

Praying at the Lord's Table

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Introduction

I believe that those of us who publicly preach and teach may have neglected the subject of the Lord's Supper. Perhaps we have assumed that every Christian already understands this subject so well that we do not need to spend time on it. Such an assumption is certainly unwarranted. As I travel about I have opportunity to worship with brethren over a wide geographical area, both nationally and internationally. I thus hear a wide variety of prayers at the Lord's Table. Unfortunately, these prayers often indicate misconceptions and ignorance about the Supper itself, as well as about the prayers to be prayed in connection with it. My intent in the remarks that follow is not to criticize harshly, belittle, or judge the heart of any brother who leads a prayer in this Sacred Memorial. Nor do I wish to cause any brother to be more nervous and self-conscious than he might already be in fulfilling this important duty. My only purpose is to encourage all who may read these lines to lead Scriptural prayers. Surely we all want to understand and obey the Bible as precisely as possible, whether on this or any other subject.

The Content of Prayers at the Table

The New Testament gives us no explicit information on what should characterize our prayers in the Lord's Supper other than His example at its institution. This information, however, is very instructive if we will but examine it carefully. A brief examination of the pertinent passages is therefore in order. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul give descriptions of the inauguration of this memorial. (Mark's account so closely parallels the very words of Matthew's that we will refer only to the other three henceforth.)

Perhaps the most common phrase in prayers at the Lord's Table is "Father, bless this bread/cup." Likely, whoever first employed these words believed that he was expressing the meaning of the opening words of Matthew's account of the institution of the Supper: "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it; and he gave to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body" (Mat. 26:26).¹

Thus before Jesus broke and distributed the bread to the apostles He "blessed" (ASV) ("blessed it," KJV [*it* was supplied by translators]). What did the Lord do when He "blessed" before breaking and distributing the bread? Note that, unlike the familiar prayer phrase, Jesus did not **ask the Father to bless the bread**, but Matthew says Jesus "blessed." (It is merely the KJV translators' opinion that He "blessed" the bread specifically by their addition of the pronoun,

it.) Even if we allow the KJV speculation, the text still fails to depict the Lord as **asking God's blessing** on the bread.)

With but little reflection one should be able to understand that Jesus did not (nor do we) need to ask God's blessing on the bread and what it represents. The Father's blessing has been on the sacrificial offering of the Lamb of God from before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20). His blessing was surely also on the Supper and its elements without the Lord's asking His Father for such. If Jesus did not ask God's blessing on the bread when He "blessed" before breaking and distributing it, what did He do? What does Matthew mean? It is important for us to answer this question because of its bearing on the nature of our prayers in the Lord's Supper.

In his very next statement, Matthew provides his own explanation of the meaning of the "blessing" Jesus did: "And he took a cup, and **gave thanks**, and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins" (vv. 26–28, emph. DM). Unless the Lord did one thing relating to the bread and something different relating to the cup when He "blessed" before breaking the bread, this term simply means that He expressed thanks for it.

Luke's account is an additional inspired commentary on the "blessing" Jesus did before breaking the bread:

And he took bread, and when he had **given thanks**, he brake it, and gave to them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. And the cup in like manner after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood, even that which is poured out for you (Luke 22:19–20, emph. DM).

Instead of saying, as Matthew did that Jesus "blessed" before He broke the bread, Luke says Jesus "gave thanks for the bread" in describing the very same event. Jesus then did the same ("in like manner") for the cup. Obviously, Luke is not telling us that the Lord did something different concerning the bread from what Matthew says He did in saying that he "blessed" concerning it. Thus when Jesus "blessed" (Matthew), He simply "gave thanks for the bread" (Luke)!²

Consider now the further witness of Paul:

For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed **took bread**; and when he had **given thanks**, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me. In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Cor. 11:23–25, emph. DM).

Paul did not get his information from another apostle or any other man, but directly from the Lord (cf. Gal. 1:11–12). As did Luke, Paul specifically stated that the Lord **gave thanks** for

the bread. Luke and Paul say explicitly that Christ gave thanks for the bread and Matthew states explicitly that He gave thanks for the cup.

Let me summarize:

1. Jesus prayed before distribution of both the bread and the fruit of the vine.³
2. He simply uttered a prayer of thanksgiving for each element.
3. When He “blessed” before He broke the bread simply means that He gave thanks for it.

