



## **Recap – The Grace of God in Preaching**

During the week I did a 1-day course at our local Telecentre which was about using the MYOB computer programme. It was a very good course, but it was interesting during lunch as we were talking how many people said that they struggled to really concentrate, since they had not done any training like this for some time. The discipline of really listening to the instructor and following with what he was saying was a challenge for many, even though what he was saying was useful and important.

It reminded me of what we talked about on my last visit – the Grace of God in Preaching. We recognised that the discipline of listening well is something that most people in our culture are out of practice with. If we are to receive the grace of God in preaching, which is the transformation of our lives through the renewing of our minds so that we may glorify God and discover the joy of living according to His will, then we must learn to be faithful listeners. As God’s Word is taught faithfully and as we listen and apply it faithfully then God will make it fruitful. It’s one of the great principles of the Christian life: when we are faithful God makes us fruitful.

However if we will not choose to apply our minds during the preaching of God’s word – if we just let it wash over us without sinking in and making a difference – then we will miss that grace of God. Not only that, but preachers will recognise our indifference, and they will resort to increasing gimmickry just to get our attention and try get something through to us. And because so much time and attention is being devoted to trying to get people interested, the quality and quantity of Bible teaching will be sacrificed. The sword of the Spirit will be sheathed and we will all be poorer for it.

So please, regardless of how good a communicator the preacher is, don’t miss the grace of God in preaching. Tune in and let the Spirit of God use the Word of God to do a great work in your mind, in your heart and in your life so that God may be glorified, that you may receive joy and that you may be equipped to bless others.

## **Introduction – The Relay for Life**

Last Sunday morning I stumbled into church 15 minutes late. I hadn’t showered or cleaned my teeth in over 24 hours. I hadn’t shaved for about 3 days. I was wearing a crumpled up T-shirt and tracksuit pants and had only managed about an hour and a half of sleep overnight. As I walked in the worship leader began the service. I walked up the front, picked up my slightly out of tune guitar and started playing, and we had a fantastic service!

What was going on? Well last weekend our church family in Naremben entered a team in the Relay for Life. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the relay it’s basically a 24 or 19-hour walking or running relay around a course in order to raise funds for cancer research and programmes to help people who are battling with cancer. I had the privilege of helping out as a DJ and M.C., as well as performing some songs with a friend from church and taking turns walking around the town oval. It finished at 10am which is when our church service normally starts, which is why a bunch of us were late that morning!

One of the things that our local committee organised as part of the relay was a special “Hope” sign. It was a reminder of why we were doing what we were doing. After midnight most of the lights were turned off, and there was just one lit up area and this glowing hope sign. As I walked around the track in the early hours of the morning I would walk through the darkness and then curve around to the left where I would see this sign and each time I saw it my heart lifted and I was filled with



renewed purpose. That's kind of like what Communion is for Christians. It is a sign that refocusses us on the things that really matter. It is a message that never loses its power – it never becomes boring or irrelevant or old. It never loses its power.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

A couple of weeks ago a young man stood up in our church and read just a few words from the account of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed "...yet not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). He reminded us that Jesus chose to subject Himself to the cross, knowing in advance what it would involve. He then read to us some information he'd got from the internet about the physical suffering Jesus went through, describing the blood loss, agonising pain, dehydration, physical shock, mental anguish, exhaustion, internal injuries and asphyxiation that Jesus suffered. As these things were read out with medical precision my heart was thumping with the reminder that He chose all of this. None of us have any way of understanding the spiritual weight of the sins of the world being heaped upon Him, or the relational pain of being separated from His Father – those things we will never comprehend. But the sheer physical torment alone is enough to leave us shattered as we realise again that He chose this death so that we might have eternal life.

As I got up to preach a little while later – still trembling inside – I knew that the hearts of the people were prepared to hear God's Word. If our salvation matters so much to Jesus, how can we do anything else but apply ourselves wholeheartedly to living it out the way that He is instructing us to? Would we dare harbour sin in our lives, that sent Him to such a death? Would we dare ignore Him who died for us when He says "Follow Me"? Would we dare be held back by hardship or fear, when He has done this for us? Would we dare take for granted what His death has purchased for us?

This is the grace of God in communion. No matter what our journey has been like, we come to communion and everything is brought back to what matters.

The celebration of communion - the Lord's Supper – each week is a key part of our heritage in Churches of Christ. Today we're going to explore some of the ways in which celebrating communion together is a means of experiencing afresh the grace of God, and we're going to challenge ourselves to make sure that we are not missing the grace of God in the way that we participate each week.

Our focus will be on how we celebrate communion – we're not going to try and cover all that communion means to us because we'd never come to the end of it!



## Keys to Experiencing the Grace of God in Communion

### Key #1: Reverence for God

#### 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

<sup>17</sup> In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. <sup>20</sup> When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, <sup>21</sup> for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. <sup>22</sup> 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!

