

A Pledge of Discipleship

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 ³ For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

The world has not seen many armies as disciplined and powerful as the Roman army. The secret of the Roman army lay not so much in superior weaponry, as it did in the ruthless discipline and endurance of the soldiers. The kind of iron-fisted determination they had lay in the way they trained: rigorous marches, daily weapons training, and punishments for poor performance – rations, beatings, or the worst – decimation. If a unit was to be punished, they would be divided into groups of ten, and then one of those groups chosen by lot. Out of that group of ten men, they would again draw lots, and the soldier who was chosen was to be clubbed to death by the other nine, who were then put on barley rations themselves. A ruthless, pitiless, merciless discipline within, made them a nearly unbeatable army without.

One of the ways of securing this unbending loyalty was something called the *sacramentum*. The *sacramentum* was an oath or vow that each soldier took. It made him 'given to the gods', so that his life was forfeit if he broke his promise. Soldiers pledged this oath of loyalty to the Senate, or to the Emperor, and it meant they were subject to harsher punishments and penalties than regular Roman citizens. He had put his life on deposit, dedicating himself wholly to the Roman people.

Within the Roman empire, Christianity was spreading. And before long, early Christian writers were calling baptism and the Lord's Supper *sacramentum* – sacraments. But understand, long before later Christians gave the word unbiblical connotations, early Christians were comparing these two ceremonies to what Roman soldiers did.

Why would they do that? What is the similarity between the Lord's Table and a Roman's oath to be loyal to Rome and its gods? Actually, there is much similarity. In using that term, the early Christians were seeing one aspect of the Lord's Table. What is that aspect? The Lord's Table is a pledge of discipleship. Not only is it a feast of worship, not only is it a meal of fellowship, but the Lord's Table is a pledge of discipleship. It is a seal on our commitment to live as followers of Christ.

How does the Lord's Table do that? We've seen how the symbols teach us worship – grace given, Christ-centred, Word-saturated, and faith-nourishing. We saw last week how the elements remind us that we partake of Christ, and partake of common status, and partake of each other. Let's consider how the Table is a pledge of discipleship.

I. We Remember Our Death With Christ.

²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood."

Not often do we think that this meal is a meal of death. The elements are all about death. In what other context can you imagine the host standing before you, taking one of the pieces of food and announcing – this is me – my body, broken, cracked – for you. Now, eat it. And then again – this red fruit of the grape, this is blood. My blood. To be poured out and spilt for you. Now drink it.

Misunderstood, it is almost gory. And it was misunderstood by the early opponents of Christianity who accused them of cannibalism. Because this is a meal about death. Whose death? Christ's death.

But it is not an ordinary death. It is a death performed for us – the partakers of the meal. We receive His death. In fact, not only is it a death *for* us, it is a death *with* us. To become a Christian is to become one who embraces Christ's death as your own death, and Christ's life as your own life. The day a man becomes a Christian is the day he admits he is separated from God and it is his own fault, and then believes that God has made a way back through Jesus Christ and His work on the cross. But he does not merely accept it like some consumable product to be thrown away. He accepts it like a cyanide pill. I realise my life up to now has been lived for myself, and that is wrong. I turn from it. I realise that life deserves to die. So die it must. I trust in Jesus, His work of dying for me. Let my sins, and their penalty, and the whole old self-life die with Jesus on the cross. May His life and His righteousness now become mine. May His resurrection life now be my new life, a life lived to love God.

And when we partake of the Lord's Supper, those elements of death say that – we have died with Christ. We do not belong to ourselves any more. We are eating death, as we eat life.

The Lord's Supper is for disciples who have already died with Christ. What is the first sign that Jesus gave for identifying yourself as a disciple?

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

Baptism. Baptism is before communion, because baptism identifies you as a disciple, and the Lord's Table celebrates and expresses that you are a disciple. That is why baptism is a one-time event, while the Lord's Supper is ongoing. Baptism is the graveside service, the Lord's Supper is the family reception meal afterwards.

Acts 2:41–42 states the proper order even more clearly: “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” In these verses, individuals believe (“received his word”) prior to their baptism. Only after baptism did these new believers become part of the community, participation in which included “the breaking of bread,” a common New Testament designation for the Lord's Supper.

