

Oath Added to Promise (Mat. 26.26-30.pt.4)

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<sup>26</sup> Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." <sup>27</sup> And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, <sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup> I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." <sup>30</sup> And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Introduction

We need to view the Communion Table in the context of communion with our risen Lord in the fullness of our lives. We have communion with Him daily and we need daily sprinklings of the water of His word. We commune with Him within the doors of the gathered church and we need a good weekly soaking in the word through faithful attendance to preaching. In continuity with these situations of fellowship with Christ, we communicate with Him and He communicates with us in a special way at the Table. Each time we have Communion, we return to the center of the center of our faith; we do this by preaching communion remembrances with distinct focus on Christ. The Lord's Table is like *a double soaking* in the word *additional* to what we have daily and weekly. To explore a little more regarding this additional aspect, our Communion topic for today is "Oath Added to Promise."

The outline unfolds in two points: coming to the Table in faith, and coming to the Table for the strengthening of faith. These points will help us develop the topic of oath added to promise.

1A. Coming to the Table in faith

To this point in this short series on the Lord's Supper, we have said nothing about the place of faith. What we should do now is look again at the words of institution ("This bread is my body and this wine is my blood" in Mat. 26.26-30) to see how coming to the Table *in faith* is an essential part of the enacted "parable" of eating and drinking. Faith emerges here in two ways.

1) First, a call for faith is in the Lord's invitation

In His invitation to receive the bread and wine from His hands, Jesus calls us to faith. As risen Lord, He is present with us at the Table through the word by the Spirit. Moreover, through duly appointed ministers of the gospel, the Lord Jesus invites us to partake of the bread and wine. **Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."** <sup>27</sup> And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you (26.26-27). Present at the Table, Jesus says to you, "Take, eat, and drink." In a word, He is telling you to *appropriate the benefits* of His body and blood, to take Him and appropriate Him as food and drink to sustain your life. It is here that John 6 relates directly to Communion.

**<sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.** <sup>52</sup> The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" <sup>53</sup> So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.** <sup>54</sup> **Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.** <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. <sup>56</sup> **Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him (51-56).**

This text raises some questions. How do you feed on the flesh of Christ and drink His blood? How do you receive eternal life and the promise of resurrection at the last day? Jesus answers these questions in the context in parallel verses about receiving eternal and resurrection life.

<sup>31</sup> **Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'** <sup>32</sup> Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> **For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.** <sup>34</sup> They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." <sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, **"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.** <sup>36</sup> But

I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (6.31-40).

The questions about feeding on His flesh and receiving eternal life have the same answer: you feed on the flesh of Christ, drink His blood, receive eternal life, and have the promise of resurrection glory *by faith*. Thus He says, **For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day** (6.40). That means that you spiritually partake of Christ by entrusting yourself to Him, submitting yourself to Him and His authority over you, acknowledging your need of Him, and recognizing your dependence on Him for the safety of your entire existence, body and soul, before Him forever. Thus, in the words of institution, our Lord calls for faith in His invitation to partake of the symbolic bread and wine. This brings us to another way that faith emerges in the sacrament.

2) Second, confession of faith is in the partaking

*During* Communion, the Lord is saying something to you and you are saying something to the Lord. In the symbolic eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ, you claim Christ as your very life, as your food and drink; He is more important than the food and drink that sustains your physical life on this earth. You make a confession of faith. You own Him as your very own Lord and Savior, as your prophet, priest, and king when you commune with Him in the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine *by faith*. Clearly, a call to faith and the fact of confession of faith are part of communion observance (it has this subjective side to it clearly).

Thus, we come to the Table in faith, and in our next main point, we will emphasize that we come to the Table for the strengthening of faith.

## 2A. Coming to the Table for the strengthening of faith

We already know that He promises the nourishing benefits of forgiveness and glory (Mat. 26.28-29), but we should not miss the specific connection between the promise of nourishment and faith. The promise must include His provision for all our needs. Therefore, *it must include the need we have to grow in faith*. He says, in effect, “Appropriate the nourishing food, partake of the gospel by faith, and I will nourish you by the gospel; I will sustain, nourish, and strengthen *your faith*.” After all, we live the Christian life by faith for Paul states, “the just *live* by faith” (Rom. 1.17). Thus, if Jesus sustains and nourishes us for life in our walk with God, then He must sustain and nourish the faith by which live.

Two ideas flow out from the fact that we come to the Table in faith for the strengthening of faith. One is that the sacrament is a means of grace. The other is that the sacrament is an additional word.

### 1B. Means of grace

Remember, the sacrament is a gospel sign not a miraculous event. The church does not dispense grace to the recipients at the Table. Administrators do not function as channels through which a miracle occurs, so that by blessing the bread and wine, God changes the elements into the body and blood of Christ. To be clear, ministers, pastors, and priests do not grant the forgiveness of sins. There is no magic here, no superstition, and nothing automatic.

