

**“Repent: Turn to Jesus and Receive a Special Assurance of Your Forgiveness”**

The relay runner races on as fast as he can, and then as he runs up to his teammate, they begin their coordinated process of passing the baton. It is a tricky process to try on the one hand to rush as quickly as possible to keep the momentum going around the track, but on the other hand to be as careful as possible that the baton doesn't drop and disqualify you from the race. But that is how important the baton is in the relay. It has to make it around.

Tonight we've heard St. Paul passing the baton in a way. No, he is not running a relay race. This baton is something even more important, vastly more important. Listen again to what the apostle says: **“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed...”** Paul received the truths concerning the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, from Jesus himself. And Paul in turn handed those truths to the Corinthians. And now the relay race continues. What Paul received from Jesus and passed on to the Corinthians has been passed on to you and to me. As we prepare to celebrate a most sacred meal, the Lenten encouragement that we have heard throughout the season—the encouragement to repent and to turn in faith to Jesus—continues. Brothers and sisters: Turn to Jesus and receive a special assurance of your forgiveness.

If ever there was a church in need of a refresher course on celebrating Holy Communion, it was the church at Corinth. The Corinthians had spoiled their celebration of the Lord's Supper. Instead of a feast of salvation, they had turned it into a celebration of self-indulgence. Paul even went so far as to tell them that they were no longer celebrating the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20). They were celebrating, but not what Christ had instituted. Instead, the way that they misused the supper left them feasting at a buffet of drunkenness and debauchery.

Yes, the Corinthians were even drunk at the Lord's Supper. It seems that the congregation had a regular meal, called an *agape* feast—that is, a love feast—that either included or was immediately followed by the Lord's Supper. But this feast got out of hand and many of its participants were overindulging in wine.

But that wasn't the only issue, either. The so-called love feast and Holy Communion with it were marred by poor manners and selfishness. Some began to view even this special supper as just another chance to fill their stomachs. And the same divisions that plagued the church in other areas were found on display in this area as well. Add it all up, and the Corinthians were not celebrating a Holy Communion—a coming together and sharing in God's goodness—they were celebrating an unholy disunion. And their lovelessness, divisions, and self-indulgences were being brought right to the Lord's altar! We even read about this situation **“That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep”** (1 Corinthians 11:30). They had turned the Lord's Supper into the Corinthians' Supper, and they were not blessed because of it. Their actions had both spiritual and physical consequences.

So how did Paul handle the drunken debacle that the Corinthians were mistaking for the Lord's Supper? He handed to them the precious truth about God's gift. He turned them to the very words of Jesus about his supper: **“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”** With these clear words of Jesus, Paul turned them away from their man-made agendas and appetites. “This isn't your supper. This is the Lord's Supper. This is God's gracious gift, not a toy to tinker with. It proclaims Christ's sacrifice for you. It is not an opportunity to cut loose with friends.”

The Lord's Supper is Christ's gift to us. In his Supper, Jesus blesses us unworthy sinners with the gift of himself. And he does so in a most wonderful way! Jesus' own words assure us that when we receive the bread and the wine, we also receive his true body and blood for the personal forgiveness of our sins. Jesus says, “This IS my body” and “This IS my blood.” Christ's body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and the wine. How is this possible? It is not apart from a miracle. I don't need to figure out the how. But I know that it is true because the Son of God who does not and cannot lie has told me it is so. The one with whom all things

are possible provides what he promises. The Lord's Supper has not been passed on to you for logical speculation or scientific investigation. It has been passed on to you for your comfort.

And we need Jesus' comfort. You come tonight just as you are. You come with sins of your youth and sins stockpiled in life's closet, open sins and secret sins, little sins and large sins, accidental sins and willful sins, sins of commission where you have done what you shouldn't and sins of omission where you have left undone what should have been done. And Jesus comes as he is tonight: the friend of sinners, the Savior of sinners. He comes to you tonight and every time you visit his table "in mouth and soul to make you whole." Turn to Jesus for this special assurance of your forgiveness. Know for certain that just as surely as you stand at the table, just as surely as your ears hear the words of Jesus' institution, just as surely as you taste the bread and the wine, so surely do you receive the body and blood of Jesus, the body and blood given and shed on the cross to save you from your sins. There is no more personal or intimate way of bringing Christ's forgiveness to us as individuals than here in this supper where he gives sinners himself. And where Jesus is there is forgiveness and life and salvation!

It is such a gift that it is no wonder that Satan attacks it so fiercely. He works hard to get Christians to drop the baton when it comes to the Lord's Supper. He convinces them to listen to their own reason and reasoning power instead of to the plain words of Jesus. He invites them to second guess what Jesus says. What does he really mean by it? He tempts them to trust only the physical and observable and to insist that Jesus body and blood cannot be in more than one place or be present for such a span of time. He lures them to believe that eating and drinking can't possibly be that important.

But Jesus says, "This is my body" "This is my blood" "given for you...shed for you." It is a gift for the soul that we receive with our mouths. And the true body and blood of which we speak are the true body and blood that belong to the eternal and infinite Son of God. This evening once again Jesus gives us his body and blood for our forgiveness and for our strengthening. He gives us, his children, the gift of himself.

And such a great blessing ought to be treated reverently and responsibly. Paul concludes this section, **"Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup."** Because Jesus' body and blood are really present in this meal, we need to consider whether we are partaking in a worthy manner.

So what is an unworthy manner of receiving this sacrament? Well, it cannot mean that a person is unworthy because he or she is a sinner. It is saddening to think of those who felt that their sins were too big to allow them to come to the Lord's Supper. It is saddening to think of the guilt that needs forgiveness that stays away from the very thing that offers and gives forgiveness. If we needed to be worthy on our own before receiving the sacrament, no one could. If we needed to be worthy on our own, no pastor would be worthy enough to serve us!

But St. Paul doesn't speak about unworthy people receiving the sacrament. He speaks of people receiving it in an unworthy manner. He is speaking of people receiving it in a way that doesn't fit with its intent, its purpose, or its goal. Holy Communion is given for our forgiveness. It is received in an unworthy manner by those who don't acknowledge their sin or have any desire to leave it behind. It is received in an unworthy manner by those who treat it not as the Lord's Supper, but as their own supper in any way. It is received in an unworthy manner by those who don't trust that, as Jesus says, his true body and blood are received there, that is, by those who explain or rationalize away and say that he meant something other than what he said.

Instead, I will examine myself before receiving the Lord's Supper. I will ask myself whether I recognize my sinfulness and my need and desire for forgiveness. I will look in my own heart for whether I realize that Jesus offers forgiveness in this meal along with his true body and blood. I will ask whether I am united in faith and in confession with those with whom I would eat it. And if and when I am able to answer all these questions with a "yes," I will joyfully go to the Lord's table to feast on the forgiveness given and offered there. I will rejoice that he instituted it for me, just as he died for me and lives again!

Much more than a relay baton, the Lord Jesus has passed on to us a precious treasure in his holy supper. It is one that we will want to treat with care and pass along to others. It is a treasure to which we will want to turn again and again as we do this evening in celebration of its institution. Turn to Jesus for this special assurance. It is yours always through Jesus. It is yours only through Jesus.

The text: 1 Corinthians 11:23–28 (NIV84)

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” <sup>25</sup> In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” <sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

<sup>27</sup> Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.