

Part 46: The Symbols and Substance of Grace

Tyler Velin | Matthew 26:17-35

March 3, 2019

Lent starts this Wednesday, and just last night my wife and I explained to my kids that for the season of lent we are going to give up TV. We began to explain that Lent marked a period of time before Easter where we remember what Jesus gave up when he came to earth by giving up some form of our own comfort. Just as Jesus was tested in the desert for 40 days, our family is going to take up this practice to remind us of Jesus sacrifice for us.

Now depending upon your church background, I'm sure the idea of Lent might bring up mixed emotions. For some, as was for me growing up it was synonymous with religious rituals and practices which were lifeless and unneeded. Practices, patterns, habits and sacraments often carry with them a negative and cold feel to them.

But the truth is anytime we are part of any culture at all, we have practices, patterns, habits and sacraments. In fact one sociologist says that all culture is, is "shared understandings made manifest in act and artifact." In other words all cultures include visible and communicated patterns. Some correspond to religious cultures, and some to sports culture, secular culture or style culture.

I imagine that you at least turned your lights on in your room this morning when you picked out your clothes. Why? Because you care what clothes you put on. The style, the color, the brand names, the aura given off all indicate two things: 1. The response to whatever culture you identify with, and 2. A reflection of that culture wherever you happen to be that day.

If you are a Griz fan, you probably have cultural patterns: wearing specific clothes on specific days, placing flags on your cars every so often. And you probably have cultural sacraments: you watch the game, you perhaps endure the cost of going to Washington Grizzly or the Adams Center.

And the reality is, to not have any of these patters or practices probably means that you are not part of that culture. In other words we are all formed by cultural patterns, and the cultural patterns that we practice contribute to the culture that is around us. We not only live inside of culture, but we have an innate ability to participate in the influence of that culture.

These ideas of patterns and symbols are very important today in the Gospel of Matthew because Jesus is engaging with and creating culture at every turn. Jesus is less than 24 hours away from his death, and in this text Jesus is going to interact with an old pattern, institute a new pattern, but lastly we are going to see the substance behind all of this culture.

Behind all of our cultural sacraments is some substance, some idea, or some person which shapes all that we do. Today, Matthew is going to identify what that should be for those who are believers in Jesus.

In our text today we are going to see Jesus interact with the preexisting culture and covenant of the Passover meal, we are going to see him install a new culture and covenant with the Lord's Supper, and then we are going to see in the final verses the application and blessing of this new covenant.

So what we are going to look at today are three moments in this text. We are going to see **The Symbolism of the Old Covenant, The Substance of the New Covenant, and The Application of Divine Grace.**

Let's begin by reading the first portion of our text together: **Matthew 26:17-19.**

So here we see our first point today: **The Symbolism of the Old Covenant.**

Last week we saw Jesus predicting his death at the Passover feast, we saw the religious officials worried about the people who would gather at the Passover feast, and here we see Jesus and his disciples sit down and partake of the Passover feast. Given its constant presence in the book of Matthew it would do us well to take time and understand more fully what the Passover feast was and why it was important.

In the Old Testament book of Exodus we read of the story of God's people enslaved in Egypt. Oppressed and afflicted, the Lord hears the cry of his people and he makes a covenant with them to redeem them, to bring them out and to carry them to a land flowing with milk and honey. In that land they will no longer be sojourners or strangers, they will be God's people, in God's place, and their culture will be distinct from any other culture for it they will live by God's law, his acts and artifacts.

So God chose a man named Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. As you can imagine, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, did not really like the idea of losing its millions of slaves. So he didn't listen to Moses request. But God desired to show both Pharaoh and the Israelites that he alone was their God. So he sent ten plagues on the nation of Egypt.

Each plague was meant to further harden the heart of Pharaoh until it came time for the final plague the plague of the first born. God warned Pharaoh that on this night, if he would not let God's people go, that at midnight, God will go out over the nation of Egypt and every firstborn child will die. From the firstborn of Pharaoh to the first born of the slaves. But Pharaoh refused, his heart was hardened.

