

Memorial Day Every Week

Luke 22:7-20

If you find yourself vacationing too far west this second Saturday in August to make it back for our Corn & Doggy Roast, you might wish to check out the National Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa. Attracting real hobos as well as hobos-for-a-week, the event draws around 30,000 people. Spectators vote for their favorite hobo and hobo-ess. The elected king and queen are rewarded with flowing robes and tin can crowns. For people who are ordinarily disrespected, belittled and feared the red carpet is rolled out. Flaws are forgiven. Outcasts are welcomed with open arms.

Every week, a similar event takes place here. Christians, jaded by the world, are invited by Jesus Himself to be reaffirmed as His beloved friends simply by remembering and re-proclaiming His death. As our national Memorial Day tradition encourages us to honor lives that were spent to secure and defend freedoms we so easily take for granted, each Lord's Day is a Memorial Day that compels us to remember the death of Jesus and the ultimate freedom from sin and death that He secured. At this Table and at others like it around the world, Christians remember the death of Jesus.

Our observance of the Lord's Supper finds its origin on the night before Jesus died. He and the Twelve were gathered to observe an ancient Memorial Day Feast, the Jewish Passover. Centuries earlier, the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. God called Moses to lead them out, but Egypt's Pharaoh would not free them. Through a series of plagues, God convinced the king that freeing the Israelites really was the thing to do. Every Passover celebration from that time until this night looked back to the tenth and final plague when God sent His destroyer to slay every first-born male in Egypt. Israelite families were spared from this horror. The blood of a lamb marked the doorframe of every Hebrew home as a signal for the destroyer to spare that household.

We all benefit from the discipline of deliberately recalling times when others sacrificed for our betterment. A little boy was captivated by the photographs of various servicemen hanging on a particular wall in the church. He asked the preacher why they were there.

The preacher explained, "Those are young men from this church who died in the service."

The little guy answered a bit nervously, "Which service? 9:00 or 10:45?"

Our Memorial Day honors the nation's fallen. For the Jews, the sacrifice appeared to be only a lamb, but that lamb was a mere symbol of one final Passover Lamb from heaven that could truly turn away God's wrath. Israel's Passover commemorated one of the most important moment in that nation's history, but on this night before Jesus died, a turning point occurred for all who count themselves His disciples. A new memorial was established, one that found its meaning in the death of Jesus. The blood of countless lambs across the centuries found final meaning in the blood of God's Lamb. Jesus' death would serve for all time as the substitute that protects His people from God's wrath.

Unbelievers are perplexed. What does this strange ritual mean? In fact, some churches hide the ritual from the larger assembly so as not to confuse spiritual "seekers." What we must guard against is that the meaning of the ritual does not escape us. Intellectually, that is unlikely. We can always recite the meaning of Communion when quizzed, but our hearts can miss the meaning and with it, the blessing. How does one safeguard oneself from missing the meaning of the Lord's Table?

I. Repentance unto Readiness Is Critical (7-13)

⁷Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.
⁸Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover."

⁹"Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked.

¹⁰He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, ¹¹and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' ¹²He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there."

¹³They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

A. Preparations for the Passover Meal Were Meticulous

A few weeks ago, we considered Peter's and John's assignment to "make preparations." After being led to the proper place by the man with the water jar, they had only a few hours to purchase a flawless lamb and take it to the overcrowded temple grounds. The lamb would be slain and offered at the altar. Part of the lamb was reserved for the sacrifice. The rest was wrapped in the skin and returned to the two Apostles. Before sunset, the actual start time of the Passover, the lamb was to be roasted. The Passover meal would be eaten that evening. Before sunset, our boys still had to round up wine, unleavened cakes, bitter herbs and the *charosheth*, a paste of crushed fruits.

One ritualistic preparation not mentioned in this text but that Paul develops would find a family scouring the house to purge it of every speck of leaven (or yeast), which was a symbol for evil. Jesus and the Twelve were pilgrims to the feast. Residents of Jerusalem often rented the upper levels of their homes to such out-of-towners for the observance of Passover. That provided some relief to Peter and John. It is likely that the homeowner had his servants "de-leaven" the house as part of providing a "furnished" room. In addition to the house being cleared of leaven, "furnished" suggests that ornate rugs draping the couches upon which they would recline were also provided.

