

MATTHEW 26:26-29

A NEW COVENANT

“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.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 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.’”¹

It is unusual when people recognise the full implication of transitional periods at the time they are occurring. After a transition, we may recognise the magnitude of the change that has occurred, and with the passage of time the differences will become obvious; but seldom do we realise what is occurring during the time of transition. It seems obvious that the disciples gathered with the Master around a table to observe the Passover did not understand the significance of all that was happening. I am confident that you and I would have been no more competent at discerning what was happening had we been there.

It is not as if the disciples had not been taught. Throughout the days the Master walked with them, He was constantly telling them of all that was to take place. However, they simply could not grasp the import of His words. Then, as He hosted the Pascal Meal on that final even He would be with them, He changed everything. Again, the disciples missed the implication of what He did. All their lives those first disciples had been trained to observe the rituals associated with the practise of the Jewish religion. It is probably correct to say that they performed the various rites required by each ceremony without thinking of what they were doing. In this, they were not terribly different from modern Christians attending almost any evangelical church.

Luther was distressed when, upon visiting Rome, he heard the Italian priests mocking the ritual of the Mass through reciting in Latin, “Bread you are and bread you will remain; wine you are and wine you will remain.” Evangelical Christians are rightly shocked at the thought that liturgical Christians could degenerate into such nonchalance before the rituals they hold dear. Frankly, it is easy for many evangelicals to believe that liturgical churches could slide into casual nonchalance when observing the rituals of the Faith. However, are we really that different from our liturgical brothers? Do we recall the significance of what we are doing as we participate in the ordinances of the Faith? Are we holding sacred the truths we profess? Do we realise the implications of what we profess and permit the confession to transform us as we worship?

Our meditations this morning are meant to confront us with our own error, calling us to pause to reflect on what we are doing through reviewing what Jesus did on the night He instituted the Meal we now call “The Lord’s Supper.” Join me by reviewing the familiar passage recorded in Matthew’s Gospel.

WHAT THE DISCIPLES KNEW — The world of the first disciples was different from our world. I’m not referring to the technological differences, or even to the cultural differences. I’m asking us to focus on the religious observances with which they were familiar and to focus on the manner in which they worshipped. To be certain, there were aspects of worship that were identical, but many things differed greatly from what we would find familiar.

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The religious world from which the first disciples were drawn was undoubtedly more restrictive than that with which most evangelicals are familiar. Though the Old Testament encourages honesty in those who approach to worship, religion for the disciples can best be described as rigid. Before the Babylonian captivity, the people of God had begun to treat religion as a necessary evil. The rites and rituals of the Faith they had received were treated as talismans—a means of private protection or of personal blessing. Consequently, God, through His prophets, condemned the religious practise without underlying faith, and sent the nation into captivity. Following the Babylonian captivity, the Jews embraced the religion of the fathers. They carefully observed the law, but with the addition of the synagogue system and the institution of rabbis to interpret the Law of Moses. With time, however, the rituals became increasingly codified and deviation from community norms was severely censured. At last, maintaining the interpretation of the rabbis was more important than worshipping God.

By the time the Master arrived on the scene, religion in Israel was mainly a series of prescribed acts with severe censure from any deviation. Let me demonstrate what I mean by referring you to several incidents when the Master clashed with religious leaders in Judea.

On one occasion, Jesus and His disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath. Since the disciples were hungry, “they began to pluck heads of grain and ... eat.” The Pharisees, seemingly ever present and apparently always ready to make certain that no rule was violated, exclaimed to the Master, “Look, you disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” [MATTHEW 12:1 ff.]. The tenet that the disciples violated was not one that is found in Scripture; rather, it arose as an interpretation of the proscription against doing any work on the Sabbath. Hence, an interpretation became a law.

On another occasion, Jesus entered the synagogue. The account Mark provides seems to suggest that the religious leaders planted a man with a withered hand in an attempt to get the Master to violate the Sabbath by healing. Turn to the account provided in MARK 3:2-5. The religious leaders “watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come here.’ And he said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.”

On yet another occasion, we read that the “Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem” to complain. They complained, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” The Lord answered their complaint by charging them with violating the very Word they claimed to uphold. “Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, ‘Honour your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honour his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

“‘This people honours me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

[MATTHEW 15:1-9]

On yet another occasion, Peter was confronted with a demand to pay the temple tax. It will help our understanding if we read the account as Matthew recorded it. The collectors of the two-drachma tax asked Peter, “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” Peter responded, “Of course.” I get the impression that he simply wanted to get rid of the tax collectors, and hadn’t really given any thought to the issue. Thus, we read that later, when he came into the house, “Jesus spoke to him first, saying, ‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?’ And when he said, chagrined, I suspect, ‘From others,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Then the sons are free. However, not to give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for Me and for yourself’” [MATTHEW 17:24-27].

