

We Eat

Good to see y'all this morning. If you have a bible, go with me to **Acts 2**. We're gonna be looking at a lot of different passages this morning, but we'll at least start off there. If you're new, welcome. To **catch you up**, for the past month or so, we've been in a series called *Church Matters*. Basically, we're taking some time to talk about *why* we do *what* we do, specifically here on Sundays. We've been saying that it's easy to just go through the motions on Sundays. Sometimes, we show up because that's what we've always done or that's what we feel like we're supposed to do. But we said that over *time*, that can lead to *forgetting* the importance of it all. So we're taking some time to *resist* that tendency—primarily by discussing, in detail, some of the things we do here on Sundays and why we do them.

So in light of all that, I've got a **question for you** this morning as we start out. My question is *of all the things we do when we gather here on Sunday, which one would you say is the most central? What is the one thing that all the other things revolve around here on Sunday?* If you had to pick just one, which would it be? Is it the *sermon*? That seems pretty important, right? Is it *singing*? Is it *giving*? What is the most central thing we do here on Sundays? This may come as a surprise to some of us, but at least for the first 1500 years or so of church history, **the answer to that question was communion. The table, the bread, and the cup has historically been the most central piece of the church gathering together.**

For instance, take a look with me there in the passage I had you turn to: **Acts 2**. We've referenced this passage at least once already in this series. It's an important passage because, best we can tell, this is the first semi-detailed description we get in the bible of what the early followers of Jesus *did* when they met together. So I want us to read the passage together and **see if anything stands out** as we do. Acts 2, starting in v. 42 and going through 47:

[42] They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. [43] Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. [44] All the believers were together and had everything in common. [45] They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. [46] Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, [47] praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

So there's **a lot we can glean from** that passage. If you've been around City Church very long, you know we circle back to this passage again and again, and really do our best to model a lot of our church after it. But for our purposes today, I want to point out one thing that actually comes up *multiple times* in that passage. In v. 42, it says they "devoted themselves...**to the breaking of bread.**" Then *again* in v. 46, it says "**they broke bread** in their homes..." and then in the same sentence again, it says they "**ate together.**" Three different times it talks about them *eating* together. Anybody else find that interesting? **Anybody else, like me, who likes eating find that encouraging and affirming and spirit-filled?**

Further, **in the Greek language** (the language Acts was originally written in), if you wanted to **emphasize something—call the reader's attention to something—you simply repeated it.** Here in Acts 2, the author *repeats* the idea of them eating together twice. He says it three times in six verses. He does that because he wants to *emphasize* its *importance*. **Other people have noticed this emphasis** too. Commenting on this very passage in Acts 2, here's early Christian historian **Andrew McGowan**:

We lack the details of these elements, but one thing in particular is surprising, relative to more recent patterns of worship: Christians met for meals. A distinctive meal tradition—here called the "breaking of the bread"—was not a social event additional to worship, or a programmatic attempt to create fellowship among the Christians, but the regular form of Christian gathering [...] They were not merely one sacramental part of a community or worship life but the central act around or within which others—reading and preaching, prayer and prophecy—were arranged.¹

The central piece of the early church gatherings was a *meal*. We also see this in **places like 1 Corinthians 11**, where Paul is discussing the weekly meeting of the early Church and starts off by saying, "**So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat...**"² Not "when you gather to *sing*..." Not "when you gather to hear *preaching*..." **Not even "when you gather to hang out in the lobby and drink Likewise Coffee..."** even though we all know how important that is, and I can only imagine it greatly increases the quality of our **Gatherings**. But *Paul* doesn't say *any* of that. *Paul* says, "when you *gather to eat*..."

Now, it's here that you may be thinking **"okay Kent...but you said the most important part of the gathering was communion.** It seems like everything you just mentioned is just talking about eating a *meal* together. Those aren't the same thing." Okay, but here's what you need to know: for *most* of the Church's history, **they were the same thing. Eating a**

¹ McGowan, Andrew. *Ancient Christian Worship*, p. 19.

² 1 Corinthians 11:33

meal together was communion and communion was eating a meal together. To be sure, certain elements of the meal (the *bread* and the *cup*) had particular significance. But it was all done in the context of a *meal* at a table.