Instead, the sacrament is a gospel sign that calls the people of God to partake of bread (not flesh) and of wine (not blood) by faith, *and in this way, God speaks, confirms, nourishes, and strengthens the faith of His people*.

According to Paul (Rom. 4.13), a gospel sign is also a seal, which means it is a confirming and assuring word. Therefore, our Lord does more than reiterate His word for our hearing; He uses faithful attendance to Communion as a means by which He sustains, confirms, strengthens, and deepens our faith. Thus, Communion is more than a sign that Jesus gives to the church; it is also a means of grace by which He nourishes the church. *Just as* we are nourished

by bread and wine physically so we are nourished by the benefits of the work of Christ *in a special way at the Lord's Table*. The sacrament is a God-given means by which the Lord strengthens our faith. In short, it is a means of grace. We need not shy away from this idea.

#### 2B. An additional word

Communion is an additional word, added to what we have in the gospel. This means that He adds the sign and seal of Communion to His gospel promises. He adds promise on top of promise. In the words of the writer of Hebrews, *He adds oath to promise*. Consider why He does this as we read the following text:

...when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." <sup>15</sup> And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. <sup>16</sup> For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. <sup>17</sup> So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, <sup>18</sup> so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us (Heb. 6.13-18).

These words apply to Communion in principle because the sacrament is a confirming word that God adds to His promises in the gospel. God's intention is to show something to us as heirs of His gospel promise. What does He intend to show us? He intends to show us **the unchangeable character of his purpose** (6.17). Therefore, He guaranteed the gospel by means of the sacrament as His oath. What then is the result? The result is that we now have two unchangeable things (promise and oath). We now have two forms of His promise (a twofold promise, gospel and sacrament) and thus the double impossibility that God would ever change His covenant purpose. Why then does God put these things together: promise and oath, gospel and sacrament? He puts these things together to give us **strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us** (6.18).

Therefore, the Lord Jesus instituted Communion with this great desire in His heart: to give us encouragement, even strong encouragement to hold fast *in our faith* as we journey into the future.

### Applications

#### 1) Preparation for Communion

What is the best way to prepare for Communion? What is the best way to come in faith for its strengthening? Specifically, knowing that we will have Communion next Sunday, what do you think you should do in preparation?

The best way to prepare for communion is to do nothing different. That is, communion observance is part of your normal walk with the Lord. If so, then you will not have some special time of confession before coming to the Table because confession is a daily matter. When confession of sin arises during communion, it does so as a by-product of your focus on the Lord Jesus. In other words, you prepare for communion by striving after godliness in fellowship with Christ living a repentant life. Thus, you come to the Table for a double soaking in the word within the context of communion with Christ in the word that you have day by day and week by week.

As we discussed last time, this double soaking of Table fellowship is qualitatively the same as the communion with Christ that we have *in His presence* daily and weekly. At the same time, we must emphasize the fact that in each situation (private devotions, family devotions, two or three gathering in His name, and gathering together at the Table, say, bi-monthly), the Lord Jesus is nourishing us in distinct ways. The unity of fellowship with the risen Lord argues for the interconnectedness of daily fellowship, weekly fellowship, and table fellowship.

In other words, if you let dust grow on your Bible all week long (with no sprinklings at least), then your ability to attend meaningfully to preaching will be weaker than it ought to be. You unavoidably set limits on what you can receive and absorb from the word. It is like trying to obtain sufficient food for your life by eating one meal a week. Your stomach will shrink and

limit your capacity to eat and drink. Your mind will shrink and limit your ability to comprehend. Your attention span will be like an unused muscle that has little energy for the important task of Christian listening. Good listening is a vital spiritual discipline.

What should we say about our busy schedules? Note that being busy, having so much work on your plate, will not change the effect. No matter how busy you are, that will not change the effect of neglect of the things of God. If you are too busy to set time aside for some sprinklings of prayer and meditation on the Scriptures, then you are simply too busy. You should not go to church with the thought that the Lord understands, so, everything will be just fine. No, the problem here is that you are putting all the ingredients in place for stunted Christian growth. You are asking the Lord to keep you healthy as a big baby. The unity of life, of the Christian walk, of fellowship with the risen Lord Jesus argues for faithfulness across the board.

The principle of faithfulness in the entire fabric of your life leads me to encourage you to use your pastor as a resource and a help, as a means that God has appointed. Your pastor is not a pope, but the Lord appoints pastors to help you learn the gospel. Use the pastor; use him as a resource. This is central to being a member of a church. The pastor's teaching is your main diet on the word; at least, it *ought* to be. If you do not like a pastor's provision of a biblical diet, then you need to find a pastor in whom you have confidence, and from whom you can learn how to walk in fellowship with the Lord Jesus better and better.

In this light, you do well to make miles out of the sermon. Making miles out of the sermon can help you during the week. This may include reading the sermon looking for better understanding, discussing the sermon with your spouse or other believers, and at times interacting with the pastor on details, implications, and applications. Doing that during the week is a sprinkling of the word. It may not be very extensive (it may involve reflection on passage here and there throughout the day), but it will help you prepare for the next sermon. On this pathway of reflection and interaction, you prepare yourself for regular preaching *and* for communion preaching. In turn, partaking of the Lord's Supper strengthens you for your daily walk with the Lord.

