

# This Is My Body

Luke 22:19-20 | October 25, 2020 | Bryce Beale

You may have a room in your house that is a catch-all.

It is probably the room or closet you use the least—a guest room, or an office perhaps. Originally it *was* a guest room or an office, but as time proceeds more and more of your miscellaneous objects end up in that space, until the room is entirely taken over. Now it is a catch-all, an overflow.

The room's original appearance, and its original purpose, is lost under the clutter of misfit toys and items.

This is little different from our spiritual lives. We begin with a sight of Christ's beauty as one who can save us from the ire of God. We see him set upon the beams of Calvary, by his blood redeeming our souls from the pit. We set the gaze of our faith upon that Savior, crucified on Friday and on Sunday bursting from the grave in victorious life—and we are born again to a living hope. We feel our adoption as sons and daughters, no longer God's enemies but his beloved children.

That is our room as originally seen, without clutter. All is as it should be.

But then we begin our life of discipleship and a change slowly occurs. Other items—many of them good, some of them bad—are tossed one by one into this room of our attention. We begin to think very largely about them, about the details of our lives and finances and relationships, about doctrinal speculations and end-time theories and the hidden meaning of Scripture, about politics, about family and career and the near future.

One by one these are tossed into the room, at such a slow rate that the change is almost imperceptible. But the change does happen. And now when you open the door of your spiritual life, you can hardly see what the room was at first. You have not thought of Christ crucified for many weeks or months, buried as that core fact is under the clutter of other interests and concerns.

And just as a dirty room may cause you stress, this clutter of the spiritual life will also leave you with a perpetual strain and stress, a tension, an uneasiness. You know things should not be this way, but so they are.

Well, if this is you, what are you to do?

Clean the room.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.<sup>1</sup>

Cleanse out the old leaven, tend to the garden and chop down the thorns which choke.

And if you find this a difficult task, keeping the clutter down and remembering the heart of the gospel, it may perhaps be that you are not making full use of a tool God has provided you, every Christian among you, to ensure that you never forget the main thing of the Christian life. This is one of the key tools God has put upon your belt as a believer to clean out the clutter and keep focused.

And it is communion, the Lord's Supper, which we celebrate here every month.

In our text in Luke today Jesus is instituting this practice, is providing for us this tool, so that we might remove the clutter of our distractions ongoingly and never forget the refreshing facts of the gospel, the main thing of our lives.

#### **LUKE 22:19-20**

Luke had already referenced a cup here at this Passover, this Last Supper of our Lord before his crucifixion on the following day. That was probably the first of the four cups of the Passover. But that first reference to a cup was still, in a sense, only an introduction to this Last Supper.

Now we come to the bread and cup at the heart of the celebration. Verse 19 contains the bread, and verse 20 the cup.

You may at times have wondered why we, each month, eat a cracker and drink a small cup of grape juice together. We call this

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. 12:1-2 (ESV).

event “communion,” and with baptism it is one of the only two ordinances that Jesus has left us to practice regularly. And of these two, since baptism occurs only once at our start of the pilgrim’s way, communion is the only ongoing ordinance that Christ has given to us for our benefit.

This ordinance of communion is one of the greatest means of grace, one of the greatest tools we have for the Christian life, and has been one of if not the chief preoccupation of Christians for the last two thousand years.

But why do we celebrate communion? What does it mean? To find the answer, we have gone with Luke our guide to the very first communion, that place where Christ our Savior instituted this ordinance and commanded that it be practiced by believers the world over for this entire age.

And in keeping with the text, we will consider first what Jesus says of the bread, and then what he says of the cup. May this message make clear your thinking on this ordinance of communion that, by the Spirit of God, you might make full use of this tool each month and thereby keep your gaze fixed upon Christ.

## The bread

First then we must consider the bread, here at this Passover meal of our Lord on the eve of his death.

See once more what Jesus does and says in verse 19:

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

We have already called to mind the fact that this is a Passover, the day which begins the week-long feast of unleavened bread—and so, as you might imagine, this bread is itself unleavened. It is a cracker, called *matza*, rather than a loaf of bread.

Jesus and his Twelve are now partaking of the Passover proper. This is the main meal, which consists of roasted lamb and unleavened bread, and at this time Jesus takes the bread and gives thanks for it. It was typical for Jesus, as a faithful Jew, to offer God thanks or praise before a meal—he did the same when he broke the bread for the five thousand earlier in Luke.

We who are in Christ of course have much more to thank God for than the bread alone, or than the Exodus of the Jews—we have our whole salvation for which to thank God! And so, as I have said before, some persons have called communion by the name of the “Eucharist,” from the Greek word for giving thanks.

Jesus breaks the single piece of bread in his hands, and distributes it among the Twelve.

These are the things Jesus *does* concerning the bread. But now we move into the marvel, the mystery of this moment, as Jesus speaks.