We see, then, a religion that wrapped adherents in a straitjacket of rules and regulations that were manipulated to make worshippers feel good about themselves, even though the careful efforts of the people attending worship would not—indeed, could not—bring them any closer to God. Those who scrupulously attempted to follow the system of ritual set out by the Pharisees and the scribes would be so focused on their own performance that they would not likely ever draw near to God. They would become like the Pharisee whom Jesus described in one parable.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” [LUKE 18:10-14].

The religious leaders had reduced religion to a set of rules, which if followed permitted the adherents to congratulate themselves on their piety. However, the efforts exerted were of no value in worship, nor did the labours of those who followed the regulations honour God. Listen to the Master as He excoriated the religious leaders before the people near the end of His ministry in Israel. The passage is rather long, but it will assist us to understand the condition of religion in the days in which the disciples walked with Jesus. Focus in particular on the obvious anger Jesus displayed as He confronted the scribes and the Pharisees in MATTHEW 23:1-36.

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”

Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of conspiring to make proselytes rather than converts to the True and Living God. They were experts at compelling others to perform onerous duties, though they would not do anything to lessen the burdens they imposed. For these pious frauds, religion was a means to acquire personal glory—and they wore their religion openly, rather than being humble. They possessed what one insightful preacher has described as “peg-leg religion”—they had to strap it on every morning; and though it got them around, it was cold and lifeless. They could divide a theological hair fourteen different ways and never whet their knife. They had mastered the art of excusing themselves even as they perpetuated the most horrendous and egregious crimes against Holy God and against His servants.

These vignettes from the days of His ministry in Judea and Galilee give us a glimpse into religion as practised in Judea and Galilee during the days of His flesh. Perhaps it is not so very different from religion as it exists today, for just as it true of our day the emphasis for worshippers in that day was to “do” rather than to “be.” Religion was about what one did rather than about the relationship of the worshipper to the Living God. Rather than seeking to glorify God, the stress in religious practise was to exalt the worshipper.

So, as the Master moved resolutely toward Jerusalem and His Passion, the disciples repeatedly argued about their relative place in the Kingdom of God, attempted to dissuade the Master from speaking of His death, and shoved the thought of His impending trials from their immediate thoughts. As they reclined at the table and He washed their feet, they were uncomprehending about what He was doing. And as He broke the bread and passed the cup, it is evident that they did not understand what was happening because it was so foreign.

WHAT THE DISCIPLES SHOULD HAVE KNOWN — The disciples should have known that the Old Covenant was drawing to a climactic conclusion and that a New Covenant was even then being instituted. The Scriptures had spoken of this transition, though it was not precise as to the timing of the change. Jeremiah had delivered a prophecy that should have been taken to heart.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” [JEREMIAH 31:31-34].

For three and one-half years the disciples had heard the Master speak of His purpose in coming. The disciples had been present when Jesus identified Himself as the Good Shepherd who would lay down His life for the sheep. “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” [JOHN 10:7-18]. He said, though they seem not to have understood, that He would lay down His life, though He would take it up again.

When they had argued among themselves about who was the greatest, jostling for prominence in the Kingdom that was coming, Jesus had censured them. “You know,” He sharply reproved the Apostles, “that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” [MARK 10:42-45]. They heard Him declare that He would give His life as a ransom, yet somehow they failed to grasp the fact that He would die.

In the days immediately preceding His Passion, Jesus spoke openly of His death. On one occasion, some Greeks asked to see Jesus, Philip told Jesus, and the Master responded, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him.”

Then, thinking of what was coming, the Master spoke of the conflict that would soon rage about Him. “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven: ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So the crowd answered him, ‘We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?’ So Jesus said to them, ‘The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light’” [JOHN 12:20-36].

The Master had spoken pointedly of the type of death He would experience, urging the throng surrounding Him to enjoy the light while they had it with them. The throng appears not to have understood what He was saying. Certainly, His disciples failed to realise what He said. Only after He had risen from the dead did they at last put things together and understand that they had witnessed the transition from the old order of worship and life to a new order.

What appeared at first as hints and suggestions grew steadily plainer as they band moved toward Jerusalem to keep the Passover. From the time that Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, “Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” At this clear statement, Peter began to rebuke the Master, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” His attempt to divert the Lord from His purpose brought swift censure from the Master [see MATTHEW 16:21-23].

As the final trip to Jerusalem was drawing to a conclusion, Jesus deliberately took the Twelve aside in order to instruct them concerning what was about to happen. “We are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and He will be raised on the third day” [MATTHEW 20:17-19]. You would imagine that such plain language would be understood, especially when it iterated what had been stated repeatedly throughout the previous forty-two months. However, the disciples didn’t get it.

The disciples should have known that God was to be worshipped in Spirit and in truth [JOHN 4:23]. The disciples should have known that the Lord requires that those who would draw near to Him must do justice and love kindness, while walking humbly with Him [see MICAH 6:6-8]. The disciples should have known that faith that fails to transform is no faith at all. They should have known that life was the purview of Him who alone gives life. They had heard Him declare that He had authority to lay down His life, and that He had authority to take it up again, for the Father had given that particular charge [see JOHN 10:17, 18]. Plainly, no one could take Him life from Him, but in obedience to the revealed Word of God He was the suffering servant whom Isaiah described [see ISAIAH 53:1-12].