Therefore, the unity and interconnectedness of fellowship with God across the board of our lives leads to the best kind of preparation for coming to communion. You come from daily snacks and weekly meals to a feast; you come in faith for the strengthening of faith.

## 2) Diligence at the Table

In this light, there is a warning to ponder in coming to the Table; this is a good thing to consider in our reflections *about* Communion. It is simply this: you should be well aware that you could partake of the Table in mockery of Christ. How do you think you might do that? This is a point to ponder earnestly. You make a mockery of the Table and of Christ (you mock Him!) when you take of the bread and wine in a light and thoughtless way, without saying in your heart what you in fact say in your actions symbolically. When you take of the bread, you are staking a claim in the redemptive work of Christ. You are claiming ownership of His grace (His "saving grace"). You are committing yourself to Him, to His Sabbath rule as risen Lord, to His teaching, to discipleship, and to His priestly ministry. You claim all these things symbolically.

Therefore, you ought to be making this commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ in your heart as you partake of His sacrament. Truly, the sacrament is *a time of covenant renewal*: God reiterates His covenant promises and you renew your covenant commitment to Him. In other words, you come by faith entrusting yourself to Him, giving yourself away to the Lord. Thus, coming in faith to receive the bread and wine, you acknowledge your need of Him. From the depths of your heart, you pray the simple prayer: "Lord Jesus, I need you and I own you as my nourishment for *life*, now, daily, and forevermore." Thus, the warning goes hand in hand with the call to faith. He bids you to come and partake of the bread and wine. By partaking of the bread and wine that comes from His hands, you make a profession of faith, and that profession ought to arise from the depths of your heart and soul.

### 3) Nourishment from the meal

The Lord “adds” sacrament to gospel, but there is no question regarding the trustworthiness of the gospel. Having an oath in addition to the promises does not indicate weakness in the promises. Granted, it would do that if we were talking about promise giving on a human level. Between men, the oath comes into play because promise keeping is imprecise and shaky. The saying “Your word is your bond” rarely applies among men. Thus, people promise to pay back a loan, and then they seal the promise with an oath to this effect: “I sign this document to guarantee my word; if I fail to keep my word by making regular payments, you have the right to take full possession of my property.” That is a form of backing up a promise with an oath because those who make such promises are not always trustworthy.

In strong contrast, as an oath added to promise, the sacrament specifically and directly points us to the *trustworthiness* of the promises. It does that because it points us to the trustworthiness of God who is the covenant-keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God *gives* the promises of the gospel and *swears* by those promises with an oath, and He does this out of the resources of His perfect holiness, justice, and truth. In both promise and oath, it is impossible for God to lie; He cannot deny Himself. No situation, circumstance, or eventuality can result in the possibility that God would fail to keep His word. The sacrament emphasizes God’s complete and perfect trustworthiness. That is comforting and encouraging for us to know, so, by the sacrament, the Lord repeatedly gives us a taste of His trustworthiness. Through the sacrament, He fixes our hearts on the Lord Jesus (cf. preaching communion remembrances). In Him, the promises are “Yes and amen” (2 Cor. 1.20, **For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory**).

Furthermore, the encouragement we receive through the sacrament has an even greater depth to it. We can see this depth when we consider why the Lord adds the sacrament-oath to His gospel promise. Again, it is not because His word is weak, but because we are weak and we need His help all along the pathway of our journey in life. Therefore, the sacrament is a way that the Lord tells us not only about His trustworthiness but *it also tells us about His loving-kindness* and good will toward us. It is His desire to show us in the most convincing way that His word is sure so that we will have strong encouragement (Heb. 6.18). In condescending love, the Lord reaches out to us in our need to supply our need of comfort and encouragement. In turn, He does this to enable us to hold fast to our hope, as we make our way to heaven’s glory through many challenges and difficulties. In His love, He underscores the certainty of His promises by giving us bread and wine to eat and drink. In this way, He assures us that He will nourish us day by day and all along the way until we reach the heavenly meal in glory.

When come in faith for the strengthening of faith, our Lord is active by the Spirit working with the word to in fact nourish us for healthy spiritual life, to strengthen our feeble knees for a worthy walk, to assure us of His love and good will toward us, and to give us strong encouragement that our faith may have a **sure and steadfast anchor** (Heb. 6.19), so that all contradiction may be countered and that “we may firmly believe that we belong to that covenant that stands as a rock” (Berkouwer, *Sacraments*, 55). We receive spiritual nourishment from meal. When we come in faith to Communion, the Lord strengthens our faith.

**May we fall down before the majesty of our God in unending praise and thanksgiving for the risen Lord Jesus Christ who is our very food and drink and who strengthens our faith through the sign and seal of Communion. To Him be all glory now and forevermore, amen.**