

Partaking of Jesus

by Mark Jarvinen

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

⁵² Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

⁵³ Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

*⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” (**John 6:51-58**)*

“The two biggest sellers in any bookstore are the cookbooks and the diet books. The cookbooks tell you how to prepare the food and the diet books tell you how not to eat any of it.”

So observed the iconic **Sixty Minutes** commentator, the late **Andy Rooney (1919-2011)**.

There's an astonishing array of topics and titles available these days in the areas of cooking and dieting. But I wonder if America's obsession with getting the food in, and then getting those unwanted pounds off, isn't symptomatic of something deeper. Are we attempting to fill a need that is **spiritual** in nature with a solution from the **material** realm? Could our national obsession with food and fitness in reality be our spiritual emptiness crying out for God? Something to think about, don't you agree?

In v. 51 of today's text, Jesus identifies Himself as "***the living bread that came down from heaven.***" He then adds, "***If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.***" In other words, that which will truly satisfy the human heart and overcome death is not of the material realm, even though as fallen creatures, that's the first place we look. The solution is spiritual – "***partaking of the living bread,***" who is Jesus. From today's text let's consider 3 main points:

- I. **What It Means to Partake of Jesus.**
- II. **How to Partake of Jesus.**
- III. **The Result of Partaking of Jesus.**

I. WHAT IT MEANS TO PARTAKE OF JESUS.

In an attempt to understand what it means to partake of Jesus, we must first notice the strong reaction of the Jews when Jesus called himself the "***living bread***" of whom the world must eat. According to v. 52, the Jews argued sharply among themselves, saying, "***How can this man give us his flesh to eat?***" This initial negative reaction was apparently prompted by the sheer impossibility of such a statement if taken literally.

Sensing their confusion over his statement, does Jesus then go diplomatic? **HARDLY!** He turns up the heat another notch by saying in vv. 53 – 54:

"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

These words, taken literally, aroused the Jews even further. Now they were pushed from the perplexity of bewilderment to the anger of being offended. Jesus' reference to eating his flesh and drinking his

blood was in direct violation of the **Law of Moses**, which says in **Leviticus 17:10f –**

“Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood – I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”

In other words, the primary use of an animal's blood in Jewish understanding was for sacrifices of atonement for sin on the temple altar. To consume any amount of animal's blood earmarked for that noble purpose was deemed a **sacrilege – an extreme “no- no.”** It was simply not **“kosher”** for a Jew to drink the blood of any animal, let alone the blood of a human being. Even the thought of such conduct was barbaric and repugnant! Not only would this act make one ritually unclean, but it also smacked of **cannibalism!** How dare Jesus even raise the issue of eating and drinking his body and blood!

Let's be honest. **Don't these words bother us too?** Cannibalism is no more appealing to us than it was to the Jews. Fortunately, Jesus didn't intend to be taken literally. There's a **spiritual meaning** to all this. If Jesus wasn't advocating cannibalism, then what did He mean when He urged the Jews to eat his flesh and drink his blood?

To answer this question, we must keep in mind that Jesus spoke these words to the Jews as they were preparing for the annual **Passover (John 6:4).** Remember how in **Exodus** God raised up **Moses** to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, but Pharaoh kept refusing to let them go? In response, God sent plagues upon Egypt,

the final one of which was the sending of an “**angel of death**” to slay the first-born sons from every Egyptian home. To ensure that the angel of death would pass over the homes of the Hebrews, they were to paint the blood of a perfectly spotless sacrificial lamb around their doorframes.

And so, in today’s text, with the imagery of the **Passover lamb** firmly in view, Jesus, taught the people to “**eat His flesh and to drink His blood.**” **The Passover lamb illustrates the salvation of Christ.** Just as the Passover lamb was killed to deliver the people of Israel from God’s judgment on Egypt, Jesus must die as a “**sacrificial lamb**” for the sins of all people in order to deliver them from God’s eternal judgment. Just as the people of Israel applied the blood on the doorframes of their homes, believers “apply” His blood to their hearts “by faith” in order to remove the guilt of sin. Just as the people of Israel roasted and enjoyed the Passover lamb after it was slain, as a meal for their strengthening; so too believers can enjoy Jesus as their spiritual food and be strengthened by Him in a daily walk of faith.

In this powerful imagery, Jesus is foretelling the shedding of His blood on the cross. In effect he’s saying, “**My blood will remove your sins. My life must be your spiritual food.**” To live physically in this world, a person needs to eat the flesh of animals, but to live eternally in God’s Kingdom, a person must receive Jesus as his or her Savior, as the one who offered his body on the cross and shed His blood for sinners.

It's hard for ***post-modern people*** like us to connect with the need for blood atonement. It's much easier to portray Christ as a great teacher or moral example than as the Lamb of God, slain to pay for the sins of the world with His blood. And I suspect the major reason for this difficulty in seeing the need for blood atonement is ...

We have a hard time seeing ourselves as sinners. Oh sure, we stumble occasionally. We make errors in judgment from time to time. We lack necessary resources to accomplish our goals. We are victims of childhood trauma. But still, when we compare ourselves with others, we seem to be doing as well or better than most. Considering what we've had to overcome, we tell ourselves we're actually doing great. There's just one small problem. **God's standard is absolute perfection.** As long as we fall short of complete moral perfection, death still has a grip on us. "***The wages of sin is death,***" (**Romans 6:23**).