But God provided a way of relief for his people. And it is here we read about the substance and symbolism of the Passover meal: **Exodus 12:1-14.**

So the substance was that at one time and place in history God spared his people from death through the sacrifice of a lamb. But after the Exodus, God commands his people to continue the feast as a symbol of what God did that one night. So for Jews, this Passover meal was not a novelty, it was an annual command from God that they needed to keep, it was part of God's law. It became a cultural marker. To be righteous was to also keep the Passover. It reminded them of the God who had saved them through a sacrifice, and the God who promised to bring them once again into their own kingdom.

What would happen at these feasts was very similar to what we just read. They would prepare unleavened bread to symbolize the haste with which the people left Egypt, they would have bitter herbs to remind them of the bitter affliction they had received when they were enslaved, and they would eat roasted lamb to remind them of the blood which saved them.

From the bitter herbs to the tasteless bread, to the mess of sacrifice, this feast was meant to be a jarring reminder of the cost of redemption. And as Matthew points out, this story of Jesus picks up on the first

day of unleavened bread. The day when Mark and Luke tell us the lambs were beginning to be sacrificed.

All across Jerusalem at this point were faithful Jews traveling to the temple to sacrifice their substitute reminder at the temple. It was estimated that on this Passover day nearly 256,000 lambs were to be slaughtered in Jerusalem. Which means that on just about every street corner you would find a lamb on its way to be killed. Blood would have been a common sight on a day like this, you couldn't escape the sights, sounds and smell of the Passover lamb.

All the while, on the day of preparation, a new Passover lamb was being prepared. All throughout the book of Matthew we have seen Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament law. And here in our passage Jesus is going to fulfill the symbolism of the Passover meal by being the new Passover lamb. And because of that drastic change, he is going to institute a new feast, a new pattern.

Let's continue to read: **Matthew 26:20-30.**

We just read two distinct scenes which occurred at this Passover meal. The first is the world's worst dinner party. One where Jesus publicly acknowledges what Judas has already done in secret. And we are going to come back to that story briefly in a bit.

But what I want to focus on right now is the latter scene where Jesus institutes a new culture marker. As Christians, we don't celebrate the Passover anymore, and the reason why we don't is because the symbolism of the Passover lamb and the deliverance from slavery has given way to the real substance that Jesus brings. Jesus himself acknowledged this back in verse 18 where he marks the time not by the Passover, but by the phrase, "My time is at hand."

This is our second point today: **The Substance of the New Covenant.**

Jesus is helping the disciples understand the events which are about to come by helping them understand the new substance and new symbols of God's new culture.

On the heels of his betrayal Jesus for the first time is explaining to the disciples the significance of his death: His body is going to be broken and his blood is going to be spilled for the many for the forgiveness of sins.

In establishing this new feast there are some aspects where it carries similarities to the Passover, and other places where it is different than the Passover. The contrast is that instead of delivering many people from physical slavery, this new Passover lamb is going to deliver people from their sins.

He is going to forgive them. If you asked the Israelites in Egypt what their greatest problem was, I imagine it would have been clear: Pharaoh. We've always been able to do that haven't we. Ask any era and they'll be able to provide you an answer. The problem is, Pharaoh is gone, Nero is gone, Napoleon is gone, Hitler is gone, Stalin is gone, Castro is gone, but our problem is still here.

But here Jesus is illuminating the depth behind the physical pattern shown in history. Our greatest problem isn't what is external, it is what is internal. We have sins. Our hearts need to be fixed. Jesus didn't come firstly to make you a better you. He came to save you from you.

When it comes to how you view Jesus, do you have this kind of view of him? Do you see him as the one who needs to forgive you of your sins? Because I imagine you are here because you want something, you want a relief from some sort of burden, you want to find a community where you can belong, you want to attain some level of comfort. But lurking behind all of those surface needs is the great need that Jesus here is revealing to you. You need his forgiveness. You need him to change your heart and cleanse you of your sin.

You can come to Christianity for a myriad of reasons, but I promise you, you will not be able to find rest until you see that Jesus has come to solve a specific problem. You must let him forgive your sins.

