

Transcribed from Dr. John Armstrong's recorded video message.

This Is My Body, This is My Blood

Mark 14:22-25

I'm very pleased to speak to my friends--my brothers and sisters at UBF church in Chicago. You know we've had a friendship for a long time and it's been mutually beneficial I think I hope that my life and my ministry has given some of God's gifts to you. I know you've given great gifts to me of encouragement and prayer and support and friendship and I'm profoundly grateful especially grateful for my friends Pastor Ron Ward and Pastor Kevin Albright and other elders who served the church together. Grace and peace to all of you in Jesus Christ our one Lord.

I've been asked to speak today on this Palm Sunday which is the beginning of what we call Holy Week--the week to which the gospels devote the most of their attention to bring us to the culmination of Jesus's mission to die for us and to be raised on the third day. Next Sunday we'll celebrate the resurrection of Christ. On Friday in many places we'll celebrate his death. So today, it's a good time to think about the text of the gospels and of Paul as they relate to the Lord's Supper.

I have a powerful memory of my first impressions of the Lord's Supper growing up in a Christian church as a boy at perhaps four or five years old when I was first beginning letters and reading. I remember seeing on the table across the front of the church sanctuary below the pulpit this table that had carved into the wood on the front of it: "Do this in remembrance of me." I remember at five and six and seven having so many questions about what that meant--those childhood questions were answered over time; some of the answers I got as I was growing up are not the answers I would accept today, at least not the way they were taught me. In some cases I would still hold to exactly what I was taught as a child but now six plus decades later I continue with some of the questions answered but new ones that still ask me to respond. And so with that background I come to a text that I know and I love because of its impression upon me from early childhood. Now I think most of you know that the Lord's Supper is referred to in five texts in the New Testament. Some of you may say four; where do you get the fifth one? Well, Matthew, Mark and Luke are obvious and 1 Corinthians 11 is obvious, but have you thought about John chapter 6: "Eat my flesh, drink my blood...If you do not eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no part in me"--clearly a reference to the bread and the cup of our Lord Jesus Christ celebrating the meal at Passover with his disciples. That is in the text we'll look at today.

Now the New Testament has many names for this celebration: it is in 1 Corinthians 11:20 "the Lord's Supper"--that's the first name I heard as a child associated with this celebration. In verse 26 of 1 Corinthians 11 it's called "the Lord's table"--the table that is the Lord's, the Lord Jesus' table; and 1 Corinthians 10 verse 16 it's called the "koinonia," the "fellowship" or the "communion." Communion with the body and blood of Christ and with each other. It's the deepest, richest Greek word in the New Testament for our intimate spirit-given fellowship in the gospel of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:24 there's another word that also occurs in Matthew 26 verse 27: "eucharisto," and it's the word we get our English word eucharist from now. In my tradition, I never heard the word eucharist and when I did I thought it was a particularly Catholic term. It's not a Catholic term. It's a New Testament term. It's a translation a transliteration literally of the Greek word for "thanksgiving" or "giving thanks." Jesus broke bread and "gave thanks"--that's the word eucharist. And then there's the word that does not occur itself in the New Testament, but is not a bad word. It's just not a word that most of us Protestants are familiar

with. It's the word "mass." I don't know what comes to your mind when you hear the word "mass," but the word mass is Latin and it actually means "go and be dismissed." That's a good idea actually. We come to the table to worship together to celebrate the death of Christ together and we go from here by being dismissed to go into the mission of Jesus in the world. The mass is a sending, a missional ceremony, a missional supper. So all these are good words but I particularly like the Lord's table because it stresses communion, and I particularly like eucharist because it stresses our giving thanks to God together.