If you glance at Jesus’ final words in this verse, you will recall that what Jesus does in this upper room institutes a new practice for his followers: “Do this in remembrance of me,” he tells the Twelve. What this group of thirteen men experience in that room at that time was to be repeated over and over by the followers of Christ until he comes again. We, with all our brothers and sisters the world over, participate in communion regularly in obedience to this command: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

But just what is it that Christ has given us in the practice of communion? How is it a tool for our benefit? How does it maintain our gaze upon Christ and his gospel? For the answer, we have come to the first of all communions.

And Jesus begins with these history-altering words: “This is my body.”

When you and I come to the table of the Lord and take up the wafer, the same could be said over it every time: “This is my body.”

What are we to make of these words?

We will do well to begin with what Jesus did not mean by these words, and then move toward what he meant. And this will be wise because many Christians, and many unbelieving members of Christendom throughout the history of the world, have misunderstood these words.

So what do these words, “This is my body,” not mean?

They do not mean, “This piece of bread is literally, physically, substantially the very body of Jesus.” A simple reading of the text

with a dash of common sense should convince us of as much, since Jesus in his literal, physical, substantial body is present there at the first communion. He is the one breaking the bread. He does not disappear as soon as the bread is broken, as if he himself became the wafer.

This should be obvious to all, Jesus is not speaking literally. He is speaking figuratively—just as he did when he said “I am the door,” and “I am the vine.” He is not an actual wooden door, nor a literal vine attached to the ground. He is these things figuratively. And any natural reading of our present text would lead us easily to that same conclusion.

Yet I must mention this odd interpretation, of taking these words literally, because for many centuries many Christians thought them literal. The Roman Catholic Church which, before the Reformation of the 1500’s, was the dominant Christian presence in the West developed a doctrine on the basis of these words called transubstantiation. It is still the official teaching of Catholicism today.

Transubstantiation is the teaching that when mass—what we would call communion—is practiced by a Catholic priest, the wafer becomes the literal, physical, substantial body of Christ. The timeless Savior is in fact resacrificed as it were each time the ceremony is performed. And believers must eat this actual body of Jesus as one part of their salvation. Of course, it is an unbloody sacrifice—the wafer, even after it is elevated, still looks and tastes just like a wafer, as though it had not changed at all. But transubstantiation teaches that those are accidents of bread, whereas the substance of the thing is at that point truly Jesus’ very body.

The priest repeats our Savior’s words, “This is my body,” and now the bread is believed to be Jesus’ literal body.

This is a sad misunderstanding of the text. Jesus never meant this—again, when he first uttered these words he sat, in his literal and physical body, right in front of the Twelve. They were not eating his body; he himself was eating the bread with them, and he was not eating himself!

When the German monk Martin Luther broke away from the Catholic Church in the 1500’s, in what we now call the Reformation, he knew that the Catholic view of transubstantiation

could not be right. It was a human tradition, that is all. But Luther did not leave the Church far enough in his thinking on the Lord's Supper—he came to teach a doctrine called consubstantiation.

According to Luther, though the bread is obviously not the actual body of Jesus, the actual body of Jesus must nonetheless be present somehow when we celebrate communion. And so, he argued, Jesus' literal body is present "in, with, and under" the bread. And when his co-reformer Ulrich Zwingli challenged Luther on this unusual view, Luther asserted with his typical fire, "This is my body!" The body must be there, he believed.

He too was wrong. "This is my body" does not mean transubstantiation or consubstantiation.

What then does Jesus mean when he breaks the matza and hands its pieces to his friends, saying, "This is my body"?

The "is," as we've already said, is not literal but figurative. "This bread represents my body." Jesus is like a door, is like a vine. And this bread is like Jesus' body.

The most remarkable parallel to what Jesus means here occurs in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus had just multiplied bread for a vast crowd, and they came back to him desiring more bread. And to awaken them from their worldly slumber, Jesus replied with a shocking statement: "I am the bread"—"I am the bread of life."<sup>2</sup>

He explained with these words:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 6:35.

<sup>3</sup> Vv. 53-58.

Taken alone, these words might seem to teach an eating of Jesus' literal body—that's how the first hearers took the words, and so they stopped following Jesus.

But although Jesus is using a strong metaphor in these words, he makes himself clear throughout John chapter 6. What does it mean to eat Jesus' flesh? Is it eating the wafer of communion as though it were really Jesus' flesh? No. We eat Jesus' flesh when we believe in him. It is faith, not chewing with the teeth.

Here is verse 29: "This is the work of God, that you *believe* in him whom he has sent." Here is 35: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever *believes* in me shall never thirst." Verse 40: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and *believes* in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." Verse 47: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever *believes* has eternal life."

