

Series: 1st Corinthians – a 21st Century Church
Today's Focus: A Very Special Sacrament

“Before You Partake...It's a Pastor's Job to Help You Be Prepared”

- 1. To understand what important message the Lord's Supper proclaims.**
- 2. To discern what precious gifts the Lord's Supper actually gives.**
- 3. To examine yourself properly to ensure that you receive its blessings.**



Do any of you know what this is {pic}? It's a pufferfish. In Japan they call it "Fugu". Fugu is the Japanese word for pufferfish. It's also the name of the dish prepared from it. You might not think this looks particularly tasty (I sure don't!) but it's quite popular and considered a delicacy. Yet it's also potentially deadly. It's the world's



most dangerous food!

This is due to its tetrodotoxin or TTX. TTX is a neurotoxin, a poison 1,200 times stronger than cyanide. This toxin is so potent that a lethal dose is smaller than the head of a pin, and a single fish has enough poison to kill 30 people. So as you can imagine, before partaking of a delicious dish of Fugu, it must be carefully prepared to remove its toxic parts and to avoid contaminating the edible meat. So the restaurant preparation of Fugu is strictly controlled by law in Japan, and only chefs who have qualified after three or more years of rigorous training are allowed to prepare the fish. People who prepare it at home on their own without proper training can accidentally cause paralysis, coma, or death. So yikes, huh?

On the one hand Fugu is a sought after delicacy. Yet if proper preparation hasn't taken place it can become a deadly poison. So in light of this all, before you partake of Fugu, wouldn't you want to be properly prepared to know what it is and to have the confidence that it has been properly prepared for your benefit? Of course you would. It would only be loving to insist on it!

So also today as we again turn our attention to 1 Corinthians we're going to look at something similar about a very special sacrament. What is a sacrament? A sacrament is a sacred act started by Jesus whereby extraordinary spiritual blessings like the forgiveness of our sins are linked by God's Word to ordinary earthly elements such as bread and wine. Today we're looking especially at the sacrament of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper as its also called here in our sermon text. And we're going to see how it's important to be properly prepared to receive this special sacrament in order to receive it for our soul's blessing instead of our harm.

Here's what we're going to learn and apply from Pastor Paul in 1 Corinthians 11: Before You Partake...It's a Pastor's Job to Help You Be Prepared. 1) To understand what important message the Lord's Supper proclaims. 2) To discern what precious gifts the Lord's Supper actually gives. And 3) To examine yourself properly to ensure that you receive its blessings.

¹⁷ In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰ So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

Whoah! It's never good when an inspired author of the Bible says, "Get ready because I'm going to talk about some important things right now and I'm not going to have anything positive to say about what you guys are doing." So you get a sense that something bad was going on here, don't you? Pastor Paul is writing to correct their abuse of the Lord's Supper. The Corinthians had turned this sacrament into a supper of their own making.

You see in the first century church, Christians would often get together at someone's larger sized house—someone who was gracious enough to open their home and host what was known as an "agape meal" or a "love feast." And so this didn't start off as a bad thing at all. You might think of it like a pot-luck meal where people in the church were invited to come and bring a dish to pass and share a meal. During this agape meal the Scriptures would also be read, sometimes communication like a letter from another congregation would be read for mutual encouragement, prayers would be spoken, hymns sung, and then after the shared meal the church would celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper.

So it was meant to be a time of fellowship and worship. But instead what happened in Corinth is that these agape meals became occasions to create divisions. The wealthier members were sort of hanging out in their own room with their own friends and enjoying the best food and drink while the others who were invited ended up going hungry. On top of this some drank to excess and were actually getting drunk while others went thirsty. And so when it came time to celebrate the Lord's Supper it was clear that this wasn't a shared meal that culminated in a wonderful expression of their unity in Jesus Christ. The Corinthians weren't treating this as a special sacrament where everyone came together with holy reverence and humility to receive Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins as they expressed their unity. Instead some people, especially the poor, were humiliated. And so the message that God wanted to be proclaimed through the sacrament was lost. What message is that? The Gospel! Before you partake...It's a pastor's job to help you be prepared 1) to understand what important message the Lord's Supper proclaims.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

With these familiar words, Paul relates what took place on that Thursday evening when Jesus first instituted the Lord's Supper. It was the day before he was going to die on the cross. During the Passover meal that Jesus was sharing with his disciples, Jesus broke away from the old customs and began something new for his church to do. What Jesus started was brand new because of what he knew he was going to do the next day. He was going to suffer and die on the cross as the true Passover Lamb to which every Passover meal previously only pointed. He was going to bring to fulfillment what every promise and prophecy of the Old Testament only foreshadowed. He was going to actually win forgiveness for the sins of the world by taking upon himself the punishment that we all deserved.

That's why friends, when we celebrate this special sacrament, what message are we proclaiming? The message of the unconditional gospel...lest we forget. Lest we start to think that worship is just another self-centered form of entertainment geared toward making us simply feel good about ourselves. Lest we give others the false impression that Christianity is just another religion telling us the steps to achieve our own versions of worldly success. Lest we forget that it's really all about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done...we remember. We remember that his body had to be broken and marred beyond recognition, that his precious blood had to be shed in order to pay for our sins. We remember that unless Jesus came and did this on our behalf we would most certainly perish forever in hell.

But we don't have to fear God's judgment in hell if we believe in Jesus who endured it as our Savior. Friends, this is the gospel. Heaven is now our home. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper here at our church we are promoting a believing remembrance of Jesus Christ who died to remove the punishment all our sins deserved so that we could be with God in heaven.

Which now brings us to our second point today: Before you partake...it's a pastor's job to help you be prepared 2) to discern what precious gifts the Lord's Supper actually gives.