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup> 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." <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

<sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. <sup>30</sup> That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. <sup>32</sup> When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

<sup>33</sup> So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>1</sup>

What's going on here? As Christians are getting together for fellowship one of the things they do is celebrate the Lord's Supper as part of the meal they share. This is a great thing to do when you are sharing a meal with Christians. Even though we have a special communion service each week with our whole church family, I would encourage people to remember the body and blood of Jesus in meals that you share with Christians in any context, it transforms the nature of your fellowship together.

The problem was that some of the Christians in Corinth are being much too casual in how they approach the Lord's Supper, and in how they treat their brothers and sisters in Christ. They have not given sufficient thought to how they should celebrate communion, and accordingly they have lost sight of its meaning and significance and are completely missing the grace of God in communion. Not only that, but they are hurting others in their fellowship. There's a whole lot of cultural baggage that's contributing to that, which we won't go into today, but Paul needs to remind them to approach communion thoughtfully, carefully, reverently. He clearly says that God has already been judging them for their lack of reverence and sincerity, and he urges them to examine their own hearts and make sure that they are ready to participate in the Lord's Supper.

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<sup>1</sup>All Scriptures from *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

## 1 Peter 1:17-21

<sup>17</sup> Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. <sup>18</sup> For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. <sup>20</sup> He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. <sup>21</sup> Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.



If someone was to toss you this golf ball, many of us would feel comfortable catching that casually in one hand, and holding on to it without a lot of care, maybe throwing it around or bouncing it.

On the other hand, if someone was to pass you the “Great Star of Africa”, which is around the same size as this golf ball, you would probably be a little more careful! The “Great Star of Africa” is part of the English crown jewels and is estimated to be worth in excess of 400 million dollars! In fact some valuers refuse to even suggest a value for it, instead just describing it as priceless.



Because we take communion regularly, we are in danger of thinking of it as something common and unremarkable, just like this golf ball. But while the grape juice and unleavened bread are common and unremarkable, what they signify to us is infinitely precious. Far more precious than any diamond, or any quantity of any perishable things such as silver or gold.

We have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and we must never become complacent about that in how we celebrate communion and in how we live our lives. Part of the grace of God in communion is that it restores us to a position of appropriate reverence toward Him, by which we remember the price paid to redeem us, and we commit ourselves again to live our lives here in reverent fear as a result. We will not turn back to the empty way of life that Christ has rescued us from. We will not carelessly do the things that caused Him such pain. We will incur our Father's judgement because of our contempt for His Son's sacrifice.

## Key #2: Self Examination

This key flows very naturally from the first. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, we need to judge ourselves before we participate in communion. We need to examine ourselves.

Reverence for God always produces repentance in us.

Looking at the holiness of God and the depth of His love for us always makes us conscious that we are not yet like Him. We have fallen short. We have strayed back into the empty way of life that Christ has redeemed us from.

However we don't become mired in guilt and self-loathing as we realise these things.

Rather as we take the bread and the juice we are filled with awe and gratitude that our sins have been forgiven, that we don't need to hold on to them any more. We confess them and we receive forgiveness and the knowledge that God has removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west.

## 1 John 1:5-10

<sup>5</sup> *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.* <sup>6</sup> *If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.* <sup>7</sup> *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

<sup>8</sup> *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.* <sup>9</sup> *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* <sup>10</sup> *If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

This passage in John is not talking about how to receive eternal life, it is talking about how to live as people who have received eternal life. You might say “Hang on, but it says we need to confess our sins and be forgiven. Surely Christians have already been forgiven for their sins?”

Yes, we have, and that’s where understanding the context of a passage is important. In 1 Corinthians 11 we read that God had judged Christians for not having a right attitude in how they approached the Lord’s Supper. In Hebrews 12 we read how God disciplines us as a father disciplines his children.

When God forgives us as the Righteous Judge, He takes away the things for which we deserve punishment. He could only do this justly by having those things credited to Christ, who took the penalty for us. Every Christian has been forgiven by God as Judge.

When God forgives us as Father, he takes away the things that as a loving Father He would otherwise need to discipline us out of. The things he would need to purify us from.

When my children are behaving sinfully, it obviously puts a strain on my relationship with them. If they’re being disobedient or disrespectful or argumentative our whole family gets disrupted. In those situations my responsibility as a parent is to discipline them in such a way that they are purified from those behaviours and attitudes and everyone is blessed as a result, but the process of discipline is rarely pleasant or easy. Until the child has a change of heart that process continues and becomes more intense.

What I love is when one of my kids comes to me of their own volition and owns up to something, or apologises for something. We can deal with it and then move on.