Everything that Jesus claims will happen to the one who eats his flesh, he claims will happen to the one who believes. So we conclude, Jesus is using the image of eating his flesh as a figure of speech, as a metaphor or picture of believing in him, and so sharing in his life by faith.

This is one half of the reason we call our celebration "communion"—for in it we by faith commune with Christ, we share in his life, as if we had actually ingested him and by means of his nourishment been given eternal life.

This means there is nothing magical in the wafer of communion itself, just as there is nothing magical in the waters of baptism. Yes, very special things take place when one is baptized, or when we participate in communion. God is present in unique ways and willing to manifest himself in power, to confirm the facts that these outward signs point to. You may well find burdens removed, temptations thwarted, fears eased, hope kindled, faith renewed at the time of these ordinances—but this is because at this time our minds are fixed upon Christ and his work, and our faith is directed consciously toward him.

Without faith, the sign of communion is only a sign. It points, as Jesus says in our text, to the cross: "This is my body, which is given for you." If you do not in your heart believe in Christ and in the giving of his body for sins, then you are only looking at a signpost

in the road. You are yet dead in your trespasses, and the wrath of God remains.

But if you believe, then communion is meant to strengthen your faith.

The Lord knows that we are weak, and so he has provided for us a regular reminder of the key thing: the gospel of Jesus Christ, his giving of his own body on the cross so that we, partaking of that sacrifice by faith, are redeemed, are given eternal life.

And since we are so easily distracted by our senses, the Lord has given us an event that requires our senses. We too take the bread, like Jesus did, in our hands; we feel it. And we chew it in our mouths and taste it. And when we do this in faith, our eyes fixed upon the substance of what this sign signifies, then we have cleared out our cluttered minds and souls. We remember our forgiveness, our acceptance in the Father's sight. That fact is impressed upon our minds as with a hot iron, in a way that cannot be ignored or forgotten.

In communion, we commune with Christ—and with each other by the way, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, though that is a message for another day.

## The cup

We could say so much more about the bread, and should the Lord permit we will, each month when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, say something more about it. I have only begun to elaborate on its beauties and its uses.

But in our short passage for today there is an entire other world opened up to our view, and we need to consider it now. It is the other half of communion—we have considered the bread, and now we must consider the cup.

See again verse 20: "And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'"

Jesus took this cup "likewise" by offering thanks over it as he did with the bread—the parallels make this clear. It too is part of the Eucharist.

The red wine which fills the cup is a symbol of Jesus' blood, yet that is not what Jesus points out at this point. He directs our

attention to something his blood accomplishes, rather than his blood itself.

The cup represents “the new covenant in my blood”—inaugurated by his blood.

You know of course that your Bibles exist in two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word “testament” means “covenant”—so, you have the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

The Old Testament of your Bible is primarily about God’s relationship with his people Israel, a relationship defined by a covenant, the old covenant. This covenant was made between God and Israel at Sinai through Moses, so we speak of it as the Mosaic Covenant. It contained promises on the part of the two parties—God promised to bless Israel, and she promised to be faithful to him and to keep his law.

This first covenant was inaugurated in Exodus 24 where, after offering animal sacrifices, Moses “took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’”

What then is Jesus doing at the supper of our text?

He is fulfilling the promises of the prophets that, though Israel broke the old covenant, God will yet prove faithful to his people by bringing about a new covenant, through the blood of a sacrifice. This was foretold in Jeremiah 31:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I

will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.<sup>4</sup>

And the author of Hebrews, after quoting this very prophecy, adds, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete.”<sup>5</sup>

Brothers and sisters, this is why you and I are not bound by the laws of the Old Testament. You are permitted to eat pork and to sow your field with two types of seed and so forth. The Law was a yoke none of our fathers could bear; it exposed their inability, showed them that they could not work their way to God. It was part of the old covenant, intended to point us to the new.

And here at the Last Supper, Jesus shows that when his blood is poured out on the following day, the new covenant will finally begin. No longer are animal sacrifices necessary; no, they are fulfilled in the one sacrifice of Christ for all time.

## Conclusion

This is what we remember when we celebrate communion—the bread of Christ’s body that, by its death, gives us life; and the cup of Christ’s blood that brings us into an unbreakable covenant relationship with God.

This act of communion is exactly the gospel, reenacted before our eyes month after month. And when we partake of the bread and cup in faith, the clutter is moved out of our souls. We come back to center.

The Lord’s Supper is not a sacrifice that we offer to God, but the sacrifice he has given, as our text tells us twice, “for you.”

Whatever else your fears, your anxieties, your concerns, your interests and distractions, they are passing in nature and will disappear in time. But what this ordinance represents stands for all time as the central act of history and our one great hope. And it is *for you*.

If you have eaten Christ’s body and drank of his blood by faith, you are accepted by God and can never die. This is the main thing.

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<sup>4</sup> Vv. 31-34.

<sup>5</sup> Heb. 8:13.