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

Just hearing me read these verses out loud you get the sense that God wants us to take this special sacrament seriously, don't you? From the very first occasion when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, when it was just his close knit group of disciples gathered together, we see that the Lord's Supper was not designed as an outreach event. It was not like the feeding of the 5,000 where Jesus miraculously provided lunch for a crowd—whoever was there. The Lord's Supper was meant for a much smaller close-knit group celebrating it in a small upstairs room.

So unlike the sacrament of Baptism which Jesus says is for all nations—in other words limited to no one by age or gender or intellectual understanding or anything else, here we learn that the

Lord's Supper should be limited to those who've first been instructed so that they are able to discern what precious gifts the Lord's Supper actually gives. Because Paul says that if you don't discern what it is that you actually receive when you partake of this sacrament... you could partake of the Lord's Supper and actually sin and harm your soul.

So before you partake...it's a pastor's job to help you discern what precious gifts the Lord's Supper actually gives. To discern means to be able to rightly recognize or to make a correct judgment about what you are actually receiving when you partake of the Lord's Supper. Because what do you receive?

Well first of all we want to do what Jesus did. So we set aside unleavened bread and grape wine for special, sacramental use, consecrating them with the words that Jesus spoke when he said, "Take and eat, this is my body...take and drink, this is my blood." So then on the one hand when you partake of the Lord's Supper you receive a little wafer of unleavened bread and you receive a little sip of grape wine. But on the other hand, at the same time, you also receive Christ's true body and his true blood which are miraculously present "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine! Martin Luther said it well. What is the Sacrament of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper? "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ together with the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink."

In other words, it's not just bread and wine that people receive. Whether you believe it or not, if you partake, you are receiving Christ's body and blood in a miraculous way. The Corinthians apparently had forgotten this. They were partaking of the Lord's Supper casually and irreverently without recognizing Christ's body and blood and so were heaping up one sin upon another.

That's why before you partake...it's a pastor's job to help you be prepared to discern what gifts the Lord's Supper actually gives. God has given a solemn responsibility to pastors to help people be prepared before partaking. Much like the Japanese chef who has to undergo years of training before being allowed to prepare Fugu, so pastors ought to be thoroughly trained in the Bible in order to help people be prepared for the Lord's Supper. It is the only loving to do. That's why I always mention my Bible 101 class before we celebrate the sacrament here. I know it might sound unloving at first to hear the message, "Hey, consider taking this class before you partake of the Lord's Supper at our church" but I want you to be prepared. The historic practice of the Christian church is that out of love for people's souls everyone would first be given the opportunity to be instructed in God's Word before partaking of the Lord's Supper. And so for youth we have confirmation class and for adults we have our Bible 101 class so that when you partake of the Lord's Supper you are prepared.

And finally, that includes being prepared 3) to examine yourself properly to ensure that you receive its blessings.

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.

What does it mean to examine yourself? It certainly means to make sure that you rightly recognize what you are actually receiving—Christ’s true body and blood. But it also means rightly recognizing just how much you need God’s forgiveness—the very blessing that the Lord’s Supper is intended to give. So that means not trying to rationalize my sins and saying, “Well, everyone’s doing it these days. This is the 21st century after all.” It means not hiding behind excuses or blaming others for my sinful choices. It means confessing them, turning away from them in repentance, and then finding in God’s full and free forgiveness offered in the Lord’s Supper the strength to pursue what is God pleasing.

Friends, I don’t know about you. But I wish I was better than I am. A better pastor. A better husband. A better dad. A better friend. But I’m weak. I’m lazy. I’m stubborn. I’m a sinner. And in my weakness I wonder sometimes whether God exists, and if he does whether he truly cares about me, whether he could actually forgive and love me. I’m guessing I’m not alone in those feelings, right? Yet the truth is God knows we all always need assurance of his loving presence especially when our conscience constantly wants us to wallow in the thought... “But I’m just not worthy.”

Well you know what? The Lord’s Supper wasn’t given for worthy people. You can partake of it an unworthy way like the Corinthians did. But I must emphasize that the phrase “unworthy manner” does not mean “too sinful.” We should never feel that because of our sins we are “unworthy” of taking the Lord’s Supper. Rather, the Lord’s Supper is precisely for those who feel burdened by their sins and feel unworthy of God’s love.

Think about marriage for a moment. A husband doesn’t just say to his wife on their wedding day, “Honey, I love you, now I’ve said it, and I’ll be sure and let you know if this is no longer the case.” No one would go for this! Rather we human beings, in our weakness and forgetfulness, need to hear “I love you” over and over again, and not just hear the words but see that love in action. That’s how I think of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It’s Christ’s love in action because he knows how weak and frail we are. It’s tangible forgiveness made personal. It’s proof of my Savior’s loving presence not just spoken into my ears as a promise but pressed into my hands and placed to my lips as I hear my Savior say, “Given and poured out for you, not just for them, but for you, Ben...for the forgiveness of all your sins. Everything I accomplished on the cross for everyone I’m giving right now to you again because I know how much you need it.”

Friends, I’m sure you’d agree, this sacrament is way better than Fugu, isn’t it? Thank you for patiently following along with me today. Perhaps this sermon is one that you want to go online to listen to again because you’ll get more out of it the second time My prayer is that we might all know a little better prepared to receive the Lord’s Supper the way God intended—for our soul’s good and our eternal blessing.

Let’s pray. Forgive, O Lord, the dullness that too frequently overcomes us as you draw us to your holy supper. Remind us of the blessings of forgiveness and salvation you provide for us through it. Give us faithful pastors who will admonish our wrongs, remind us of your love in Christ, and encourage us to receive the forgiveness brought to us in your sacrament. Unite us in true love and fellowship with those whom you have redeemed who join us at your table. In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God, we pray. Amen.