See, when *you and I* think of *communion*—what some people call *Eucharist* or “the Lord’s Supper”—chances are, we think of a piece of bread, or maybe a tiny little wafer or cracker, and then a sip of wine. Or if you’re *Baptist*, a *tiny* shot glass full of Welch’s grape juice. But here’s the issue with that. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is trying to correct a misuse and abuse of communion. And *part* of the problem is that people are getting *drunk* off of the communion wine.³ ~~Which thankfully, is not a problem we’ve encountered yet at City Church, so congrats to us on that.~~ But think about it: if people were getting *drunk* off of communion wine, that *either* means people were downing *quite a few* plastic communion cups...*or* they were practicing communion a little differently than us. Right? And we know from history that it was the latter. **When the early church “took communion,” it was a meal they were eating.**

When the early Church got together, they didn’t primarily think of it as a concert, or a TED talk, or a religious service to observe—they primarily thought of it as a *meal* that they participated in. ~~We find out in the New Testament book of Jude that they actually had a name for it: they called their weekly meetings “love feasts.”⁴ Which I’m all for using biblical language for things—but if it’s good with y’all, we’re just going to leave that one alone. “Love feasts” kind of sounds like something else when translated into English, and we don’t need the city of Knoxville getting the wrong idea about what kind of church we are.~~ But still, **notice the language there in Jude: meeting together as the church was a feast. Not a bite of cracker and a shot of grape juice—a meal. A big, celebratory meal, eaten together with other followers of Jesus.**

So **where am I going with all this?** Does this mean we need to demo our stage, get rid of the speakers, cut the sermon down to about 10 minutes, and just build a massive, room-sized table for all of us to eat at every Sunday? Honestly...that sounds kinda great to me. I wouldn’t hate it at all. But it also sounds *expensive* and kind of difficult to pull off. In fact, that’s one of the primary reasons communion *became* what it is *today*: as many churches *grew* under the Roman empire to a few hundred or a few thousand, it became *very logistically difficult* to organize that many people around a table and afford to feed *them all*. So as much as I would love to switch it up and do things exactly the way they used to be done, I don’t know that we could feasibly pull that off each Sunday.

³ See specifically 1 Corinthians 11:21.

⁴ Jude 12

But here's why I walk you through all of that history of communion. *One*, it's never bad to learn a bit of church history. But *two*, because I do think **there are certain inherent dangers in the way we practice communion here on a Sunday, that I at least want us to be aware of**. I don't think the way we do communion is *wrong*, but I do think it can lead to us forgetting some things *about* communion that are very important. It can cause some mental shifts to happen that do damage to the *reasons* we share this meal together. And I at least want us to be *aware* of that so that we can guard *against* it.

Put another way, I think when we practice communion the way we do, it's easy to view it in **a very flat way**. We walk to the table, we quickly think about something involving Jesus' death (maybe), we take the bread and juice, we go back to our seat—and that's all there is to it. But the truth is **in the Scriptures, eating this meal together has a lot more layers to it than that**. There's a little more going on than that. So I want to spend the rest of our time this morning unpacking some of those things. I want to lay out for us four “dimensions” of communion, from the Scriptures.⁵ And **the hope is that by understanding all these dimensions of the meal, we can see it with much more depth and meaning than it would have otherwise. And maybe that can restore a lot of the centrality that this meal has always had for followers of Jesus**. Make sense?

Okay. The **first dimension** I think we see in the Scriptures about the communion meal is this. It points us...

Backward

This is probably **the aspect** of communion that *most* of us are the **most familiar with**. As Jesus ate the “last supper” (which was the very *first communion*) with his disciples, **Luke 22** records this—we'll put it up on the screen:

And he [Jesus] 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.”⁶

“Do this in **remembrance** of me,” Jesus says. **When we, as his disciples, eat, Jesus wants us to think backward and remember something**. And while the disciples at the time didn't fully *understand* what Jesus was alluding to in saying that, it would soon become very evident. **Jesus was talking about his own body, that would be torn to shreds on the cross, for them and for us**. When we eat of the bread, and drink of the cup, Jesus wants us to remember *that moment* in history when *that happened* to Jesus. Paul, writing about this very thing in **1 Corinthians 11**, puts it like this:

⁵ I owe much of this language and outline to a fantastic teaching by John Mark Comer, available [here](#).

⁶ Luke 22:19

*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*⁷

When we take communion, we are remembering (and proclaiming) Jesus' death on the cross. And not just the death *itself*, but what that death *accomplished* for us. Some of you may know that when Jesus gathered with his disciples to eat that meal recorded in Luke 22, they wouldn't have thought of that meal as a new tradition, but rather a very, very old one. In their minds, they were eating something called the Passover meal: a Jewish tradition going back hundreds and hundreds of years.