But there's one thing that all Christians—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestants--of all varieties agree on and it is this: Jesus instituted this meal. He celebrated it with his first disciples in the upper room and he taught them from it. And Saint Paul took that teaching and taught the Christians in Corinth and in turn it was passed on to all the New Testament churches to celebrate the Lord's Supper, to give thanks, to come to this table and commune with the Lord and each other. So all agree Jesus instituted it. And secondly, all Christians agree that the New Testament commands us to do it. Now I would have to go outside Mark and Matthew and Luke to show you this but clearly in Matthew it's implied if not said clearly and in 1 Corinthians 11 it's clearly commanded that we are to take the bread and take the cup and celebrate the Lord's death until he comes. In other words, until the second coming of Christ we are to celebrate his death in this way that he taught his disciples to celebrate his death. They passed it on to us and commanded us and all Christians so far as I know agree with that. Ah well, I can think of a few exceptions--there are a few protestant groups that have reacted against the misuse of the supper so much that they don't celebrate it at all for fear that it will get in the way of their ministry. I don't understand that; I've listened, I've dialogued, I've even had students in Wheaton in my grad classes several who believe that and it made for an interesting discussion in the classroom since most of the students had never heard such an idea. One church of which this is true is the Salvation Army. There are other churches that don't require it, but practice it.

Well all of this raises the questions that we do not agree on. So let me tell you briefly what those [things] are we don't all agree on: the meaning of the supper. We have different ideas about what it means and why we do it. We have different ideas about its importance. In fact, in my own tradition we only celebrated the Lord's Supper four times a year. I don't know how many times you celebrate it at UBF. I celebrated monthly when I was a Baptist minister decades ago. But now quite honestly I don't like to go to worship on Sunday without the Lord's Supper. So I've gone from once a quarter to once a month to now in the last 25 years celebrating it weekly, sometimes more. But how important is it; what is the importance of it. Thirdly, who should come: one of the questions surely all of you ask of your parents is when should my children come? What is the basis of their coming? Who should come: anyone who wants to? I think that answer is a bit weak, if you really study the text of the New Testament and ask hard questions. Should only those who've been baptized receive it? If I had time, I would try to show you why I think that is a strong inference of the New Testament. But then the question is when I've already said about my own background once a quarter and then once a month and now weekly how often--well all we know in the New Testament is we're told to do it as often as we do it in remembrance of him. We're not told how often. That is, most scholars agree that when it says as often as you can as often as you do, it suggests that they're doing it often. I am that persuasion myself, but it is a strong inference again. We are not commanded to keep it weekly in the New Testament.

What does this mean? What does the supper mean for you, for me, for the church? Well these are big questions and Christians—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant--of various varieties do not give the same answer to these kinds of questions. So one has said that the table has become the table that divides rather than unites and I'm afraid that's true. The Lord's Supper is a table that has divided Christians from

one another. This is especially true of Protestants in the time of the Reformation in the 16th century. Calvin and Luther and their respective followers, following Zwingli on Calvin's side and yet developing further the thoughts of the meaning of the supper in John Calvin. They disagreed. And in fact for Martin Luther this was a dividing point with Zwingli and his disciples. So much so that they had a specific debate about the words "this is my body." Luther said it has to mean something in which it is more than a symbol and Zwingli said it is a powerful symbol. But we can debate that. But they debated in such a fierce way that it caused them not to work together and even to start writing politics and treatments against one another's view of the Lord's Supper and to divide fiercely over it. All of this prompted me some years ago to edit a book, actually I have it here in front of me: "Understanding Four Views of the Lord's Supper," and here we look at, I as the editor write the last chapter. In the first chapter we have a Baptist reformed Lutheran and Catholic presentation of how they understand the Lord's Supper, what it means and then each of the authors interacts with how they disagree with the other's presentation. It's very charitably done. It's very honest. But it allows people to see if they want to dig into these questions--how Christians have disagreed, why they've disagreed, what they've disagreed about. But I want to summarize this way: I think it is positively unbelievable that over the table that united Jesus with his first disciples in the symbolism and the reality of his death that we would find ways to tear the body of Christ apart.