These were the typical preparations, but from the outset of creation, other preparations were being made. God become man and lived a flawless life. This qualified Jesus as a perfect Sacrifice whose death could cover the sins of others. Sin brought death to this world, but Jesus came to defeat death. John the Baptist identified Him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), and Jesus never tried to avoid the cross before Him. It was His life's agenda. He was called by God to be "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

B. Are Our Preparations for this Morning's Feast Any Less Vital?

Life moves at break-neck speed. How can we ready ourselves for this Table of Remembrance?

The ritual of purging the house of leaven was critical to the Passover celebration because it represented the purging of sin from the home. We cannot purge our own lives of evil. We are utterly dependent on the blood of Jesus for that, but we can and we must learn to acknowledge the holiness of the occasion as well as our ongoing need for God's cleansing. The Lord's Supper is wasted on those who approach it unrepentantly. This is a time to face our sin and to call it what God calls it.

We do not confess our sins to inform God of things He does not already know. The primary meaning of “confession” is “acknowledgement”. To confess is to agree with God’s assessment of the sin in our lives. Only then can we turn from it (or, repent.) It is seldom the sins that we call “sin” that keep us at an arm’s length from God. It is the sins we justify. It is also the sins we wish to avoid, which prevent us from opening up to Him in prayer (as though we can hide the matter or even overcome it ourselves.) No wonder the human spirit so often remains empty as it pursues bigger and better worship experiences. We resist the practices of confession and repentance.

A man and his wife were having problems and were giving each other the silent treatment. The next day the man realized that he would need his wife to wake him at 5 A.M. for an early flight. Too stubborn to break the silence first, he wrote on a piece of paper, “Wake me at 5 A.M.” The next morning, he woke up. It was 9 A.M., and he had missed his flight! Furious, he was about to rip into his wife when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed. It said, “It’s 5 A.M., wake up.”

I suspect that the most common disagreements we have with God as to what is and is not sin involves our relationships. He says, “Forgive.” We claim, “Justifiable Resentment.” Of course, that is hardly the only area where we resist calling our sin as God sees it. Have you accepted some prejudice, some sensual lust or some material idol simply as a part of you? There is nothing that you have ever done, thought or felt that God cannot heal, but if you will not agree with Him as to the sinfulness of your sins, or if you resist facing them, you are giving yourself no room to experience His healing.

Confession to God is often prerequisite to communion with Him. Jesus died for sin. That is what this meal is about. Without a resolve to confess our sins and to turn from them, we observe the ritual, not harmlessly, but at our peril. We partake in “an unworthy manner” as Paul put it, which is tantamount to raising our glass and toasting whatever judgment that sin we cherish carries.

... Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. – 1 Corinthians 5:7, 8

II. Remembrance unto Renewal Is Crucial (14-20)

A. The Passover Feast Was All about Remembering

To this day, the typical Jewish family comes together after sunset for the Passover meal. The father thanks God for the feast day and for the wine, praying over the first of four cups. The first course of greens and bitter herbs is followed by the *Haggadah*. A child asks the meaning of all this, and the father explains the symbols in terms of the exodus from Egypt. They all sing part of the *Hallel*, six psalms filled with utterances of praise and thanksgiving for God’s deliverance. A second cup of wine introduces the main course. A third cup, the “cup of blessing,” accompanies another prayer. Everyone sings the rest of the *Hallel* and drinks a fourth cup of wine. Passover is as much of a worship service as a dinner. In fact, every course is an aid for remembering.

Jesus and His disciples constituted a household that night in the upper room. We cannot know who got to ask, “What does all of this mean?” but we know Who led this makeshift family in worship. I suspect that everything seemed like a regular Passover meal before Jesus began to deviate from the familiar script. The Twelve heard things never before uttered at a Passover celebration.

