

First Sermon For The Day Of The Lord's Supper

The Holy Sacrament

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Source: Martin Luther, "First Sermon for the Day of the Lord's Supper," Matthias Loy, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's House-Postil, or, Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year*. Volume 2. Two Volumes. Second Edition. (Columbus, Ohio; J. A. Schulze, 1884), pp. 1-15. Translation by Prof. E. Smid.

Editor's Note: As is the case with other of Luther's sermons, I have excluded unnecessarily provocative language that typified the controversies of those times (by all parties). As necessarily, I have summarized the main points within square brackets. In other cases, omissions are marked by three consecutive periods (ellipses, i.e., "...").

1 Cor. 11. 23-26.

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread : and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat; this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood : this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till He come.

According to a time-honored usage, more people come to the Lord's Table at this season than at any other time during the year. This fact, together with the urgent necessity that on a stated day the doctrine of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper he plainly taught the people from the pulpit, prompts us to consider now the words of St. Paul, which you have heard read in our text. From these words we learn that this Sacrament was in no wise instituted or introduced by men, but by Christ Himself. In the night in which He was betrayed He instituted it for His disciples, yea for all Christians, that it might be unto them His Testament, His parting gift, full of great comfort and blessing.

We Christians should therefore cherish this Testament as a treasure of the highest value,

should love it dearly, and should make use of it cheerfully and frequently, deriving from it much joy and consolation, thus fulfilling the will of our dying Lord and Saviour. His command in this regard is plain; He enjoins upon us the use of this Sacrament. True Christians will never disregard this command, but will readily and often find comfort in its fulfillment, even until that day when the Lord, who Himself gave us such a Testament, shall again come from heaven to judge the quick and the dead.

[For a time, the words of St. Paul kept people from this Holy Sacrament: "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself."¹ But this we misunderstood,

¹ The full context of this quotation shows the error: "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of

which was our fault, and in this we neglected the great and sacred treasure.]

A similar calamity is now threatened by the Sacramentarians, who bring dangerous controversies into the churches by their false doctrines concerning the Sacrament; for they teach the people that in it we have naught but bread and wine, thus depriving the Christians again of the comfortable assurance of grace, which Christ has connected with this Sacrament and given to His Church. We must therefore avoid these false teachers, else they will drag us once more into the bitter woe which we endured under the Pope, when it had become customary to preach of this Sacrament in such a manner as to produce but fear and trembling, so that people refused to participate in it, and lost all the gladness and grace which this holy food can bring.

We were told that we must first confess all our sins, and do penance for them, ere we could approach the Table of the Lord. To do this was, however, an impossibility. We were conscious of our sinfulness and feared to partake of this food, judging ourselves unworthy of it, so that no one could commune with a cheerful heart. Every one mistrusted this benign institution, fearing it to be a source of death, or a means of "eating damnation to himself," as St. Paul expresses it. Surely that was a most lamentable state of affairs, when the people became averse to the most blessed Sacrament.

[This problem was made worse by the requirement, under threat of excommunication, that everyone must receive Holy Communion at least once a year. This forced reception made receipt of Communion even worse due to the mis-interpreted quotation from St. Paul.]

...

Tell me, is it not an exceedingly cheering word, when the Lord tells His disciples so graciously and kindly : "Take and eat, this is my

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. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself." 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 (NIV)

body ; take and drink ye all of it; this cup is the New Testament in my blood, this do in remembrance of me," and do it not only once, but repeatedly until the end of time? Our blessed Lord desired, by means of this Sacrament and Testament, to keep alive in us our remembrance of Him and our faith. He therefore instituted His Supper as a constant memorial of His death, through which we are delivered from our sins and eternal misery.