If this example teaches us to pray before passing each of the emblems, it also teaches us that thanksgiving for each of these emblems should characterize those prayers. (Incidentally, the simple reading of the Lord’s example exposes the error of the practice in some congregations of having only one prayer, which includes both the bread and the cup before the bread is distributed.)

The New Testament explicitly teaches us to intercede for one another, for the sick, for those who preach the Gospel, for our rulers, and, by implication, for and concerning many other things. It also teaches us to bring other requests and supplications before God’s throne. We do not do enough of such praying. However, **at the Lord’s Table is not the place for such varied prayers**. They only serve to distract from the singular emphasis of the Lord’s Supper. The one type of prayer, authorized by the Lord’s example, in the Lord’s Supper, is thanksgiving—first for the bread, then for the fruit of the vine. Yet, the prayers at the Lord’s Table often include many extraneous things while sometimes altogether omitting thanksgiving for the respective elements. I urge brethren, when called upon to lead a prayer at the Lord’s table, to take care specifically to thank God for the bread and for the cup, and for that which they signify.

The Supper Relates Directly to the Son of God, Not to the Father

The New Testament refers to this memorial as the “Lord’s table” (Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 10:21) and the “Lord’s supper” (1 Cor. 11:20) in reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, **never to God, the Father**. It belongs peculiarly to the Christ because it commemorates His sacrifice, the shedding of His blood, and His suffering on the cross. Hence, the Bible never refers to it as “the Father’s supper” or “the Spirit’s supper.” I have never heard a brother refer to it as the “Spirit’s supper” (although I will not be surprised to hear that some liberal brethren do so). Nor have I heard it called the “Father’s supper” explicitly. However, in the wording of their prayers at the Table brethren frequently imply as much.

Very often I hear the Table prayers include the following verbiage: “Father, we thank Thee for this, Thy Table.” The brother who thus prays, states—whether or not intentionally—that

the Table/Supper is the Father's. Yet we have seen that this is not the case; it belongs to (and is in Scripture identified peculiarly with) the second member of the Godhead.

Similarly, "We thank Thee Father for...Thy body" or "...Thy blood," also constitutes manifestly erroneous wording because it fails to keep a Scriptural distinction clear. The Father did not give His body or blood, but He gave His Son (John 3:16). The Son, Christ Jesus, yielded up His body and sacrificed His blood. The Father never had either a body or blood to offer. Not the Father, but the Word, "became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14). The Father was in Heaven when the Lord addressed Him in His crucifixion agony: "And Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said this, he gave up the ghost" (Luke 23:46).

There is another possible explanation for such unscripturally worded prayers: The prayer leader may have unconsciously begun addressing Jesus in His prayer and is thus speaking to Him when he refers to "Thy table," "Thy body," and "Thy blood." Should this be the case, this latter error is as egregious as the former. There is no New Testament authority for addressing Jesus in prayer. Rather, He taught the apostles (and us through them) that after His ascension we are not to address our pleas to Him, but to the Father in His (Christ's) name (John 16:23–24). The apostles understood this teaching and thus "lifted up their voice to God with one accord" (Acts 4:24). Paul issued the very same precept: "And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks to God the Father** through him" (Col. 3:17; emph. DM). Let us then pray, "Father, we thank Thee for this bread that symbolizes the sacrificed body of Thy Son," and "Father, we thank Thee for this fruit of the vine that reminds us of the blood Jesus shed for our sins on the cross"—or similar wording.

That Which the Supper/Table Memorializes

Again, prayers led during the Lord's Supper often betray either ignorance or a lack of thought (perhaps both?) concerning the purpose of the observance. Likely most brethren comprehend that its intent is to be a memorial—a reminder—of one or more things pertaining to the Christ. The Lord was explicit in this regard. When He instituted the supper, He said, "This do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; cf. 1 Cor. 11:24–25).

Are we to remember everything about the Lord as we eat the supper? Assuredly, everything about His remarkable life and teaching is worthy of our remembrance. The Lord underscores this fact by His promise to the apostles that the Holy Spirit would (among other things) "bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you" (John 14:25b). Are we to remember His virgin birth, the few vignettes from His childhood, His baptism, His temptations, His

wondrous miracles, His incomparable parables, His rebukes of the Jewish leaders, His weeping over Jerusalem, His prayer/betrayal/arrest in Gethsemane, His trials, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His ascension, or even other occasions? All of these and other things concerning His earthly life are unarguably significant and worthy of our meditation and thanksgiving. Which, if any, of these matters pertaining to Him did He intend for us to remember as we observe the supper each Lord's day?