¹⁴When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. ¹⁵And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

¹⁷After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

¹⁹And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

²⁰In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

The meal took a fairly normal course before Jesus began to *ad lib*. He took one of the four cups and told the Twelve to share it amongst themselves. This would be His last time to partake of the fruit of the vine with them until His kingdom was established. Then, He broke the thick unleavened bread, distributed it and said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

The Twelve had always heard that this meal was in remembrance of a great deliverance thousands of years before. But now, His disciples were no longer to reflect upon that great national exodus out of Egypt in the days of Moses. For as long as they lived, they were to regularly remember the day that Jesus died for them. But, before any of this could really sink in, Jesus took another cup and announced, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

A covenant is a contract. The Law was a covenant between God and the Israelites. The Law defined what sin was and spelled out its penalties. But a provision was also made. When the law was broken, a sacrifice could be offered. The wrath of God could be diverted when a sinner thoughtfully made his required sacrifices. Needless to say, many sacrifices were offered, but no amount of sacrifices could remake the heart of a sinner so that he would ever be genuinely clean again. These sacrifices only anticipated the new covenant in Jesus' blood by which God makes us over again. In His eyes, we are innocent. New blood sacrifices are not required day after day or year after year.

"For Christ died for sin once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." -1 Peter 3:18

B. The Lord's Supper Remains All about Remembering

We can be dupes for mindless ritual.

A little girl asked her mother, "Mommy, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?"

Her mother said, "I think it allows the meat to better absorb the spices, but ask Grandma. I learned it from her."

So the little girl found her grandmother, "Grandma, why do you and Mommy cut the ends of the meat off before you cook it?"

Grandma answered, "I think it allows the meat to stay tender because it soaks up the juices better, but why don't you ask your Nana. I learned it from her."

The little girl climbs up in her great-grandmother's lap and asks, "Nana, why do you and Mommy and Grandma cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?"

Nana answered, "I don't know why they do it. My pot was too short."

This church observes the Lord's Supper weekly. Other groups have reached different conclusions about the proper frequency of the observance. I cannot imagine severing this Table from the mainstream of Christian worship and relegating it to some special day. Be that as it may, we can miss a bigger point. Communion is a time to remember Jesus' death as well as the new covenant with God that His death secured. We can speak all we want of the horrors of a crucifixion. The real question is, "Will my remembrance of Jesus' suffering deter me one iota from acts of deliberate self-will? Will it nurture my love and gratitude for Him Who died in my place? Will I live like a child of God?"

It was sad reading an article by one Captain Cloud, a former Grand Duke of Hobos, criticizing the National Convention in Britt. On the occasion of the 100th gathering, he concluded that the commercialization of the convention had ruined it. Predictably, it had become an event in and of itself. Local merchants catered to the tourists. Once again, real hobos became the recipients of suspicion, harshness and disrespect. It became something other than what it was intended to be.

Our only burden when we approach the Lord's Table is to remember the meaning Jesus gave to it. This Founder of this feast will never forget His love for the outcasts, but we can approach without properly engaging our hearts and minds. In Corinth, the wedges that naturally divide people were driven even deeper because the Lord's Supper became just a thing they did. This was no one's stated intent. It was just the natural consequence of letting it become something other than what it was intended to be. Then, the Lord's Supper was observed in the midst of a common meal, and the event became about "who ate first." But, why should that surprise us one bit? Whenever the spiritual meaning that God Himself gives to a thing is lost, natural human selfishness and sinfulness will rush in to fill up the void.

Because Jesus established it, the Lord's Table is the perfect occasion to agree with God about your sins. It is the ideal time to face personal areas of rebellion, idolatry and selfishness and to be done with them. Why? It is because communion is a time when we deliberately rivet our hearts and minds to the very heart of the gospel. We come face to face with the cross. What better opportunity to examine your life than this one which Christ has already provided for His people?

Ultimately, we will face our sins. Sadly, that is often after we find ourselves weeping from holes that we have dug for ourselves because we have been too proud or too distracted to come to the Table and examine our lives, confess our sins, receive God's grace, and move on to better things.

What a unique opportunity for the Lord to keep the soil of every believer's heart freshly tilled - this memorial that recalls the day that all unworthy sinners were rendered worthy through the blood of the eternal Lamb of God. Take! Eat! But, do so in remembrance.

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