

Symbols are powerful things, especially when the relationship between the symbol and the thing symbolized becomes personal. For example, I went to high school in Germany, and one of our field trips was to a concentration camp that contained several gas chambers, and rooms of large furnaces where many lives were taken. I remember walking through the chambers, and even my simple 16-year-old mind grasped the gravity of the horrors that I was encountering. Claimed as a symbol by the Nazi regime, the swastika evokes powerful emotional responses for many, and for me, whenever I see it, I'm reminded of the atrocities that took place in those chambers. During my freshman year at college, my roommate played a cruel trick on me. My dorm was small, and everyone on my floor knew that I was the kid that grew up in Germany. So, one day my roommate carved a swastika on the wooden handle of a steak knife he took from the dining hall and hid the knife under my mattress. Later, when a number of guys were hanging out in our room, he pretended to discover the knife under my mattress and joked that I might be part of the Hitler youth. While it was an immature joke by an 18-year-old kid, I reacted quite strongly as that symbol carried a lot of weight in my mind and heart - more weight than he might have realized. Symbols can be powerful.

The Bible is full of symbols, in particular in connection with the establishment of covenants. A covenant is a binding relationship between two parties, and we take part in them today. Think about marriage, business deals, buying a home, or committing to a school. All of these covenants are symbolized by something. For example, a marriage is symbolized by a ring, and business deals are symbolized by contracts and signatures. In the Bible, God established covenants with particular people to reveal His nature to the people He had chosen for a relationship. Symbols often accompany God's covenants. When you think of Adam and Eve, what do you think of? How about Noah? Abraham? Moses? Our text today comes from Matthew 26, and it is often titled *The Last Supper*. In this text, Jesus introduced a covenant that we call the New Covenant, and it is actually the last covenant made in the Bible. There's a reason for that. But first, in order to understand why, I want to take us through a little summary of Old Testament covenants.

God made His first covenant with Adam. This covenant, known as the covenant of works, went like this: Adam would be master of all creation as long as he didn't eat from the one tree that symbolized death. As we know, he did eat the forbidden fruit, and as

a consequence of Adam's disobedience, sin distorted every area of God's creation, including his prized creation, humanity. But God was gracious to Adam and Eve, and although they broke the condition of the covenant, God still promised them a savior that would do what Adam did not do, a savior who would obey God perfectly. Then came Noah's covenant. After the flood, God told Noah that because of his obedience in the midst of wicked people, God would not destroy the world by water again. He created a symbol to remind Noah of this covenant, the rainbow.

Next, we have Abraham. His covenant with God was in two parts. First, God promised to make Abraham's name great among all nations, and bless him with as many children as stars in the sky. On late nights Abraham would walk out under the Middle Eastern sky and see the stars and be reminded of God's covenant with him. Secondly, God promised Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through one of his descendants. God made this covenant with Abraham despite his flaws and poor decisions and those of his children that followed him: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. This covenant was symbolized by circumcision and sacrifice, two very personal and poignant reminders of God's relationship with His people.

Eventually, Abraham's descendants became slaves in Egypt, and God called Moses to lead them out of captivity. Pharaoh would not let Israel leave, even after nine devastating plagues. However, the final plague was too devastating even for Pharaoh. The first-born son of every household in Egypt was killed except for those who displayed an important symbol. God instructed His people to make bread without yeast, and kill a lamb and prepare it in a certain way. The people were to take some of the blood from the lamb and spread it on the doorpost of their homes. As the Spirit of the Lord passed through Egypt that night, it "passed over" the homes displaying the symbol of blood, sparing the first-born sons inside. After this shocking night, Moses led the people out of Egypt, and soon after he received a new covenant from God. Moses received the Law of God which provided clear instructions about what He expected from His people and in return the people would receive protection and provision. This covenant was symbolized by the two stone tablets on which the Law, or the Ten Commandments, were written. The ark of the covenant was always in the middle of the Hebrew camp to symbolize God's covenant with them.

The people of Israel did not obey the law very well, yet God still blessed them with their promised land. Eventually, they wanted a king to rule them instead of God. David was the man God selected, and he too was given a covenant. God promised David that his heir that would be on the throne forever, reigning over an eternal kingdom. David's son, Solomon, built the temple, which acted as the symbol of this covenant-that God was the ruler in the midst of His people.

All these covenants - Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David - were wonderful, and all of them displayed the graciousness and faithfulness of God. But in a good covenant relationship, it takes two faithful parties. God was always faithful, but His people were not.