Almost no churches in Christian history have allowed unbaptised people to partake of the Table. The ancient church manual, the Didache reads, “You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord's name.”

The biblical way for the church to know if people profess to be Christians is not if such people claim to have prayed a prayer, but if they have testified publicly of their faith in Christ through believers' baptism. If they have had a public funeral service for their old life, then they are invited to the feast of new life in Christ. You book your seat at the family table by submitting to believer's baptism.

The old life is gone. Julius Caesar, when attacking Britain, got his troops up onto the cliffs of Dover, and told them to look down. There in the water, they saw their ships burning – he had ordered them set on fire. There was no possibility of retreat. No choice but to advance and conquer.

So with us. No going back. That life is gone.

How is the Lord's Supper a pledge of discipleship? It reminds us that we have died with Christ. We pledge allegiance to the Lamb, because we are dead and our life is hid with Christ in God. Our lives are no longer our own. But that then leads to the second way it is a pledge of discipleship.

II. We Remember Our Life in Christ

When we partake, not only do we say that we have shared in His death, and our old life is over, we testify that our new life is Christ. He is our life. We live on Him and in Him.

Galatians 2:20 ²⁰ *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

To eat death is to say – I live every moment on Christ. I died with Him, my life is not my own. Throughout Jesus' ministry there were people who wanted to use Jesus for their own ends. They wanted him to be their political King, or the one who endorsed their school of thought, or the one who agreed with their works-righteousness. And Jesus keeps throwing out these hard demands, these radical calls to follow Him. He says things like, if you want to come after Me, your love for everyone else must seem like hate. If you want to follow Me, you must daily deny yourself and live as dead to the old life. If you want to follow me, you must be willing to forsake all your goods. If you want to follow Me, you cannot look back. If you want to follow Me, you embrace lack and difficulty. To one man He says, sell all your goods. To another He says, lead the dead bury their dead.

Why did He keep doing this? He wanted to emphasise: following Me is not just a little adjustment to your life. Following Me is not just another religion. To come to Me is a new life altogether. The old passes away, the new comes. You are born again, regenerated, and there are new loves, new priorities. The old dies and must be continually mortified. The new is born and must be continually grown.

This is discipleship. This is the picture at the Lord's Table. We live on Him. He is our life, for we no longer live. We love what we love because of Him.

When James Clavert went to the Fiji islands as a missionary, the captain of the ship said, "You shouldn't do this. You and your companions will be killed." Calvert replied, "Sir, we died before we came."

But you know, when we speak like this, along comes what Bunyan called Mr Worldly-wiseman. Mr Worldly-wiseman came to Christian and saw all his struggle and advised him to cool it – to go to Mr Legality, and Mr Civility to cure him of his burden. And so today we find plenty of similar folks standing with a fire-extinguisher ready to quench the hot zeal of true discipleship.

"No, we can't give that much time. No you can't expect us to be that committed to evangelism and discipleship. No, this is ridiculous. All things in moderation. Not this fanatical, hysterical kind of religion."

Isaac Watts didn't seem to think so. That's why he wrote, and we heartily sing, as if we mean it, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small; , Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Many of us Christians in the West have a kind of spiritual thermostat. Just like thermostats are there to switch things on or off depending on the temperature, so we have this kind of inner thermostat that measures if perhaps we're getting too worked up in our religion. And I'm all for guarding against hysteria and excess, but the problem is, we set that thermostat by looking at the world, and its priorities, and what it deems a normal life, and what it regards as healthy and average, and acceptable.

He who marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widow in the next. It is a princely evil to embrace the world's idea of religious commitment, the very same world that crucified Jesus for being a radical, fanatical trouble-maker.

