

J.C. Ryle:

These verses contain Mark's account of the institution of the Lord's Supper. The simplicity of the description deserves special observation. Well would it have been for the Church, if men had not departed from the simple statements of Scripture about this blessed sacrament! It is a mournful fact that it has been corrupted by false explanations and superstitious additions, until its real meaning, in many parts of Christendom, is utterly unknown. Let us however, at present, dismiss from our minds all matters of controversy, and study the words of Mark with a view to our own personal edification.

Let us learn from the passage before us, that self-examination should precede the reception of the Lord's Supper. We cannot doubt that this was one object of our Lord's solemn warning, "One of you who eats with me shall betray me." He meant to stir up in the minds of his disciples, those very searchings of heart which are here so touchingly recorded--"They began to be sorrowful, and to say unto Him one by one, Is it I?" He meant to teach His whole Church throughout the world, that the time of drawing near to the Lord's table should be a time for diligent self-inquiry.

The benefit of the Lord's Supper depends entirely on the spirit and frame of mind in which we receive it. The bread which we there eat, and the wine which we there drink, have no power to do good to our souls, as medicine does good to our bodies, without the co-operation of our hearts and wills. They will not convey any blessing to us, by virtue of the minister's consecration, if we do not receive them rightly, worthily, and with faith. To assert, as some do, that the Lord's supper must do good to all communicants, whatever be the state of mind in which they receive it, is a monstrous and unscriptural figment of imagination, and has given rise to gross and wicked superstition.

The state of mind which we should look for in ourselves, before going to the Lord's table, is well described in the Catechism of the Church of England. We ought to "examine ourselves whether we repent truly of our former sins--whether we steadfastly purpose to lead a new life--whether we have a lively faith in God's mercy through Christ--and a thankful remembrance of His death--and whether we are in charity with all men." If our conscience can answer these questions satisfactorily, we may receive the Lord's supper without fear. More than this God does not require of any communicant. Less than this ought never to content us.

Let us take heed to ourselves in the matter of the Lord's supper. It is easy to err about it on either side. On the one hand, we are not to be content with staying away from the Lord's table under the vague plea of unfitness. As long as we so stay away, we are disobeying a plain command of Christ, and are living in sin. But, on the other hand, we are not to go to the Lord's table as a mere form, and without thought. As long as we receive the sacrament in that state of mind, we derive no good from it, and are guilty of a great transgression. It is a dreadful thing to be unfit for the sacrament, for this is to be unfit to die. It is a no less dreadful thing to receive it unworthily, for this is most provoking to God. The only safe course is to be a decided servant of Christ, and to live the life of faith in Him. Then we may draw near with boldness, and take the sacrament to our comfort.

Let us learn, in the second place, from these verses, that the principal object of our Lord's Supper, is to remind us of Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross. The bread is intended to bring to our recollection the "body" of Christ, which was wounded for our transgressions. The wine is intended to bring to our recollection the "blood" of Christ, which was shed to cleanse us from all sin. The atonement and propitiation which our Lord effected by His death as our Surety and Substitute, stand out prominently in the whole ordinance. The false doctrine which some teach, that His death was nothing more than the death of a very holy man, who left us an example how to die, turns the Lord's supper into an unmeaning ordinance, and cannot possibly be reconciled with our Lord's words at its institution.

A clear understanding of this point is of great importance. It will place us in the right position of mind, and teach us how we ought to feel in drawing near to the Lord's table. It will produce in us true humility of spirit. The bread and wine, will remind us how sinful sin must be, when nothing but Christ's death could atone for it. It will produce in us hopefulness about our souls. The bread and wine will remind us that though our sins are great, a great price has been paid for our redemption. Not least, it will produce in us gratitude. The bread and wine will remind us how great is our debt to Christ, and how deeply bound we are to glorify Him in our lives. May these be the feelings that we experience, whenever we receive the Lord's supper!

Finally, we learn from these verses, the nature of the spiritual benefits which the Lord's supper as intended to convey, and the persons who have a right to expect them. We may gather this lesson from the significant actions which are used in receiving this sacrament. Our Lord commands us to "eat" bread and to "drink" wine.

Now eating and drinking are the acts of a living person. The object of eating and drinking is to be strengthened and refreshed. The conclusion we are meant to draw, is manifestly this, that the Lord's supper is appointed for "the strengthening and refreshing of our souls," and that those who ought to partake of it are those who are lively, real Christians. All such will find this sacrament a means of grace. It will assist them to rest in Christ more simply, and to trust in Him more entirely. The visible symbols of bread and wine will aid, quicken, and confirm their faith.

A right view of this point is of the utmost moment in these latter days. We must always beware of thinking that there is any way of eating Christ's body, and drinking Christ's blood, but by faith--or that receiving the Lord's supper will give any man a different interest in Christ's sacrifice on the cross from that which faith gives. Faith is the one grand means of communication between the soul and Christ. The Lord's supper can aid, quicken, and confirm faith, but can never supersede it, or supply its absence. Let this never be forgotten. Error on this point is a most fatal delusion, and leads to many superstitions.

Let it be a settled principle in our Christianity, that no unbeliever ought to go to the Lord's table, and that the sacrament will not do our souls the slightest good, if we do not receive it with repentance and faith. The Lord's supper is not a converting or justifying ordinance, and those who come to it unconverted and unjustified, will go away no better than they came, but rather worse. It is an ordinance for believers, and not for unbelievers, for the living and not for the dead. It is meant to sustain life, but not to impart it--to strengthen and increase grace, but not to give it--to help faith to grow, but not to sow or plant it. Let these things sink down into our hearts, and never be forgotten.

Are we alive unto God? This is the great question. If we are, let us go to the Lord's supper, and receive it thankfully, and never turn our backs on the Lord's table. If we do not go, we commit a great sin.

Are we yet dead in sin and worldliness? If we are, we have no business at the communion table. We are on the broad way that leads to destruction. We must repent. We must be born again. We must be joined to Christ by faith. Then, and not until then, we are fit to be communicants.