In this we can see naught but condescension and love; there is no anger here nor vengeance; yea, parents could not deal more kindly with their children. Christ's chief desire, as He Himself declares, is that we shall not forget Him. It is His earnest intention that our whole being shall be impressed with the memory of His passion, that we may never forget how He died for us upon the cross and rose again from the dead. It was His purpose that coming generations should know Him as their Lord, that they might be saved by Him; and therefore, also, He earnestly enjoined upon Christians to instruct the young in His word, and to keep His remembrance sacred, that those who come after them may also be induced to worship Him in the congregation of believers, and own Him as their Christ and only consolation. For this reason the Lord made His Testament, and we ought never to weary in the remembrance of it. Surely, when true friends meet it is no burdensome task for them to sit together in conversation throughout the night, forgetful of sleep and rest; why then should we grow weary of learning and of preaching the precious truth that Christ the Lord is our Redeemer ?

But the Sacrament of the Holy Supper was instituted not merely that by its observance Christ might be honored; for He can truthfully say: I need not thy praise, I am the Son of God, whether thou glorifiest me or not; but also and especially for the reason that we stand in need of such a Testament and Supper, and that we might be benefited by it. Listen, to the words with which He gives the bread: "Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you," and with which, soon after, He gives the cup: "Drink ye all of it; this cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you, for the remission of sins."

This declaration is the Christian's most effective consolation; for he who really believes that Christ gave His body for him, and that He shed His blood for the remission of his sins, cannot despair, no matter what sin, the world and the devil may say. He knows that this treasure where-with his sins have been cancelled is far greater than all his iniquities.

But the consolation contained in this declaration stands not alone; Christ really gives us with the bread His body to eat, and with the wine His blood to drink, as the words plainly state, in spite of the devil. Each one that eateth and drinketh, receives for himself in this Sacrament the body and the blood of Christ as his own especial gift. Yea, this is the very truth which we must firmly hold: Christ suffered and died for me also, and not alone for St. Peter, St. Paul or other saints. To assure us of this truth Christ gave His Testament; for through it each one individually receives the body and the blood of Christ. It is therefore proper to say that through this Sacrament we obtain forgiveness of sins; for where Christ is, there is forgiveness of sins; here we have His body and blood, as the words declare; therefore he who eats and drinks, believing that the body of Christ was given for him, and that His blood was shed for the forgiveness of his sins, must surely have this forgiveness. Yet, it is not the act of going to the Sacrament, nor the eating and the drinking, whereby we gain this divine grace ... but it is the faith in us which believes the words of Christ when He says: I give you my body, given for you into death, and give you my blood, shed for you for the remission of your sins. Thus will our reception of the Sacrament tend to the strengthening of our faith, and the chief and greatest blessing of this Testament will be ours.

Another benign effect of this Sacrament is the union, in faith and doctrine, which it produces among Christians, and which is so very necessary. To bring about true union among Christians it is not sufficient that they come together to hear the same preaching and the same word, but they must also meet around the same altar to receive the same food and drink.

One may, perchance, hear me preach the word and yet be my enemy; but if one partakes of the Lord's Supper he, by that act, makes for himself, individually, a public confession of his faith, although there may be hypocrites now and then; and thus a more reliable union, between the Christians who unite in this Sacrament, is formed than if they merely had the Gospel preached unto them, though this may also cause them to be of one mind. Those of the same faith and the same hope unite at the Table of the Lord, while those of a different faith stand aloof. Agreement in the Church is very desirable, and there should be no divisions in matters of faith. This union was properly called, by a Latin term, *Communio*, a communion, and those who would not agree with other Christians in faith, doctrine and life were called *Excommunicati*, as being different in their belief and conduct, and hence unworthy to belong to the congregation of those who are of one mind, lest they might produce dissensions and schisms. By means also of the Holy Sacrament Christ establishes this union among the little company of His believers.

Our old teachers entertained beautiful thoughts in regard to this when they said: Christ took bread and wine for His Supper to indicate that, just as many distinct and separate grains of wheat, when ground together, make one loaf of bread, so we, being many, are one bread and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread, though each one is a distinct person and separate individuality, 1 Cor. 10. And again, as many clusters of grapes and many little berries, each distinct and separate, when pressed together form one delicious juice, one wine, thus it is with the Christians who have the same faith, the same confession, the same love and hope of salvation.