The Grace of God in communion is that it reminds us of the incredible privilege of being a child of God and gives us a chance to deal with whatever needs to be dealt with in our relationship with Him.

The first 2 keys were very closely related: communion restores us to a position of reverence for God which causes us to closely examine our own lives. The final key flows again from the first 2, and in many ways the area in which the first 2 are most clearly demonstrated.

## Key #3: Relational Integrity

Integrity means wholeness. It is the opposite to hypocrisy, which is when you show different faces to different people. Relational integrity means that we are in right relationship with God (first 2 keys) and with each other. We cannot claim to be in right relationship with God if we are not in right relationship with others. That’s not to say that our relationships with others must all be right – that doesn’t just depend on us. But from our side of things, we might have right attitudes and behaviours toward others. We must be relating to them in a way which is godly. If we aren’t doing that, then our relationship with God is not as it should be.

### Colossians 1:3-6

<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— <sup>5</sup> the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup> that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

Being impacted by the message of the gospel always produces love for one another. Therefore if we are showing signs of not loving one another (as some were in Corinth) then we clearly are not being sufficiently impacted by the gospel and therefore missing the grace of God in communion.

Let's make this more clear by looking at the example of Jesus as He instituted the Lord's Supper...

### John 13:1-5, 12-17

*It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.*

<sup>2</sup> The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. <sup>3</sup> Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; <sup>4</sup> so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. <sup>5</sup> After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

<sup>12</sup> When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. <sup>13</sup> "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. <sup>16</sup> I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

### Luke 22:14-27

<sup>14</sup> When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. <sup>15</sup> And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

<sup>17</sup> After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. <sup>18</sup> For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

<sup>19</sup> And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

<sup>20</sup> In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. <sup>21</sup> But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. <sup>22</sup> The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him."

<sup>23</sup> They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

<sup>24</sup> Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. <sup>26</sup> But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. <sup>27</sup> For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.



Jesus is showing His disciples a new way to live with one another. We are by nature selfish, competitive, argumentative, status-conscious and so on. We are called to follow Jesus' example of giving up that empty way of life and instead choosing a life of love, humility and service.

Jesus served us by doing what only He could do, in going to the cross for our sins and granting us eternal life. He also served His friends by doing what any of them could have done but none of them wanted to do and therefore didn't do! He told them to follow His example, and that was to become the characteristic of the Church.

What does it mean for us to give up our preferences, our ambitions, our comforts in order to serve one another in love? When we celebrate communion we should be reminded of Jesus' example and we should examine ourselves to see whether or not we are following it.

You cannot take communion while being locked in a bitter dispute with a fellow believer. You cannot take communion if you are in the habit of criticising other believers, slandering them, ignoring their needs while pursuing your own and so on. Communion does not fit with any of these things.

**1 John 3:16** says: *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."*

A little later on in chapter **4:19-21**, John writes: *"<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."*

This is what I mean by relational integrity. You can't say you love God if you will not love your brother or sister in Christ.

Remember the teaching of Jesus in the sermon on the mount, found in **Matthew 5:21-24**

*<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca\*,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*

*<sup>23</sup> "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.*

\* My translation - "You brainless idiot!"

God cares about the condition of our relationships with others. He cares about how we are treating one another.

I remember when I was a kid (somewhere between 8 & 12 years old!) I was sitting in church during a communion talk when someone referred to that passage from Matthew 5. It really spoke to me, as during the previous week I'd been pretty nasty to my sister in an argument we'd had during a long car trip. I knew this passage as a kid, and so I was always careful not to call anyone "Raca" or "Fool", but I used plenty of other unpleasant names! A good exercise in missing the point of what Jesus was saying!

Anyhow I leaned across to my sister then and there and apologised for what I'd said. She was a bit stunned, and so was my Mum, sitting between us in the front row of church while I am apologising



to my big sister and causing a bit of a scene in doing so! Mum suggested that we talk about this later, so that day I let the communion elements pass me by – I felt that until I'd dealt with this issue I wasn't ready to take communion.

Some churches have special services where they deal with relationship issues between people before they celebrate communion together. Sometimes that involves literally washing the feet of someone you have had issues with.

We need to be conscious of relational integrity when we take communion.

When you think about the cross, remember that it has both horizontal and vertical aspects. The cross is about what God was doing to reconcile us to himself (vertical) and also us to each other (horizontal). Both are necessary. When we celebrate communion we must be concerned for both.

That is one reason why in our tradition we usually hold on to our cups until everyone has one to drink from. It is a simple way of showing that we are one body, and all the parts have concern for each other.

So there are our 3 keys to experiencing the grace of God in communion: Reverence for God, Self Examination and Relational Integrity. There's obviously a lot more we could talk about, but if we can remember those three things each time we approach communion we will find that it is never an empty ritual, rather it is a life-changing experience of the grace of God.