Eventually, due to the continual sin of the people, Israel was conquered, the temple was destroyed, the ark of the covenant was taken, and all God's people were left with was hope promised by prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah that God would give them a new covenant. Jeremiah wrote that this new covenant would not be symbolized by an external sign. Rather, the new covenant would cause the Law of God to be written on the hearts of His people. This new covenant would result in a transformation from a dead heart to a heart of living flesh. This new covenant would be given by God in a way that no one could fail in their ability to keep their end of the deal. Isaiah prophesied that the symbol of this new covenant was a Messiah, who would pay the penalty for their sin.

And this leads us to our passage today. We have in this little section of the gospel of Matthew, an accumulation of hundreds of years of prophecy and promise. We have in this passage, the foundation of the relationship between the Christian and God.

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "You have said so." While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave

it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the[a] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Matthew 26:17-30

Matthew wrote that the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread was beginning. This was also known as Passover. As we recalled earlier, unleavened bread or bread without yeast was part of the meal God instructed the Israelites to eat the night before the Spirit of God passed over the Jewish homes bearing the symbolic blood of the lamb. And every year, the Jews ate this same meal in celebration of God's protection. The holiday surrounding this meal was so important to the Jewish people that it started off their calendar year. What Easter morning is to the Christian; Passover is to a person of the Judaism faith. As was custom for all Jews, the disciples wanted to establish what the plan was for the celebration. According to Luke, Jesus tells John and Peter to go into Jerusalem and there they would find a man who would provide their accommodations. I think it's interesting, right before this passage, Matthew records that Judas sells Christ out for money. Jesus knew his time was limited and soon he would be betrayed. Yet, he decides to spend time with his disciples. Not only that, he performs one last miracle by orchestrating the last meal he would share with his friends. Jesus valued his disciples so much that even with death staring him in the face; he chose to eat and fellowship with those who were about to betray and deny him. He values us that way too. Jesus spends time with those he loves in their best moments and their worst.

Matthew continues with the disciples sitting down to eat in the evening. Growing up I pictured this meal as boring. Like it was just Jesus and the disciples drinking grape juice and eating dry cardboard crackers. But this was actually a cherished feast. There would have been a bowl passed around containing a special herbed sauce for dipping the unleavened bread. The host would have spent all day preparing the lamb in accordance with God's original instructions to Moses. Yet, now the true sacrificial lamb sits down with his disciples. They would first have bread, which they all dipped in a bowl filled with a special herbed sauce. They would also enjoy a few cups of wine which had important symbolic meanings. It was at this point during their meal, Jesus, as the host of the meal, drops a huge bomb in the conversation. He said, *"Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."*

Could you imagine the look on their faces or even the look on Judas' face? All the gospels record the response of the disciples, first they were very sad, and then they said out loud, *"Surely you*

don't mean me, Lord?" Isn't that an interesting response? There are two parts to this response.

First, each of the disciples were horrified at the idea that perhaps, it could be them that betrays their friend and master. This indicates something about all of us. As one author put it,

"The potential for unfaithfulness dwells in every disciple, then and now...His teaching and miracles would never be enough to rescue us from our weakness, failure, and sin" (Doriani, p. 438).

The disciples knew their hearts enough to know they were capable of this sin. In fact, they all kind of suspect themselves not just because they all would have dipped their hands in the same bowl.

Second, while they all doubt themselves, Judas seems to understand he is the one being called out. He responds, *"Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi. Jesus answered, 'You have said so.'"* In other words, "You know I mean you." Do you notice the difference between the rest of the disciples and Judas? They called him Lord; Judas calls him Rabbi. Judas saw all the miracles; he witnessed all the teaching; he was a leader in the church; he attended every sermon; he knew Jesus better than you and I did. At least, he knew the earthly Jesus better than you and I did. And none of the other disciples suspected Judas. Their response wasn't, "Oh yea; Judas seems to make sense; he clearly was never really on board." While the disciples knew they could be the ones to betray Jesus, in fact, they all do when they run away at Jesus' arrest, (Peter's denial of Christ is recorded next), the disciples trusted Jesus and loved Him. He was their Lord, and he was about to become their savior. However, Judas just thought of Jesus as a teacher, a means of becoming famous or rich. Judas never really trusted Jesus. And Jesus had something to tell those who never trust him as their Lord.

"Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better if he had not been born." You might argue, did Judas even have a chance? If Jesus miraculously set up this meal, couldn't he have prevented Judas from betraying him? The Bible affirms two realities, humans are responsible for their decisions, and God is in complete control. Jesus is in control of providing the meal, and at the same moment, Jesus holds Judas accountable for his actions. These two truths apply to us today. John 13:30, in the most chilling of ways, tells us that Judas then left the light and went into the darkness.