Jesus came not to deliver us from physical oppression, but a spiritual one. But there is continuity with Jesus and the Passover too: how will your sins be forgiven? Death, death is still the central need. Jesus' body is going to be broken, his blood is going to be poured out.

That's not because God is gruesome, it's because our sin is. Look with me at **Romans 6:23**. The wages of sin is death. How are we to be forgiven? Our debt must be paid. Our sins are so serious that it demands our death. And the only way we would escape that punishment is if the God of the Bible were to make a covenant to redeem us from our sin.

And this is exactly what Jesus is doing in this text. He is creating the sign of a new covenant. The substance of gospel culture is that Jesus is going to die for sins. But how does this Passover lamb count for you? Let's look at our text again: **Matthew 26:26-29**.

For the Israelites, you had to get your own lamb that fateful night. For the Passover, to fulfill the law you had to get your own lamb every year. But to receive the benefit of the true Passover lamb, you must take Christ.

This is what the Lord's Supper represents. Every time we gather together as God's church and we break this bread and take this cup we are using symbols and patterns to remind us of what the center of our hope is.

At a Passover meal the Israelites would understand the symbolism behind their food, and would therefore see the symbolism behind what Jesus is doing. The bread doesn't save us, the drink doesn't purify us. But the body which was once broken and the blood which was once poured does.

That's the covenant. Take this broken body by faith. How do you receive the forgiveness of sins? Take Jesus with the hands of faith. This is the covenant Jesus is making: take him and receive the promise of forgiveness and the hope of the Kingdom once again.

Everything you want in this world is found in Jesus. Everything you seek to escape in this world was poured out on Jesus. And here he is offering himself to you that you might take him in faith and remember him when we practice the Lord's Supper together.

This is the beauty of the new covenant. But it is about to get even more beautiful. Let's read on. **Matthew 26:30-35**. Here we see the final scene: **The Application of Divine Grace**. In one sense we saw a covenant practiced with the Passover feast, a covenant installed with the Lord's Supper, but it is here in this final story we see the covenant applied with Jesus and his disciples.

Now remember the two scenes that just occurred. Scene one: Judas betrays Jesus and all the disciples know. Scene two: Jesus institutes a new covenant, a new pattern, a new culture which will define his followers.

So when Jesus says to his disciples that all of them will fall away, it makes sense that Peter would take offense. "Jesus are you kidding me, I'm not like Judas. I won't betray you. We just made a covenant. I ate the bread, I drank the cup, I will never fall away.

"That's what a covenant means isn't it? That we agree to keep something? I'm going to keep the covenant. I'm going to be faithful, even unto death. Everyone else will fail, but I won't." And all the disciples thought the same.

But didn't Peter miss what is seemingly the most amazing part? Look back with me at **Matthew 26:31-33**.

Did you notice that: Peter is more shocked at the idea that he would fail than he is at the reality that Jesus just said he would rise out of a tomb and travel/lead them 80 miles north into Galilee. But how often do we think the same?

The truth is we are often unamazed at the idea of the death and resurrection of Jesus because we overestimate our own involvement and ability. If we are able to keep our end of the covenant, if we are able, by sheer commitment to stay faithful, to never sin, to do good, to reach the end, then Jesus' death and resurrection are robbed of their centrality. They might be good symbols, but the substance is still partly my own efforts. But it is when we see the inevitability of our failings that we see the stunning need of Jesus and his covenant.

Jesus quotes the prophet Zechariah: "strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." But Zechariah goes on to say this: **Zech. 13:9**. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered and they will be refined as my people.

There was one thing that stood out to me this week while I was in this Matthew text and that was this. In verse 28 Jesus creates a covenant with his people, in then in verse 31 and 34 he predicts the failures of those very people, but in verse 31 he also predicts their restoration to him: you will fall away, but I will go before you, I will lead you to Galilee.

You see this is a unique covenant. This is a covenant where our failings do not destroy our benefit. How? Because this covenant is dependent on one party: God. It was God the Son who would live perfectly and die sacrificially, and it was God the Father who would accept that sacrifice, and it was God the Spirit who would regenerate our hearts to see and believe and take in faith. This is a culture of grace.