The little band of disciples had completed all the ritual associated with the Pascal Meal. They had recited the ancient Scriptures, eaten the bitter herbs and drunk the cup together. They should have known that events were moving rapidly toward a conclusion. The fact that the traitor had left after a muted exposure of his intentions by the Master Himself should have alerted them to what was about to happen. But they did not understand.

After Judas had left the room, “Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 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’” [MATTHEW 26:26-29]

The actions were stunning precisely because they defied convention. They violated tradition even as His words make it plain that He is instituting a new tradition. It was the final act in preparing them for the new paradigm in worship. Ritual would never again be as significant as relationship. The New Covenant was being instituted.

WHAT ALL DISCIPLES SHOULD KNOW — I must stress one great truth for Christian seeking to please the Lord our God. We enjoy the advantage of knowing how matters unfolded in the hours, and then in the days following this Meal on that evening so many years ago. We have the advantage of seeing the completed picture as presented throughout the remainder of the Word. There is no excuse for us if we fail to grasp the truth that is vital for all worship. That truth we must recognise is that **RELATIONSHIP, NOT RITUAL, IS THE BASIS FOR WORSHIP**. Jesus made this clear His disciples that evening, but we seem to need to be reminded on a regular basis.

There is a reason we speak of this Meal as the “Lord’s Supper.” He instituted the Meal, but more importantly, He invites whom He wills to the Meal. It is in recognising the body and blood of the Lord that participants are blessed. This is according to the words of the Apostle. He wrote, “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world” [1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-32].

Coming to the Meal, we participate in remembrance of the Saviour. Those partaking of the Meal are confessing that He died because of their own sin. The individual exposes himself or herself before the Living God, confessing that his sin or her sin caused the death of God’s Only Son. We eat bread and remember that His body was broken because of us. We drink the cup, remembering that His blood was poured out because of us. We confess that we have no right to be present, but we are here by grace. Invited by our gracious Saviour, we worship.

As this day drew near, what steps did you take to prepare yourself to partake of the Meal? Did you read the Word, meditating on the mercy and goodness of our God? Did you pray, asking that He be glorified in your life as you performed your work and strengthened your fellow believers? Did you intercede for those who are weak and about to cease standing firm in the Faith? Did you employ your hands to tend to the hurting? Did you speak comforting words to those who struggle with depression and with trials that threaten to inundate them?

Have we, as did the religious leaders in the days of the disciples, reduced this solemn act of worship to a mere ritual? Have we fallen into the trap of the Pharisees and the scribes, performing mere rites rather than seeking a vital relationship with the Son of God? I confess that I live in terror of permitting the Meal to become just another rite for those whom God has placed under my authority. So often as I have observed the Meal in evangelical churches, it seems as though it is conducted in a mindless manner—tacked on at the end of the service as a necessary requirement to permit the congregation to get to the restaurant before other Christians. Therefore, I seek to warn all who participate against coming to this Meal in a casual manner.

Whenever we gather to observe the Meal, I ask those participating to take time to examine themselves, just as we are taught by the Apostle. Paul cautioned against eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. His warning is nothing less than an admonition against participating in this act as though it were mere ritual. He calls all who participate to ensure that there is a living relationship with the Risen Son of God, so that participation will truly be worship as God intended it to be. The alternative is to invite the Lord's discipline.

Do we believe that God will indeed hold us accountable for our actions? Do we believe that He will not permit us to treat His Table with contempt? Is it possible that some whom we have known have actually been disciplined with illness or even with death because they forgot that relationship was the necessary requirement for participation? I trust that none among us shall ever be exposed to such awesome discipline, but I know that it has happened in the past. And I daresay that it will happen again to any among us who forget what we are now doing.

Perhaps, as I have spoken, you realised that you have not prepared for this time of worship. Let's take time now to prepare our hearts to worship the Living Saviour, Jesus our Lord. Now is the time to confess sin that may hinder us from worship and to ask Him to make us ready to worship. Now is the time to make right all that may otherwise be wrong and to remove any impediment that may hinder us from serving Him as we should and as we truly desire.

Of course, there is no relationship if you have not been born from above and into the Family of God. The call of God is for each one to believe the Good News that Jesus has provided a perfect sacrifice for sin and that He has risen from the dead. The death of the Saviour was indeed real; but His resurrection is no less real. We serve a Living Saviour, and not a symbol or one who lives in our memory. He walks among us and dwells with us. We are therefore careful to invite all who share our service to consider the life that Christ offers.

The Word of God invites each individual to life, saying, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." The passage concludes with the glorious promise that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

And that is our invitation to all who are outside the grace of God. Believe the message of salvation and be saved. Receive the Risen Son of God as Master of your life so that you may enjoy the forgiveness of sin and be born from above and into the Family of God. Amen.