So Jesus says that hot and cold is one thing, but the lukewarm Christian He will vomit out of His mouth. The contemptible thing about spiritual apathy is this: for the most part God blesses us with joys innumerable: life, food, shelter, clothing, family and friends, His Word and church, money and to spare. He says – I give you richly all things to enjoy, simply receive it with thanksgiving. He blesses and blesses. So we are not dealing with a stingy Father, a hard taskmaster, a tyrannical God. This is the God of abundance who does not withhold any good thing from His own. The contemptible thing is when He comes to us and calls us to give up one of those blessings – maybe even temporarily, maybe permanently. He comes and calls us to sacrifice a portion of the time, of the comforts, of the pleasures He has given us. He says give up some of those for my sake, and great will be your reward in heaven. And then we say, “No, I will not. These are mine. And if You love me, you would not demand it of me. And if any man or church calls me to, they too do not love me.” From Heaven's perspective, how does that Christian seem? Like someone filled with balance, moderation? I suggest they seem to Heaven like the spoilt child who will not share one of his hundreds of toys, simply because it has been asked for.

Believer, what if your Saviour had treated His mission like so many Christians treat Him? What if He had approached the cross and decided it was too radical? What if his love for His earthly mother had stopped Him from going to Calvary? What if His normal love of stability and comforts had led him to say – better to live and work in Nazareth and see whom I might influence here?

I'm glad my Saviour was radically, passionately committed to His Father's will, and His love of sinners. Woe to the world of sinners if Jesus had possessed the spirit of moderation that so many tout as wisdom and balance. I praise my Saviour for His zeal for me, and how then should I respond to Him?

I gave My life for thee, My precious blood I shed,
That thou might ransomed be, and raised up from the dead
I gave, I gave My life for thee, what hast thou given for Me?
I gave, I gave My life for thee, what hast thou given for Me?

Spiritual apathy is not fitting for a true disciple. When Christians – blood-bought sinners, condemned criminals rescued from hell at the price of the slaying of the innocent Jesus – Christians complain that God demands too much of them, it is not love and faith talking.

Listen rather to the Resolutions of Jonathan Edwards:

6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.

22. Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can, with all the power; might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.

When we gather around the Table, love speaks to us. The clear reason of God's logic speaks, and it says, **2 Corinthians 5:14-15** ¹⁴ *For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; ¹⁵ and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.*

It's an oath of discipleship. It's our *sacramentum*, our pledge to follow and keep following. Because when we eat, we say – He died for me, and I died with Him. His life is now my life.

How long do we do this for?

III. We Remember Our Future in Christ

²⁶ *For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.*

The Lord's Supper is not a permanent institution. As we sometimes say, each Lord's Supper is one more, but it is also one less. We are to show His death till He come. What happens then? Then the striving is over. Then the mortifying of the flesh is over. Then we are clothed anew. Then the simple Table is replaced with a Feast, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

That should have two effects on us. One is a goad behind us. We are reminded that when our Lord returns, there is a day of judgement. God will reckon with His servants.

2 Corinthians 5:10 ¹⁰ *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

The goad says, let me not be found spiritually sleepy and lethargic when He returns. Let me not waste my stewardship. Let me not bury my talent, and be found on that day with more confessing to do. Nothing wrong with that healthy fear. We should fear displeasing Him. We should fear losing rewards. We should fear wasted time. We should fear the Lord's return catching us in a state of spiritual slumber.

God puts a time-limit on it because He wants to remind us that time is not an infinite resource we have. Paul tells us to redeem the time, Moses tells us to number our days. This pledge of discipleship pushes us on to faithfulness.

But it also pulls us and draws us. It fills us with hope. The return of the Lord means there will be an end to the suffering, the injustice, the rejection, the physical pains, the confusion, the persecution. Every time we lift up the cup, we agree, it will be worth it all, when we see Christ. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed.

There's coming a day when we will be seated around another Table, decked in royal wedding garments, and a king with a face like the sun in its noonday brightness, and with joy overflowing, will lift up the cup he last had with his disciples, and announce a welcome, and a victory.

So until then, we follow. We spend and are spent. We are hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. Why? **2 Corinthians 4:10** *always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.*

The Lord's Table is a Feast of Worship. Christ-centred, grace-given, Word-saturated, faith-nourishing. It's a meal of fellowship for people who partake of the same Christ, the same status and one another. And it's a pledge of discipleship. You died for us, we died with you, our life is Your

life, and will be, even till Your return.

How central should the Lord's Table be in our worship? How central should it be for our fellowship, and our discipleship?