Whatever we understand about the meaning and significance of this meal, we should not allow it to force us into conflict with one another. It's a travesty to talk about uniting with Christ, celebrating his presence, being together in oneness, sharing and giving thanks, sharing communion, fellowship, koinonia together, and then be at odds with each other. This by the way is why many traditions celebrate taking another New Testament text what is called "the passing of the peace," some of you may know what that means—"the kiss of peace" (the old translations), the passing of the peace, the affirmation of peace. And this was traditionally connected to what happened just before the church took the Lord's Supper. You didn't just go around and shake one another's hands and then take communion. You rather had a time in which you could go to a brother or sister and ask their forgiveness, seek reconciliation, before you came to the table and most congregations were taught that if you were unreconciled to someone you should not take the meal until you are reconciled, or as much as it is within you, you seek the reconciliation. So it has always been important right down to the centuries that Christians be reconciled with God and each other before they take the Lord's Supper.

Now the text that I want to use today in the second half of this message is from the gospel of Mark, which I understand you've been in this gospel for some time now. And I want to read the text in verses 22 through 25. It's brief but here's what Mark says: "While they were eating the Passover meal--while they were eating the Passover together in the upper room--he took a loaf of bread and after blessing it he broke it gave it to them and said, "This is my body," then (verse 23) he took a cup--a cup, one cup--and after giving thanks he gave it to them--to the disciples, the one cup--and then he gave it to them and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." That's Mark's account.

Now almost all New Testament scholars and students who really explore this have come to the conclusion that Mark was the first gospel written. They've also almost universally concluded that Mark was the person who wrote down from at least an outline if not the actual verbal communication to him from Saint Peter, from Peter the apostle. So it's been traditional to call Mark's gospel Peter's gospel with Mark as the writer. I accept that theory and believe it's substantiated by all kinds of things that occur in the gospel of Mark. What is clear is that Mark is the foundation as it were that Matthew and Luke are

built upon. Matthew expands on Mark, adds things to his account that are not in Mark's account here in chapter 14. And the same in Luke. So there's a very real sense in which the three should be put together.

But since our text is in Mark 14 and this is often the last text people go to to talk about the Lord's Supper, I want to stay with this specific text for a few moments. I submit to you that the most striking thing of Mark's purpose what makes it the most unique in its own way from the other accounts is that he uses the Lord's Supper to interpret the central core concern of the mission of Jesus. His desire is to show the Lord's Supper is meant to advance the mission of Jesus. Now you'll notice if you read this carefully and then look at the other gospels that if you had only the gospel of Mark it would not be specifically clear that the gospel writer was telling you and me to also take this same supper. It just doesn't say that. It says "while they were eating, he took a loaf of bread and after blessing it he broke it and gave it to them and said, "Take it; this is my body," and then he took the cup and after giving thanks he gave [it to] them and all of them drank from it. And then he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for you." He never says, "Do this; tell others." Now obviously Mark is telling us what happened with the disciples in the upper room. But he's not passing it on explicitly telling us we should do it. Now don't be concerned, because Matthew clearly says we should take the meal and continue to celebrate the death of Christ with it. But the two points that are central to the meal itself, that make up the meal, are the bread and the cup. And both are in Mark's account. Especially in Mark the bread here introduced to us as the first element of the supper is situated in a context which makes this text--in the words of my friend Donald Senior, a New Testament scholar at Catholic Theological Union, a foremost scholar, Don Senior says—"this is one of the most vibrant theological crescendos in the gospel of Mark." "A theological crescendo." It's like the orchestral arrangement reaches the high point and this is the crescendo before Jesus dies for our sins. Understandably this scene would provoke their memories and lead them to their own celebration.

So what then is Mark's unique purpose? To give his readers as I've said an explanation of the mission of Jesus so they could understand why he had come and why he was going to die--for what purpose and to what end. This gesture is symbolic. But it's not symbol in the sense that it's just a sign like a stop sign. No, it's a sign in the sense that it's a sign that takes you into the sign itself. It puts you in the story, the symbolism, the reality of what's being portrayed. And it does so with the reference to the bread and the cup. The bread, if you read Mark's gospel carefully, is a constant symbol of two things: first the mission of Jesus--he comes as bread for the world, and the person of Jesus--he is the bread of life, to quote from another gospel. His mission and his person.