This was the interpretation of our fathers, and they were not mistaken in it. The Holy Sacrament has the effect to firmly join the Christians together in unity of purpose, doctrine and faith, so that no one should stand alone, nor have his own doctrine or belief. The devil is sorely vexed at this, and is busy in endeavoring to destroy such unity and agreement. He knows full well what injury results to him, if we are united in our confession and adhere to one Head ; hence he endeavors

to tempt us, here and there, with false doctrines, with doubt, with lying insinuations in regard to the Sacrament and other articles of faith, hoping to cause dissensions in the Church.

It is true, offenses will come, yet it behooves us to guard against them, so that the devil may not entirely separate us. If one or the other insists on differing with us in the doctrine of the Sacrament, or in other parts of our faith, let us, who agree in one confession, be so much the more united in our faith in Christ Jesus; yea, let us be in this as one man. This, however, is only possible where there is unity in doctrine.

This, then, is an additional benefit of the institution of the Holy Supper. Our Lord gave us this Sacrament to bring about unity of faith, of doctrine and of life. The external differences in the stations of life will, of course, continue; there is no equality there. Each one has his own duties to perform, which differ vastly from each other. A farmer leads another life than a prince; the wife and mistress of the house has other duties to perform than the maid-servant. Such distinctions must ever remain in our every day life. But in Christ there is neither male nor female, no prince nor tiller of the soil: they are all Christians. The Gospel, the promise and faith which I have, belongs equally to prince, peasant, woman, servant and child.

Such equality is indicated by the Holy Supper, since in it we all receive the same food and nourishment, whether we be man or wife, matron or maid, father or child, ruler or subject. If we have the same faith we are heirs of the same heaven, though I may reside here and another in Jerusalem, and we are personally total strangers to each other; for we both have the same Lord, in whom we believe and hope for salvation. This union of faith causes the devil immense displeasure, and he is ever on the alert to sunder our communion; for he knows how his influence is thwarted when Christians firmly agree in faith and doctrine. Against these attempts of Satan, Christ instituted this Holy Sacrament as a means of uniting the believers.

From this it follows that this Sacrament is needed by every individual; and if we disregard it

and fail to praise the Lord, and so sever ourselves from the communion of Christians, the loss will be ours, and will become greater the longer we abstain from the Sacrament. It is true, indeed, that Christ has no need for Himself of our compliance with His ordinance, nor of our remembrance of Him; it is to our own advantage to do so; for if we are not in communion with Christ we are in communion with the devil, and will suffer great injury. Even if Satan cannot harm us externally, we still will carry with us in our bosoms our bitter foe.

We ever have near us an advocate of evil, whether we eat or drink, whether we are asleep or awake, even our own flesh, the old Adam. He accompanies us to bed and arises with us in the morning; he pleads unceasingly and eloquently, with the fixed purpose of estranging us from Christ and His Gospel. This advocate of evil whom we constantly carry about with us, and whose habitation is in our hearts, is ever intent on exciting us to become rich and great in the world, and sways us with the delusion that we have neither occasion nor time to go to the Sacrament. If we heed his lying counsels we will grow colder and colder in our love towards Christ and His gifts; yea, though we might even daily hear His word, this cunning tempter within us will bring it to pass that we do so merely outwardly, while in reality our devotion is a sham, and our thoughts are engaged with the business of this world. Show me the avaricious man who grows weary of his passion! Is it not rather true that the covetous man becomes fonder and fonder of his idols from day to day, cherishing and pursuing with eagerness avarice and usury? The same is true in regard to other sins. The lewd person delights in his unchastity; he thinks and speaks about it with evident glee, and indulges in his wicked passion more and more. Such are the results of the instructions which the old Adam gives: they lead to destruction.

