

***The Holiness Of God: Sacred Washing, Sacred Meal***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Romans 6:1-5; Matthew 3:13-17; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34***

Our final Scripture reading today is from 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. May God bless the reading of His holy, perfect, and infallible Word. “In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 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. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night 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, 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." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, 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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.”

What objects around your house are set apart for special use? If you had a fire, what would be the first things you'd try to save? When I was growing up, I knew it was a special occasion when the fine china and good silverware came out. They were reserved for holidays and important company. You didn't serve pizza on china. China was something unique to make guests feel special. China has fallen out of favor, but for a very long time we knew there was a difference between an everyday plate and china.

There are plenty of other things today we display around our homes as a sign of their importance. Many years ago, I took all my CDs and DVDs and placed them in binders, getting rid of the cases so they'd take up less space and so I wasn't making a big display of them. When I asked online about what people used to store their CDs, a fair number of people were like, “Why would you want to do that?” Their CD and DVD collections were a statement about who they were and their interests; why would they hide them? Some of us have big collections of books on our shelves. We've been packing stuff for when my mom moves in with us, and it's been hard trying to decide which books to keep out and which ones to pack up. Books say something about our interests and likes and sometimes give insights into our personalities. All of us have items that are special to us and we set them apart.

We've been talking about the holiness of God and how God's holiness is defining of Him – how He is totally other than us, that His attributes are all perfectly balanced by His holiness, and how our knowing Him is through His graciously allowing us to do so. We've talked about how Jesus' perfectly holy life redeems us – it takes away our sin and unholiness so that we can enter into God's presence. We've talked about how God does not just call us holy but works to make us holy through the work of the Holy Spirit. We've seen how God intends us to have peace and rest in Him through becoming Jesus' disciples, through being a part of His church, and through turning to Him in all things – giving up our old lives to have new lives perfected in God.

Today we're going to look at another meaning of the word "holy." To be "holy" on one level means to be sacred, to be in some way related to God in a meaningful way. But another key meaning of "holy" means to be set aside or set apart for sacred use. To be chosen, to be set apart for God's purposes, that is an honor above all others. And the sacraments – baptism and communion, the one we're going to celebrate together today – are part of God's setting us aside for His designs and plans.

We take care of the things that really matter to us. If our relationship with our spouse and our children is important to us, we make time to be with them. If our car is important to us, well, I'm guessing it spends a lot of time at the car wash, or if you've got a really nice car you're crazy into, maybe you have it detailed. A special gift you got from your grandfather might get dusted more often and put in a place of prominence. We put a lot of work into those things that we set apart. They aren't holy – they shouldn't be, anyway – but even in everyday life, we know that we treat special things with special care.

God also sets important people and places and particular objects apart for Himself. God sets aside the Jewish people as His very own, giving them a law different from the nations around them and showing them unique favor – despite that their constant sinfulness showed they were no better than any other people group on Earth. He chose them out of His grace.

God set apart the Levites to be priests; they had no inheritance in the Promised Land, but lived in every city, leading the people towards God. God set apart the firstborn of Israel and every firstborn of each flock to be His. The first priest, Aaron, was set apart – so were certain people like Jeremiah and Paul and his friend Barnabas. Jesus is set apart. So too were certain places – Mount Sinai in the wilderness; the place of the burning bush; the temple. God sets apart the items in His temple as holy – most of the second half of the book of Exodus isn't about the Israelites' rescue from Egypt, but how God wants the holy objects within the temple to be made.

Sometimes we wonder why parts of the Old Testament law are so strange. We're OK with "do not murder," but what about not eating bacon or shrimp? What about having all the men in Israel wear garments with a tassel on the corner with a blue thread? Why all these festivals of worship? We don't do any of those things now, and some of the weirder ones I haven't even mentioned. Not every law in the Old Testament was universally morally binding on all people for all time. So why were these restrictions placed on the Israelites? It was not because every law was a moral absolute, but because God intended for the Israelites to be uniquely His, to please Him by being different, by being holy – set apart.

Again, when we think about our own situations, this isn't too uncommon. Not every item Dad owns is for the kids to play with – even if they look like toys, they aren't to him! People get really picky about what they use to clean their records or their figurines; “don't touch” becomes the name of the game. In our cases, it's usually because we don't want something to break, but also because an item is special to us. In God's case, some of those special laws were intended to make the Israelites stand out. It's like, you only have to wax your car once in a great while to keep your paint safe – but studies have found the more a person waxes their car, the better driver they tend to be! And who doesn't like the look of a freshly waxed car? Necessary every week? No, but it brings out the best look for the car. God has His people set apart in unique ways that shine in a darkened world, just like that waxed car shines in the sunlight.

And this is where we come to baptism and communion. In worldwide Christianity, both are called sacraments – rituals or ceremonies having spiritual significance. (The word “sacred” is built in!) Almost every church recognizes at least these two sacraments. Even though we don't all agree on the meaning and purposes of them, we recognize that Jesus established them for the church, and the early church regularly practiced them.

Again, we might find baptism and communion odd. They are ceremonies in which we see no material change. No one is bathed in bright light when they're baptized unless you're in a contemporary church and the guy running the light board has gone crazy with the spotlight. No matter what you believe about what happens when you take communion, it always has the appearance of bread and wine or grape juice.

Yet there's something going on deep underneath. In both baptism and communion, we are participated in something profound. We encounter God in His holiness when we are baptized and when we commune. And in both, if we understand them well, we see that God is using these ceremonies to set apart His people as holy – as His own.