And the reason that's significant is because the Passover gives color and detail to what Jesus was communicating about the meal he ate with the disciples. The Passover commemorated a time when God was enacting judgment on the nation of Egypt for their sin, injustice, and oppression. But in the *midst* of that judgment, God told the *Israelites living* in Egypt that his wrath would "pass over" them, hence the name *Passover*. And in the same way that God's wrath "passed over" the Israelites and landed on the Egyptians—on the *cross*, God's wrath "passes over" us and lands on Jesus.

Now, God's wrath is not an easy topic for many people to discuss, but it is a necessary one. The reality is that sin makes God *angry*. And listen: when understood correctly, that shouldn't actually *bother* us; if anything, it should bother us if God *didn't* feel that way about sin. If God could look at violence and exploitation and racism and sexism and objectification in our world—if he could witness all of that and remain *indifferent* towards it, that would not be a God worth worshipping. If God was not *bothered* by the brokenness of our world, there would be nothing particularly good about him.

But the Scriptures tell us that when God witnesses all of those things, he is *angered* by them. Now, that isn't to say that God is the type to just fly off at the handle. God isn't *easily* angered. The Scriptures actually teach us that he is *slow* to anger.⁸ Anger is not his *default posture*. It's not his *nature*. His *nature* is love. He *overflows* with love. But *love*, when it witnesses injustice and wrong, naturally becomes *anger* at the thing *causing* the wrong. Think about it: if I told you I *loved* my wife, but was always *indifferent* to anything that threatened to *harm* my wife—you would rightly question whether or not I *truly loved* her. Love, when it witnesses injustice and wrong, rightly becomes angry at the thing causing the wrong.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:26

⁸ See Exodus 34:6-7.

Now, here comes **the uncomfortable part for us**. Quite often, **you and I are actually the ones causing the wrong**. We are often the ones creating the injustice. We might *bristle* at that because we as humans are really good at convincing ourselves that we're not all *that* bad. But it's *true*, whether we want to believe it or not. We have sinned, and that sin *angers* God. **But at the cross**, what we celebrate is that God, in his love, chose to *pass* over us with his wrath, and allowed it to fall *on* Jesus. **Isaiah 53** puts it like this:

*Surely he took up **our** pain and bore **our** suffering, yet we considered him **punished** by God, **stricken** by him, and **afflicted**. But **he** was pierced for **our** transgressions, **he** was crushed for **our** iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was **on him**, and by **his** wounds we are healed. We **all**, like sheep, have gone **astray**, each of us has turned to our **own** way; and the Lord has laid on **him** the iniquity of us all.⁹*

That is what happened at the cross. So **when we take communion**, we are **celebrating a Passover of our own**. We're celebrating that God's anger and wrath for our sin, though we *deserved* it, did not land on us; but instead landed on Jesus. And because of that, we get to experience life with God forever. Life in the light of his grace. And when we come to the table to eat, we're commemorating that. Calling that to everyone's attention. *Celebrating* that. *Proclaiming* that. We're remembering Jesus' body and blood, broken and poured out for us, for our sins. We're looking *backward* to what happened on the cross.

That's the first *dimension* of communion: *backward*. But we *also* look, second...

Forward

Jesus also says **something really peculiar** in that Luke 22 passage—something that often gets overlooked. Take a look at verses 14-18 on the screen, and I'll put the part I want you to notice in bold:

*When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it **again** until it finds **fulfillment in the kingdom of God**." Then he repeats something similar in regards to the cup, v. 17: After taking the **cup**, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink **again** from the fruit of the vine **until** the kingdom of God comes."¹⁰*

⁹ Isaiah 53:4-6

¹⁰ Luke 22:14-18

So when we eat this meal, we **don't just look backward**—we also look *forward*. We look *ahead*. Here in Luke 22, Jesus points *forward* to the day that, in his words, “the kingdom of God comes.” Now if you're newer to Jesus or to Church, real quick: here's what he's talking about. **Followers of Jesus believe that there is a day coming on the horizon, when God will make all things in the world back to the way they *should* be.** **Pretty much all of us—Christian or not—look at the world around us and agree that many, many things aren't as they *should* be.** Well followers of *Jesus* have this really *crazy, out there* belief that the *reason* things feel like they shouldn't be this way is...get this...that they *shouldn't be this way*. But we also believe that one day, God is going to do something about that.