But what about the other disciples, and what about us? Every covenant God had sent up before this was ruined by the unfaithfulness of human's sin. When you read through your Bibles and see the unfaithfulness in Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, the Hebrew nation, and even the disciples, remember that if you were in their situation, you probably would have been

just as unfaithful. And so, for this reason, Christ did what he was about to do.

Matthew wrote, *"He took the bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'"* This would have sounded as odd then as it would today. The Law forbid the touching of a dead body. But that is what we must have in this new covenant. We must have our Lord's body broken for us. But that's not all! Next, he took the cup, probably the third cup of wine in the process of the meal and said, *"Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* We must also have the blood of Christ shed for us. Jesus had to fulfill the demands of the law, which was to obey perfectly, and He did that. Also, for this new covenant, He must pay the penalty of death for all of our sins, and He did that as well. Jesus lived the life we couldn't and died the death we should have. Jesus gives a new covenant which is between God the Father and Himself but includes his disciples and us as well.

There are a few important applications here:

Substitutionary Atonement

The Passover meal was seen as a reminder that God would cover the sins of his people. Just as the blood from the lamb smeared on the homes of believers caused the wrath of God to pass over that house, so the blood of Jesus covers us and protects us from God's wrath for our sin. When Israel disobeyed, Moses was the mediator for the people, and at one point he made Israel say, "We will do everything the Lord has said." Then Moses sprinkled them with blood as a blood oath. The reality, of course, is they did not do everything the Lord said, and neither do you or I. Yet, a blood oath demands blood if it is broken. That is what we have in Christ, our substitutionary sacrifice. Any other view of what happened on the cross takes away from the necessary act Jesus performed and the power of this symbol.

Our sins are forgiven by the broken body and blood of Jesus on the cross. It's tempting to try and rectify something that we have done wrong. When I miss a shot in a basketball game, I want to get the ball back and make it right by making the next shot. But the new covenant reminds us we, by ourselves, are powerless to make up for our sin against God-only Christ can. On the other hand, it's easy to feel discouraged that we don't measure up to Christ. Perhaps you walk around in shame, believing Jesus can't really forgive your sin. Or maybe you fear some theoretical future circumstance where your faith is tested, and you fail. Remember the disciples' response; they knew they were capable of betrayal even though they loved and followed Jesus. Likewise, you may feel your weakness before Christ. That feeling is part of the former covenants-that in order for God to bless you, it requires obedience on your part. But the beauty of the new covenant is Christ obeys perfectly on our behalf. The starting point

of Christianity is to recognize you cannot make right the penalty of your sin and you cannot "out sin" Jesus' forgiveness.

Jesus said, *"This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many..."* Not all, but many. Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient for all sin, but it does not cover everyone's sin. In other words, the new covenant is offered freely to everyone, but each individual is responsible for entering into this relationship with Jesus. And not everyone will choose to do so. The consequence of being outside of God's saving grace is eternal condemnation. You should ask yourself, "How do I know if I am in this new covenant?" The answer is this, do you confess your sin to Jesus and trust in His sacrificial death? Has His grace melted your heart to the point of worship? Do you seek to know Jesus and submit your life to Him? These are all indicators that you have faith in Christ. If you do not, what is stopping you right now? His forgiveness is offered to you right now; you must only trust in Christ with your heart and confess with your mouth that He is Lord.

There is eternal security for believers.

Jesus died on the cross, that is a historical fact. Jesus died on the cross for our sins, that is a theological reality. The past action cannot be reversed, and it need not be redone. When a sports player is interviewed after they win a championship, you might hear them say, "No one can ever take this away from us." Their victory cannot be undone. How much more does this apply to us! No one can undo the past achievement of our Lord and Savior. Every time we drink from the cup and eat the bread, we are celebrating, "Our Christ has done the work we needed and could not do ourselves! And nothing can change that." The last part of our text says, *"I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now until the day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."* This is a reference to the final banquet that Isaiah predicts at the end of time. When we are ushered into His eternal Kingdom, we will dine with Christ at an eternal banquet. But notice, it is Christ who promised to offer the disciples, and all of His disciples, the wine in heaven; because it is Christ who holds us close in His covenant with God.

Until that time, his church will continue to take the bread and continue to drink the cup as our symbol of this new covenant. This new covenant which promises the faithful and true Adam who acted obediently to the point of death. The new covenant which promises the salvation of the world and to make all things new. The new covenant which gives us the Law written on our hearts. The new covenant which makes Jesus the everlasting King

over his Kingdom that has no end. The new covenant between God the Father and His Son of which His church is included. The new covenant which gives each of us the joy to sing,

"My sin, o the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part but the whole, was nailed to the cross, and I bare it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord oh my soul!"

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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