In baptism, we are set aside for God, either by our decision or by those already a part of the covenant community of faith. Jesus was baptized, not because He was stained by sin but because baptism is the first sign that we are set apart, in one definition made holy, by God. Jesus was always unique, always holy, and John the Baptist recognized this, but even Jesus went through the physical ritual of cleansing and being set apart. As Paul talks about it in Romans 6, we are baptized into Christ Himself – we take on His new life, His true life. At the same time, the water is a burial, a drowning, of the old self still linked to Adam. We are baptized into Christ's death to self and made alive in Him both now spiritually and then physically when the resurrection finally occurs.

When we baptize, we do it as Jesus commanded in Matthew 28 – in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This differentiates it from any other ritual washing or cleansing. Many religions have some sort of religious bathing ritual, but having it done in the name of the Triune God sets it apart. When we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are sealed to God. God claims us in that moment and says, “This is mine for my special use.”

Salvation doesn't come through baptism, but baptism is the sign that God intends us for sacred use. And while not every believer everywhere is baptized due to circumstances, like the thief on the cross beside Jesus, the first sign of real trust in Jesus is following His commands – and Jesus commands our baptism. If we desire to follow Christ, if we haven't been baptized as a child, then baptism should be the natural first step. And for those who are baptized before they remember, confirmation doesn't change the baptism but confirms that we indeed are a part of the community of faith and are part of those God is making holy.

When Martin Luther was tempted to sin, famously he would shout out not “get behind me Satan” or “Lord, help me” but, “I am baptized!” Luther was reminded that in his baptism, he was called to something more – to be a holy instrument in God's hands. Our baptism reminds us that our lives are no longer about sin but being a tool God can use. It doesn't matter if you remember your baptism or not; the important thing is that it happened. So when you are down and discouraged and troubled, remember – you are baptized. God has claimed you. God is making you holy through His Holy Spirit, and you are now in a special class with a special function, to serve the Kingdom in ways God will set out for you. You might feel like a lowly grapefruit spoon, but God has set you aside as the finest silver in all creation.

If baptism is the point at which we are declared holy, set apart for use, then communion is the time where we come to Jesus' table and feast with Him and on His life given for us. Communion is where we most recognize that we are united with Christ, and communion reminds us of who we are – the set apart people of God. Just like baptism, communion is not something all people partake of, but only those that God has called to Himself.

Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:20-21, “Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.” Communion is one way God imparts His life to us and we are cleansed for that honorable work.

If baptism is like the purchase of the fine silver, communion is the polish, the loving care, to make it shine. In communion, God reminds us of who we are. Jesus through the bread and the cup spiritually imparts His life to us. The Holy Spirit works to prepare us for the tasks ahead for the Kingdom. The beautiful thing about communion is that we don't bring anything to the table but ourselves, yet it is enough. We do not merit the table on our own accord; we simply come in response to the feast.

We might ask, especially if you've been a part of CrossWay for a while and have heard my invitation change slightly, why should someone be baptized before they take communion? Simply put, the table is open to all who are a part of the Kingdom, and the invitation has been extended to any who would become a part of God's rule and reign. But it's not wise to go to a banquet when you haven't sent a reservation back – otherwise, there may not be a spot at the reception for you! To come to the feast without a reservation makes you a gate crasher...and none of us wants to be bounced out from Christ's table!

Seriously, we know that God forgives those who act in ignorance, the unbaptized who truly desire His presence and simply haven't been taught enough to know that baptism should come first. But when we do know, we have to be obedient. It is spiritually dangerous to take part in communion willfully without first becoming a part of the Kingdom.

In the same way, it's wrong to take communion lightly. Each time we take communion, I talk about Paul's warning and resolving issues of sin or strife before coming to the table. It's important that we come in a worthy manner – not in terms of getting our entire lives together before communion, because then who could come? But in a worthy manner that recognizing the presence of Christ, that honors God and fears Him, that shows our respect for Him and for one another in the church.

In today's passage, Paul is discussing a problem unique to his time. In Corinth, where a lot of believers came straight out of paganism, communion wasn't the ceremony we are used to today. Instead, it was part of a shared meal. Problem was, pagan religions didn't involve a community of people coming together to support one another. So some people came with dinner for themselves while others couldn't participate because they had nothing to eat. This practice of eating a meal that was supposed to be a time of communing with Christ – the whole point got lost. They were having the Lord's Supper in name only, but they were acting decidedly unlike Christians, and it made them sick both spiritually and physically.

We have different issues. We don't have a problem with not sharing food. Our issues stem from not taking sin seriously. If we are in the middle of unrepentant willful sin, we shouldn't take the Lord's Supper. We all sin; we ask for and receive forgiveness. But if we've wronged someone and haven't made it right; if we're living outside of the boundaries God set for human relationships; if we are harboring anger and resentment; if we're doing nothing to make it right, we shouldn't come to the table. If you're unwilling to be set aside for God's purposes, if you're not desiring to be holy, you shouldn't present yourself as such.

All these things can be forgiven, and receiving Christ at the table is so good for us when we desire holiness and it is just out of our grasp. When we're wrestling and struggling and burdened because we want to do what is right but often do the wrong thing, coming to Jesus at His table and feasting on His love and grace can empower us to do what is right. The table is for forgiven followers looking for refreshment and rest, not for perfect performers who think they've earned a meal with the King. It's a matter of your willingness to no longer cling to your old life but to let it drown in those waters of baptism in which we were claimed for the Kingdom of God.

All of you here – our family of faith – you have been declared holy through the blood of Jesus covering your sins. You are being perfected by the power of the Holy Spirit. And you are literally holy – set apart – so the King can use you to bring others to Himself, to speak truth into a world of lies, to show the world His love, and to light this dark world. May we rejoice in our status as holy vessels created to do the work of the King of the universe.