And the bible uses **a lot of different imagery to describe the day** when that happens. But *one* of the images it uses regularly is that of a *meal*. Look with me, for example, at **Isaiah 25**, up on the screen:

*On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a **feast** (a what? A feast) of **rich food** (No McNuggets at this particular meal. A feast of *rich* food...) **for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine** (doesn't say whether it's a red or a white—I'm hoping for red—but does say it's *aged*, so that's good. And then, just in case you doubted the *quality* of the food and drink) **the best of meats and the finest of wines**. And this next part gives us the *reason* for the meal...**On this mountain he will **destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations**** (so this is poetic imagery for the curse of death, and the fact that death and mortality seems to have impacted everything in our world for the worse. Isaiah says all of that hangs over humanity like a *shroud*—like a thick cloth. But, on *this* day in the future, Isaiah says, God will do away with all that...); **he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.**¹¹*

According to this passage, there will come a day for followers of Jesus when everything that haunts us and our world will be no more. Where *death* itself will be gone, forever. **And Jesus says that when that happens, he will celebrate with all of us over a *meal*. A feast.**

Now, here's **why all that matters** in regards to *communion*: it means that **when we eat this meal, we're not just looking backwards to the day when Jesus rescued us. We're also looking forward to the day when God rescues the world.** **Life is hard, amen? When we come in here on Sundays, at least a lot of us are very aware of the**

¹¹ Isaiah 25:6-8

“*sheet* that covers all people.” We come in very aware of all the things in our world that just aren’t as they should be. Very aware of the things in our *hearts* that aren’t as they should be. Things in our *family* that aren’t as they should be. Things in our *relationships* that aren’t as they should be. We come into this room every Sunday very aware that the version of the world we live in *isn’t* the world God intended.

But **when we come to these tables** to eat, we are remembering that *that* world has an *expiration date*. That it *won’t* be that way forever. And that **one day, those of us who know and follow Jesus will sit at a table with him eating the best of meats and drinking the finest of wines.** There’s a day *coming* when Jesus makes all things back to the way they should be. And on that day, we will *celebrate*. We will *feast*. **So even though we often call Jesus’ meal with his disciples the “last supper,” in reality, that’s not what it is at all. It’s wasn’t the *last* supper; it was the *next-to-last* supper. The *last* supper is the one we all eat with Jesus on the day he makes all things new.** And when we eat *this* meal, we look forward to *that* one.

Third, when we eat, we also look...

Inward

In **1 Corinthians 11**, the passage about communion we’ve referenced several times already, Paul says something really interesting. We’ll put it up on the screen:

*So then, 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.** [So] **Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.**¹²*

Before participating in communion, Paul wants each of us to “examine” ourselves. He wants us to look *inward*. In context, he’s calling out wealthy members of the Corinthian church who were going ahead and eating without considering or waiting for poorer members of the church to arrive. Which in Paul’s mind, is a sin *against* those poorer members of the church, and therefore against God himself. It’s also a radical misunderstanding of the meal itself.

“So,” Paul says, “everyone ought to *examine themselves*” before eating. In other words, **we should consider whether or not our *lives* reflect the significance of the meal.** We should think to ourselves: this meal is about Jesus redeeming me *out of my sin*. Does my *life* reflect that reality? This meal is about how God’s hatred of sin was so

¹² 1 Corinthians 11:27-28

intense that he gave his only son to rescue us out of it. Does my life reflect that posture towards my *own* sin? This meal is about how Jesus is the only source of true life, true joy, true healing, true contentment. Does my *life* echo that reality? Before coming to the table to eat, Paul wants us to *examine* our lives *in light of* the meal we're eating.

Now **don't read this wrong**. Paul isn't insisting that we need to achieve some level of moral perfection in order to participate in communion. In fact, the entire point of the meal is actually that none of us *are* perfect, and therefore needed *Jesus'* perfection in our place. So Paul isn't demanding *perfection* here, but he is insisting on *alignment*. He's saying that **if we are flippantly approaching the table while parts of our lives and hearts are willfully misaligned with the teaching of Jesus, something is wrong and first needs to be addressed.**

So **as I approach the table**, if there are aspects of my life that are at odds with the meal I'm about to eat, I should first do the necessary work of confessing, repenting, and seeking the Spirit's help to realign those things with the message of Jesus. And *then*, I *participate* in communion as a *celebration* of the fact that I am accepted fully and completely, *despite* my sin, because of Jesus' work on the cross. Communion is meant to make us look *inward*.