Thankfully, **God is also love.** Because God is righteous and holy, He can't ignore our sin, but neither is He willing to let sin have the final word. He offers mercy because of His love. And so He moved to save us. It took a blood sacrifice to do it - one righteous life sacrificed on behalf of the many unrighteous. It wasn't just an animal's blood, or even the blood of a person of noble character. Rather, it was the blood of God's own Son – Jesus – the perfect sacrifice of whom we are invited to eat and drink. But that leads to our **2nd point.**

II. HOW TO PARTAKE OF JESUS.

Saving faith in Jesus Christ, “***eating His flesh and drinking His blood,***” is more than head knowledge or lip service.

Several years ago, a couple of reporters conducted an experiment on the streets of **Miami, FL**. They printed a copy of the ***Bill of Rights*** in the form of a petition, put it on a clipboard, and then stopped people on the sidewalk asking them to sign it. As you know, the Bill of Rights contains the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution, adopted in **1791**. Most people glanced at the document, shook their heads, and continued walking by without signing. Several people became angry with the reporters and accused them of being radical enemies of the American way of life. The experiment ended when a dozen or so passers by surrounded the reporters with clenched fists and threatened to have them arrested. (Sermon Central)

What this experiment demonstrated is what we already know. Many citizens pay lip service to their country and its heritage, without the vaguest notion of what the Constitution even says. In other words, while claiming citizenship, many have not internalized the basic meaning of it. They claim the privilege of the status without “***eating and drinking***” of its reality.

The same sort of thing is described in today’s text. Jesus says in v. 53, “***Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.***” Although some hear an allusion to the sacrament of Holy Communion in these words, the true meaning lies even deeper. Jesus is talking about **the difference between**

external lip-service and internal embodiment. He's talking about the difference between admiring Him and actually trusting him for salvation. He's talking about the difference between attempting to act like a Christian on the outside and actually being a Christian from the inside out by a work of God's grace.

Edwin Peterman, a Lutheran Pastor from Houston, TX, tells of a visit he once made to the city of **Leipzig**, in the former East Germany, less than a decade after the Fall of Communism, which occurred in the late 1980's. He stopped by the **St. Nicholas Church** where prayer services for peace had been held each week. Apparently, during that time of unrest, literally thousands of people had gathered in the church and in the streets nearby to pray for the restoration of freedom to the land. Peterman said, however, after visiting with the pastor of St. Nicholas Church, that the churches in Leipzig, only a few short years later, were scarcely attended on Sundays. Many people claimed ignorance about the Christian faith, and some even held it in disdain. The multitudes that had once thronged the streets to pray for their freedom had in relatively short order largely disappeared, simply blending back into the pagan populace. In other words, the vast majority had followed the cause of Christian freedom when it suited them, but they apparently did not take the Christian faith into themselves. They had not partaken of Jesus in a way that was real and thus, as our text says, they had no life in them.

Finally, what will result when people truly partake of Jesus?

III. THE RESULTS OF PARTAKING OF JESUS.

Besides the promise of “**eternal life**” and the promise of **resurrection** in v. 54 – “**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day**” - v. 56 of our text holds another important promise, where Jesus says, “**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.**” There’s probably not a theme in Scripture more exalted, more remarkable, and more mysterious than this – the sharing of **intimacy** between Jesus and those who believe.

As people, we are driven by the human hunger for intimacy. We yearn both to know and to be known. Jesus Christ invites us to partake of Him to satisfy our desire for intimacy at the deepest level of our being – “**You in Me, and I in you**” (v. 56). We were created in God’s image to worship Him, and isn’t worship our celebration of God knowing us, and we knowing Him? That is what Jesus says happens when we eat and drink his life. Recognizing His love for us, we are led to trust Him, abandoning ourselves to His grace and care day-by-day – remaining in Him and He in us.

There is a story about a **pastor walking along the shore** with his young son. The boy questions his father about the spiritual life, saying,

“Dad, I can’t understand how Christ can live in us and we live in him at the same time.”

Further down the beach, the pastor noticed an empty bottle with a cork in it. Taking the bottle, he half-filled it with sea-water, re-corked it and flung it out into the ocean. As they watched the bottle bob up and down the father said,

“Son, the sea is in the bottle and the bottle is in the sea. It is a picture of life in Christ. You live under the Lordship of Christ and He lives in you.”

To eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus means to know him intimately and personally. When you eat some food, the food enters your stomach and after you digest it, it becomes part of you. In the same way we take the teachings of Jesus inside us as we hear the gospel and think deeply about His sinless life and His finished work on the cross. In that process, the Holy Spirit enlightens us to see that Jesus came down from heaven for us since we were incapable of climbing the ladder to Him. **He lived in perfection** to make up for our imperfections. **He accepted death on the cross** to make payment in full for the sins of the world, so we wouldn't have to die for our own sins. **He rose from the grave** to break the power of sin and death so that we might one day be raised with him.

Eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood means receiving from Jesus Christ what we cannot provide for ourselves. It means laying hold of His forgiveness for our participation in the brokenness of life, both through the things we have done and the things we have left undone. In partaking of Jesus we're not asking God to bless our goodness, but to forgive our wickedness. And thankfully, as demonstrated by the cross, that's something He was more than willing do. Friends, the gospel invites us to fully partake of Jesus - the living Lord, who died and rose again for us. His flesh is real food, and His blood is real drink. Only He can give us the life that truly satisfies. **A-men.**

