be like me thinking that now, after the surgery has already been done. How foolish would it be of me to think I somehow have to make my arm better so the doctor can work on it to make it better, when he has already made it better?

We have this feast to remind us of how foolish that would be and how destructive. For when we fall back into that habit we utterly destroy the peace and joy God wants us to experience, we load ourselves with a burden of trying to earn something we have already been given, which wears out our souls and inevitably causes us to become hypocritical, judgmental and joyless. It actually distances us from the God who loves us. We have this feast to bring us back to the rest for our souls Jesus came to bring us.

#### WE HAVE FEASTS TO CELEBRATE

We have feasts at weddings because a joyful, wonderful thing has happened. We have feasts on those birthdays because we want to celebrate this wonderful person that we love so greatly. So the Lord's Feast is also a cause for celebration. When we partake today we are celebrating Jesus and what he has done. He has done something incredibly wonderful, and we want to proclaim how great he is and how thankful we are for him.

We had an odd thing happen on our vacation. At one place we stayed they had a breakfast buffet. The first morning because we got in so late the night before due to our flight adventure, we just went to the buffet. We had a coupon for one of us, so I figured I would just pay for the other one. We discovered something I should have remembered. Our package, which was already fully paid, included the buffet for both of us. The price was already fully paid. We celebrate because our eternity package is fully paid. There is nothing left for us to pay.



## WE HAVE FEASTS TO REJOICE

Feasts, at least in our family, are not somber times. They are not times when we become morose and introspective. We feast because we have reason to rejoice. When he began this feast Jesus said he would one day celebrate it with us in his kingdom. We will be with him in his eternal kingdom. In Matthew 26:29 when he instituted this form of worship Jesus referred to the day when he would participate in this feast with us in his kingdom. This feast looks forward to the hope of eternal life we have in Jesus. Nothing can take that away. This is our ultimate hope, and it is hugely important. On our vacation we flew to Maui after church on Sunday. It was a long day for us. After many hours of flying we were on final for landing. We were just a few hundred feet up, less than a minute from touchdown, when suddenly the plane began to accelerate and climb. We've been on a flight before where this happened and the pilot had to go around for a second attempt at landing. I thought, "Why do these things always happen when we travel?" Little did I know. As the plane climbed I expected we would quickly turn to get back into the landing pattern. We didn't. We climbed to 8000 feet and kept flying level. At that point I knew the truth. Something was wrong with our airplane. The crew were saying nothing, but the fact that we weren't setting up for a landing meant something was wrong. The flight crew wasn't saying anything because they were too busy dealing with the problem. I didn't want to be an alarmist or upset Laurie, but I calmly told her we had a problem. I didn't want to be Chicken Little, but if the sky is falling don't you want to warn those you love? Since we were over the ocean I thought we might want to mentally review those instructions about life vests and rafts. I figured out we were flying west, so I knew we were heading for Honolulu. I told Laurie we were going there and she asked why. I told her. "Longer runway and they're better equipped for dealing with emergency situations." I mentally began thinking about what would cause them to abort a landing. Let's see, the plane obviously is flying just fine, so whatever is wrong it specifically has to do with landing. An obvious candidate was landing gear failure. There are others, but I thought if that's the problem then this could be really bad. There's another name for a landing without functioning landing gear. It's called a crash. This flight could very well end with a crash, and we might not survive it. I didn't share that lovely idea with Laurie, but I did think about it. I wasn't panicking and yelling, "we're all going to die," but I did consider that this thing could end very badly. It is an odd thing to be faced with the very real possibility that in about 20 minutes my life might end. What I found was that because of what Jesus has done for me I could face that calmly. I knew that I would be with him in his kingdom. I knew he was with us, so I could relax. I didn't look forward to the possibility of crashing, but I was at peace. I did tell the Lord, "I know we always have to have these weird things happen when we go on a trip, but honestly, this isn't very funny." Finally

after about 10 minutes of flying the first officer came on the PA and informed us that we were indeed headed for Honolulu. The flaps were not operating properly. That was good news, because I knew that meant that while we would land awfully fast, hence the need for a longer runway, such a landing could be done. The next few minutes it was very, very quiet and pretty tense in that plane. We came in really hot, but we landed safely. But in those few moments on that plane I got a vivid reminder of what a great gift we have in Jesus. We have hope, and because of that we have peace, and that changes everything.

When we celebrate the Lord's feast it is to rejoice in what God has done and is doing in our lives. It is to rejoice in the hope of his eternal kingdom. The point of the feast is not to make us feel guilty and to demand that we do more and get better. Feasts are never about that. The point of this feast is to be thankful for God and his grace given to us through Jesus, to remember that what God has supplied in Jesus is all we need, and to rejoice that we are his children because of what he has already done for us through Jesus. It is a done deal that we rejoice in, and the whole thing should be as fun as a birthday party.