And then **finally**, communion should prompt us to look...

Outward

This is perhaps the aspect of communion that I am **most concerned about us forgetting** as modern Americans. Just by the nature of the way we take communion, I'm nervous that we would start to see it as an isolated, individual practice. *I get out of my seat, I walk to the table by myself, I grab my individual piece of bread and juice—maybe even the presealed, individually packaged one—I say my prayer to my God, and I walk back to my seat by myself.* And a lot of this is just by virtue of how we have it set up. *So don't feel bad about that if you came by yourself today and don't know anybody—it's not wrong, I just think over time it can become dangerous.*

And here's why. The meal we see disciples sharing in the Scriptures, was **necessarily communal**. It's literally in the name itself: *commun*-ion. Think of how Jesus took the meal. He sat at a table with twelve others, took a *singular* loaf of bread, and he *broke* it into *pieces* to distribute to his disciples. Paul even says *this* in 1 Corinthians:

*So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.*¹³

Maybe the most destructive way we can lose the significance of this meal is to see it only ever individualistically. Meals *in general* were meant to be eaten with others. I know that's easy to forget in a day and age where many of us eat half of our meals in a car by ourselves or at our coffee table with Netflix playing in front of us. But meals, historically, were meant to be *communal* activities. This is why we encourage our *LifeGroups* to share meals together, as regularly as they can. It's meant to push back against this individualistic mentality when it comes to eating. But it also reminds us of who and what we are. A *group* of people that God has saved and redeemed and rescued, and then knitted together into a *family*.

So **how can we push back against** this individualistic mentality when it comes to communion here on Sundays? I've got **two suggestions** for us:

- 1. Take communion together.** What if, after the teaching, when we went to the table, we went *with* others? I know many of y'all *sit* near your LifeGroup here on Sundays. So you're already near one another in the room—what if you just all came to the table together? Plan beforehand, or just have a secret hand signal or something you do, and all come and take communion together. Maybe you could pray together while or after you eat. Maybe you could thank Jesus for giving you that community to live life alongside. Maybe you could remember together his death on the cross that makes all of that possible. **What if we just had groups of people coming to the table and taking communion together?** I would love that. **The sides and halls of our sanctuary would be so congested and crowded...and I would love it so much.** So consider taking communion together with others. LifeGroup or otherwise. *Spouses. Bigger circle?*
- 2. Consider any conflict that needs to be addressed.** **If the gospel has both individual and communal implications, it would follow that this meal celebrating the gospel has both individual and communal implications,** right? So in theory, when we approach the table, we shouldn't *just* be thinking “is everything in *my life* aligned with the gospel?” We should also be thinking, “is everything okay between me and other people?” **If I'm going to the table to proclaim God's full and free forgiveness of me, while knowingly withholding forgiveness towards someone in my life, that's a problem. If I'm celebrating God's grace, but my heart is filled with resentment—that's a problem. If I'm celebrating God's wrath “passing over” me, but allowing my wrath to settle on somebody else,**

¹³ 1 Corinthians 11:33

that's a problem. So when we come to the table, we ask, not just "am I okay?" but also, "are all my relationships *reflective* of what this table communicates?" And if not, we stop and do that work first.

Look with me at **Matthew 5**, and we'll wrap up here. This is Jesus speaking:

[23] "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar (an ancient form of worshipping God) and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you (you realize there's conflict, tension, bitterness, between you and another follower of Jesus—here's what you should do...), [24] leave your gift there in front of the altar (stop what you're doing immediately). First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Do you see the importance here? The *urgency*? Jesus is saying that we can't wall off our worship of God from our love for each other. They go hand-in-hand. Such that God would prefer that if we are attempting to *worship*, while not fully loving or forgiving or pursuing our brothers and sisters, we should press pause, and go make that right. It's *that* big of a deal to him.

So today, as we approach the *table*—the thing that has been the center point of *worship* for most of the church's history...let's approach it in that same way. Let's look backward to the cross, forward to the new heavens and new earth, *inward* to ensure our life is aligned with Jesus...and *outward* to make sure everything is right between us and other followers of Jesus. *That's* what this table was meant to be.

Let me pray, and we'll come to the table to worship.