Now Mark has previously used bread and loaves in two accounts. You remember then, Mark 6:34-44 where he feeds the 5000 and Mark 8:1-10 when he feeds 4000, not counting women and children. As both texts say, these two stories are told for a very explicit purpose in Mark's gospel. The first one you'll remember in Mark 6:43 at the end of the meal Jesus tells them to gather up the bread that is left over. And how many baskets did they gather? The children might know: 12. What does the number 12 tell us? In the stories of the Old Testament, how many tribes of Israel: 12. Is 12 used in the New Testament in this way of referencing Israel? You bet! All the way to the end of Revelation--12 tribes. 12 baskets. In the second feeding account of bread, how much bread is left over there? Seven. What's the significance of seven? Well some of you were taught that seven is the perfect number. The problem with saying it's the perfect number is it sounds like this is a reference to absolute perfection in the philosophical sense. That's not what it means. It means perfect in the sense of complete, whole. More particularly, in this case, universal. Now consider these two feeding stories and the bread and the loaves. In the first instance in Mark 6, the crowd that is fed is Jewish. The reference to the 12 is Jewish. The whole

symbolism of Mark 6 is very Jewish. But in Mark 8 it shifts. At this point, Jesus is on the other side of the lake and he's among Gentiles, the nations. Thus, the seven of universal and complete, the whole world. So these two stories remind us of both the Jewish and the Gentile aspects of Jesus' mission and his death. These stories of feeding them become action summaries in Mark's gospel. That's pretty typical of Mark. His summaries are always very short and very action-oriented. Jesus' mission to the Jews and the Gentiles is action-oriented. The story of these two miracles of bread is the story of feeding Jews and Gentiles, extending the mission. In fact the loaves of bread throughout Mark's gospel are always to be read in some way symbolically. This is the third in a series of messianic meals and we know of course that the great final messianic meal is the great supper of the Lord Jesus, in which we sit down at a feast with him. His body then in this text is his very person, his very self. He's going to give himself by giving up his body to be broken and killed for us, for the whole world.

The second element here is the cup in Mark 10:38 and 39 the cup is used by Jesus when he's teaching his disciples about his future which they didn't understand that he has to die. And he refers to his dying as drinking the cup to the bottom, as it were, drinking the whole cup unto his own death. That is, he invites his disciples to drink the cup, if they can, by sharing in his sacrifice. If they will, he invites them to drink the cup, if they can to share his sacrifice. If they will, well at this moment they didn't drink the cup. Except this cup of the supper which is called by Jesus here in Mark "the cup of the new covenant, which is in his blood." Now you notice that Mark uses the phrase "for [the] many" in verse 24. He says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." The cup is poured out for many. The cup of his death is poured out for many. Does the "many" mean some, but not all? No, the word many here is a Hebrew idiom, a Semitic idiom. And it's an idiom for "universal." The many is everybody. It's not many in exclusion, but many meaning many peoples, many nations. For the many, in fact, reminds us of Jeremiah 31 in which the prophet speaks of God writing on the human heart of the people of the covenant his law. So that from the greatest of them to the least of them they would know him. The law of God written on the heart. The personal knowledge and relationship with the Lord Jesus and with his Father. This is the promise of the prophet. Israel--faithful Israel--looked forward to a day in which the law would be written on the heart and they would walk in the fullness of God's Spirit. And Mark says that day has come and this supper reveals it.

Mark uses this supper scene in chapter 14 to confront his readers with a powerful theological interpretation of the death of Jesus, a powerful theological definition and interpretation of the death of Jesus. Think about it: his death will be his body, his flesh, given up for the world, for the many. His blood will be spilled from his head and the crown of thorns, spear cast into his side, the lashes on his back. His blood was shed. The Old Testament says "the life of the flesh is in the blood." [Lev 17:11] He shed his blood, not because we wipe blood on us and it cleanses us literally. No, blood is life and blood cleanses because blood is the life of the Son of God. That's the meaning of the references to blood and it's the meaning here. This cup is the blood of Christ. This cup is the ultimate symbol of him giving up his life for you and me. We accept the cup. He gives his life for the world. And he renews the covenant by establishing in us, inside of us by the Spirit, a new covenant--a new covenant he says here in his blood.