I was meeting with a young lady this week and as I was sharing the gospel with her she expressed a fear. In looking at all Jesus did for her she felt sad because there was nothing she could do to change help him, and now looking ahead she was fearful of failing, of not living up to the life he bought for her, of making his death be for not.

But that is the beauty of divine grace in this text. God's mercy accounts for our failures. And it is actually our failures which strike our hearts in mercy. You see the disciples needed to fail. They needed to see

that where Jesus was about to go, they could not. Peter had to see that the covenant he just agreed to was a covenant that needed an obedience stronger than all the obedience he could offer.

It needed Jesus to go where we could not. To span the gap that we could never bridge. To pay the debt we could never afford. It had to be all Jesus. And it was. And because of that in the middle of our failures, we know that there waiting for us is a risen and resurrected Jesus because he was our lamb.

Brothers and sisters, we will at various times fail our God. But because of his covenant, if we have taken him in faith, and if we continue to take from him, he will never fail us. This is the very heart and scandal of grace.

I know for me when I sin, when I fail, I always impose on myself a spiritual time out. I express how unworthy I am to be a child of God, and I say, "I'll come out of my room when I've sat and suffered enough to atone for my sin. Once I've really felt the weight of it, then I'll come back and you can absolve me."

But brothers and sisters, this Jesus has seen our sin, and for his people he is already looking forward to our reunion. He is saying, come to me. It was never up to you. I took your failure. That's what the lamb was for. That's why my body was broken, that's why my blood was spilled. So that you might run to me and experience the wonderful extravagant relentless grace of the new covenant.

When we see that it is Jesus and only Jesus then we have not only a renewed sense of worship when we take the Lord's Supper as a reminder. But we have a present hope that his grace is ours.

Let me give an example in closing. One I want each person in here to consider as we move towards the Lord's Supper. As a parent, one of the hardest things for me to endure is when my children are scared at night. My older two kids always ask me the same question when they are scared, "Are there any bad men?" Addley wants to know if all the windows and doors are locked, Owen wants the assurance that the house is clear.

And this is hard for me for two reasons. The first is that my kids might have that kind of fear in my own home. The second is that I can never with full certainty promise them their safety. I can promise them that I will die for them, I can promise them that whatever happens God is in control and we can trust God. But for their little minds there is no tangible real object I can point to.

Now imagine you were a firstborn child in Israel that fateful night of the Passover. You heard what Moses said to Pharaoh. You heard that if blood were on the doorpost, you would be spared. But you also know that it's your life on the line. Now imagine if you were the boy's father. And he came down to you after trying to sleep that night and he said, "Dad, are you sure I'm safe? Are you sure the blood is on the door?"

What would you do? You'd probably take him out and show him the blood and say, "Look son. That blood is for you. Go and rest, for God has sent a sacrifice for your salvation."

We would certainly do that for our children. Do you think that in believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in taking the Lord's Supper, God our Father is doing the same thing for us. "Look my children! That blood is for you. You do not need to fear. For a sacrifice has been sent for your salvation."

As I sat across from this young woman and practiced this very sermon in front of her I asked her this one simple question: "Do you believe that blood is for you?"

We are about to take the Lord's Supper together. Is this blood for you? You see this meal is for believers. To partake of this bread and grape juice is really nothing. It is, like anything else a cultural symbol even if it is one given to us by God. However the reality behind this symbol is faith in the real body which in history was broken and bled for your sins.

Is this blood for you? This is the culture of the church, turning with all we have and looking to what Jesus and Jesus alone did for us. This is the way we create culture, is by giving him our faith which overcomes our sins and failures and calls us to Galilee where Jesus is waiting for us. It calls us to a Kingdom where the blood of his covenant will give way to the full feast of our salvation.

If this blood is for you? Jesus has done the work. His sacrifice is pleasing to God. His resurrection seals its effectiveness. Take him. Take him when you are weak. Take him when you are ripe with failure. Take him on your knees in repentance. Take heart and take Jesus.

For the rest of our life all of our practices and all of our patterns stem from the substance of grace which is through Jesus and Jesus alone.