Christ desires to counteract the sinister influence of the old seducer within us, who would fix our attention alone and chiefly on temporal things. Christ instead would have us be mindful of eternity, of Himself, our Saviour, who died for us upon the cross. He would fain have us see our

foolishness, so that we would gladly come unto Him, weary of our depraved life, exclaiming: O Lord, we know how sinful we are, and how unable to resist the allurements of evil, therefore we cry unto Thee for help; enable Thou us to shun the world and to love Thee truly. We stand in daily need of such remembrance of Christ in opposition to this pernicious advocate, this old Adam within us, who clamors about our ears day and night, hoping to plunge us, beyond all help, into the cares and pleasures of this world.

To counteract this wicked purpose, Christ instituted His Holy Supper, that its celebration should remind us of the life to come. He takes the bread and the cup, and tells His disciples to eat and to drink, saying, "This is my body and blood, given for you, and shed for your sins," at the same time exhorting us to remember Him, and not to run merely after the things of this world, as we generally do. In the Holy Supper He gives us an opportunity to receive Him, to come unto Him, and to remember Him; for in Communion the benefit is ours; He has no need of it.

I doubt not that the people would fairly crowd to the Sacrament if money, or earthly gifts, were distributed there; yea, the blind and the lame would rush thither, regardless of intervening rivers and mountains.

We ought, indeed, to be ashamed of ourselves, when we think what a miserable set we are, always ready to run after money and perishable things, while we are so slow, yea, so averse, to come to the Table of the Lord, where a heavenly gift, even His body and blood, awaits us. Here, in this Testament, a precious treasure, salvation and happiness, is to be conveyed to us; but, alas, we flee from it as from poison or some terrible punishment.

How comes it that we prize gold and silver more than this magnificent, precious treasure? The devil is the instigator of this our choice; he influences our old Adam, who is naturally backward and indifferent towards things eternal, and cares more for that which is temporal. This ingratitude and carelessness is very sinful, yea, much more than can be imagined; nevertheless we are often guilty of it, else we would seek more dili-

gently the kingdom of heaven and its blessings, which are not transitory, like the earthly property, of which we are so much enamored. Let us never forget that we must in due time render an account of our behavior in this regard.

The Lord's Supper admonishes us not to be ungrateful any longer, but to realize, together with other Christians, with whom we confess our faith and share this most Holy Sacrament, what great blessings Christ bestows upon us through it, and how we should therefore serve and praise Him as our Lord, who not only died for us, but also gives us, as nourishment for our souls, His body and blood. He desires that we should remember Him whilst we receive it to the strengthening of our faith and the preservation of unity among the Christians.

Whosoever refuses to comply with the command of the Lord, deserves to fall into the hands of false teachers, who preach to him that in the Lord's Supper there is naught but bread and wine.

God grant that we may retain the true faith and have a living interest in this matter. We have the doctrine true and pure again, we understand why we go to the Holy Sacrament, to remember the Lord with praise and thanksgiving for His mercy and kindness, and also to receive therefrom consolation and strengthening of our faith. Let then our hearts be firm and not doubt; let us be assured that God is pleased with us, and will not punish us for our sins, since Christ gave for us His body and for us shed His sacred blood. Thus will we proclaim the death of our Lord aright and fulfill His command: "Do this in remembrance of me."

In view of this, judge for yourself what kind of Christians those persons are, who stay away from the Lord's Supper one whole year, yea two, three and even more years? Such people are surely possessed of the devil; they either have no knowledge of their sins, and consequently take no thoughts how to be relieved of them, or else they are so wrapped up in the affairs of this world that they entirely forget the life to come. This is dreadful indeed. Whosoever professes to be a Christian and desires to live in accordance with his profes-

sion, must come repeatedly and often to the Holy Sacrament. Its blessings are very necessary for the Christian, as we have shown above.

This, however, does not apply to those who cannot receive the entire Sacrament as it was instituted by Christ, and hence refrain from participating in it at all. Such people must be satisfied with the word of Christ and the assurances of His

Gospel, until God in mercy gives them an opportunity to enjoy again the Holy Supper in its entirety and purity, as Christ instituted it.

May God give us grace, through His Holy Spirit, that we may ever receive this blessed Sacrament to the glory of Christ, and to our souls' salvation. Amen.