So, "Truly," he says, "I tell you (verse 25) I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." He says we won't celebrate this meal in this way again until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness. When we say "when we drink it new in the kingdom of God," I take it that that's a reference to the kingdom to come after his second coming. It could be that it's a reference to the kingdom that will come after the ascension of Jesus. Both are true. But I think it's right to assume he's referencing the kingdom which is to come. Now the kingdom has already come in Jesus and he's preaching the good news of the kingdom and his disciples have entered the kingdom. But it's

always in anticipation of the kingdom which is to come. We live in the “already, not yet” if you’ve heard that phrase before. We live in the already--the now of the kingdom, and the not yet of the kingdom which is to come. We should not set our hopes on human leaders. We should not set our hopes on politicians and government officials, never! It is a travesty to see Christians today talk about leaders--even leaders who are not Christians--as the hope of people, as the hope for the future, as the solution to our problems. My brothers and sisters, it is not so! Yes, we need government. We need good rulers, good leaders. But this is not our hope. This is not our gospel. This is not our anticipation. This is not what we tell the world. We tell the world that the hope is in Christ and Christ alone. And when we come to this table we come to celebrate the reason that is so: that his body was given for us, that his blood was shed for us, and that this meal takes us up into this glorious gift of Christ’s death for us. And then when he’s raised on the third day, Paul says he was raised for our justification. He was raised to save us. He died to rescue us; he was raised to redeem us and save us. A death without a resurrection does not bring hope. But a resurrection without this death, does not have the passion that was required for Jesus to drink the cup to its depths, to let his body be broken and to be tortured in his passion for us to demonstrate to us how great is the Father’s love to give his only begotten Son! How great is the love of Jesus to voluntarily, sacrificially, personally give up himself to the cruelest tortures and shame and scorn so that he can save us--so that he does save us now.

I’m going to close with this. It’s not in Mark’s gospel, as I’ve said, but it is in what Paul says: we are to “do this in remembrance of him,” and I quoted this earlier, “until he comes.” Why do we need to remember until he comes? May I submit to you that this underscores how tragic but true it is that though we have once been pardoned, that we’ve met God in his grace, and for some of us that was a transforming memorable life-changing experience, in which we were turned inside out and refreshed anew and we entered into joy the joy of the Lord and the strength of our salvation in Christ. But you know what? As wonderful as that is, you know what we do? We forget? We go on about our business. We study the Bible. Oh we study the Bible. We go to Bible studies, we listen to Bible messages, we study the book. But we forget the Lord Jesus. Is it possible? Oh yes it’s possible, for any of us, for me, for you, to forget. To forget that which is central to everything we believe and confess. That Jesus is Lord, that he gave up his body as bread for the world and he shed his blood to save us and forgive us and cleanse us. The bread and the cup bring us again and again into communion, into koinonia, into thanksgiving together, so that we might be at the Lord’s table and we might take the Lord’s Supper and we might celebrate his death until he comes. I need this and one of the reasons why it’s become more frequent in my life is because I realize the older I get how feeble I am to remember the most important thing in life. How easy it is to get sidetracked by all the things going on in the news, all the things that get my attention. I have a lot of interests--I was a history major; I studied political science; I’m deeply interested in history, especially American history. I’m particularly interested in political science, political systems, political ideas. I’ll discuss them with you anytime you want a discussion. But the danger for me is that these things become too important and they are [of] such minor importance to the death of Christ. Oh my dear ones, do not forget: Jesus gave up his body and his blood to save you. This supper will remind you, will feed you, will nourish you, and will strengthen your faith, if you receive it in obedience to Christ with a heart of faith. Amen.