The Lord's Table prayers also reveal a widespread misconception of that which the Lord intended for us to remember as we observe the supper. The prayer phrase (or one very similar), *We thank Thee for this supper, which commemorates the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord*, is in common use by brethren in all parts of the country. This verbiage appears to have been borrowed from Paul's listing of the fundamental facts of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3–4). I am quick to say that we should never cease to remember and thank God for each of these astounding, historical, and sin-shattering events.

Without His death, we would be hopelessly lost in our sins with no means of forgiveness (2 Cor. 5:14–15; Heb. 9:22; 1 Pet. 1:18–20; et al). Without His burial, the witnesses of it, and the events surrounding it, His resurrection could never have been certified; it ties the Lord's sacrificial death and His triumphant resurrection together. Without His resurrection, He would have been exposed as a mere man—moreover, a deceiver and an imposter (Acts 17:30–31; 1 Cor. 15:12–17; et al.).

However, having said all this, there is no Scriptural hint that the Lord had all three of these events (much less the numerous other things about His earthly life) in mind in instituting His supper. He did not even have two of the three in mind, but one alone. Moreover, we do not have to speculate about that one thing that He intended us to especially remember as we eat the bread and drink of the cup: "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye **proclaim the Lord's death** till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26; emph. DM).

We can deduce as much from the very elements of the supper themselves—the bread to symbolize His body, willingly offered in our stead and the fruit of the vine to represent His shed blood—both of which are inseparably related to His death. So, as important as the Lord's burial (by Joseph and Nicodemus) and His resurrection were, our remembrance of them is not the Lord's aim in establishing or in our observance of His Supper. Purely and simply put, the Lord's Supper is a memorial to His death, period.

Surely, our prayers in connection with the Lord's Supper should reflect its plainly stated Scriptural purpose. Further, we have no authority to leave the impression (by our prayers or

otherwise) that the Sacred Supper has any other memorial design. Again, I doubt that brethren who use the incorrect and misleading phrase (i.e., *the death, burial, and resurrection...*) have consciously set out to mislead others about the Lord's Supper. I suspect that some brethren are simply ignorant of Paul's clear declaration (1 Cor. 11:26) and have added this good-sounding (to them) phrase to their Table prayers. Others have simply not given sufficient thought to the fact that they are going beyond the stated purpose of the Lord's Supper in these innocent-sounding words. Surely, none would ever intentionally do such.

Conclusion

The Lord's Supper is central to the Gospel as a whole because it commemorates the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God for the sins of the world. This one fact alone should stimulate everyone who has been redeemed by the Lamb's blood to diligently study what the New Testament says about this Sacred breaking of bread. I especially exhort men who have the solemn assignment to lead a prayer for the Lord's Supper to think carefully in advance about the wording that they will use and to studiously avoid words and phrases that either state or imply false concepts. In light of the passages we have noticed, I suggest the wording of our prayers at the table similar to the following as appropriate:

Dear God and Father in Heaven, we thank Thee for this, the Lord's Supper, which He established to commemorate His death. We thank Thee especially for this bread (or this fruit of the vine), which reminds us of the sacrifice of His body in the awful agony of the cross for our sakes (or which reminds us of the precious blood He freely shed for our sins on the cross). In His name we pray, amen.

Endnote

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. An additional instance in which Matthew used the term *blessed* in reference to thanksgiving is found by comparing Matthew 14:19 with John 6:11 in the accounts of Jesus' feeding the 5,000.
3. Brethren sometimes refer to the liquid element that is part of the Lord's Supper as "wine." However, neither the Lord nor the inspired writers ever did so, although the Greek words for it (oinos, oxos, gleukos) were readily available to them and were used by them on various occasions. They use only the terms *fruit of the vine* (Mat. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18) and *the cup* in reference to it (Mat. 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 10:16, 21; 11:25–28).

[Note: I wrote this MS, which originally appeared in two parts in my "Editor's Extra" column in the July and August 2000 issues of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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