

Don't Bar Yourself
Communion Meditation on Matthew 5:23-24
By Phillip G. Kayser

I've titled my communion meditation – “Don't Bar Yourself.” And I want to begin by reading the main Scripture people use to bar themselves from communion. It is Matthew 5:23-24. And though it doesn't teach us to bar ourselves from the Lord's Table, it certainly teaches us a wonderful lesson on the value confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. So I could just as easily title this sermon, “Do Get Reconciled.” Matthew 5:23-24. In the first phrase Jesus says,

“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, [And I will stop there for a moment. Bringing gifts to the temple altar was to bring a sacrifice. It might have been a sheep, or a goat, or a bull. We no longer bring sacrifices to the temple. Jesus, the final sacrifice was offered up, and all that is left for God's people is the communion meal that followed those sacrifices. And so there is a sense in which there is not a one to one correspondence between this passage and what we do today. We no longer bring the gift. Jesus brought the gift and we freely partake of it. But since there was a communion meal connected with Old Testament sacrifices, I will grant the point that some people make – that this passage is relevant to communion. It is. So Jesus says, “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar] and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

I have known people who bar themselves from the Lord's Table Sunday after Sunday after Sunday because they have had a fight with their wife, or have had harsh words with their children, and they feel unworthy to partake. After all, 1Corinthians 11 says that if we partake unworthily, we will eat judgment to ourselves. I can certainly understand the concern. But there are two major mistakes of exegesis that people make on this Scripture when they bar themselves from the table.

The first mistake that they make is to think that this person waits until the next week to take the Lord's Supper. Notice that he doesn't take the bull or the sheep home with him to offer the following week. *That* would be barring himself, right? But no, he leaves the bull there. He ties it up at the altar.

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Why? Because he is going to sacrifice it that same day – probably within the next few minutes. He wants to partake of communion that same day. He’s not going to skip communion. The priests might be irritated with him that he is leaving his bull tied up at the altar when everyone else is standing in line with their sacrifices. In effect he is stopping the show. They can’t proceed with other sacrifices while his is still at the altar. Jesus is saying that getting reconciled is so important that you can’t put it off till the next day. Even if you risk frustrating the priest and everyone else who is waiting in line, get reconciled. This is not an authorization to bar yourself from communion. Let me give a modern example that is more analogous. I usually try to get myself squared away before I come to church, but there have been rare times when I have had to lean over and ask forgiveness of my wife or children, or take someone aside during a hymn and ask forgiveness. But I remember a very embarrassing time at our previous church when I was leading worship and was suddenly convicted by the Spirit that I had offended an elder. I knew that my worship was an abomination to the Lord. And I could not get it off my conscience. I confessed to the Lord, but that wasn’t enough. I had to step down in the middle of the service, confess my sin to my brother, and ask forgiveness, and when he forgave me, I went back up and explained what I had done. He had sinned against me too, but I didn’t feel the need to confront him on that. The Spirit was convicting me that I needed to confess my own sin and get that resolved. Now that was pretty embarrassing. I should have taken care of that *before* the service. But that’s the kind of urgency the Lord wants us to have when we come to the Lord’s Table. To bar yourself from the Lord’s Table shows the *opposite* of such urgency. It’s putting things off till the next week. It is procrastinating reconciliation.

Now I have had other occasions where there was no opportunity for me to take a person out into the hallway and get things right. I didn’t bar myself from communion then either. Instead I confessed to the Lord and vowed to the Lord that I would get things right. And I dealt with it as soon as I could. And I gave that vow before I came to communion. Why didn’t I bar myself? Because I don’t believe that the Bible authorizes me to do so. I authorizes me to eat to judgment or to eat to blessing, but I must eat. I cannot excommunicate myself. If I really should be barred from the table, I should ask the elder’s permission. They are the ones who have the keys of the kingdom. Let me give you some sample Scriptures: Exodus 12:16 says, “**everyone must eat.**” It is not an option. Leviticus 23:6 says, “**you must eat.**” Deuteronomy 12:18 says, “**you must eat.**” 1Corinthians 11:17 gives only two options: eating for the better or eating for the worse. It doesn’t give

the option of not eating. It doesn't give believers the option of excommunicating or disciplining themselves – even temporarily. God gave discipline into the hands of the elders as a body. Even an elder cannot bar himself. Only the elders acting as a court can do so. Nor do you parents have authority to bar your children from the table. I have seen some parents withhold communion from their children because they are upset with their children. Church discipline is not within your jurisdiction. It is a function of church authority. Now you may need to bring your children to the elders for us to have a serious talking to them. In fact, that should happen more frequently. We would be happy to talk to your children and explain the seriousness of partaking without repentance. But you shouldn't bar them unless the elders have barred them. 1Corinthians 11:28 says that we should only eat after we have examined ourselves, but it does not give the option of avoiding self-examination and not eating. Verse 31 says that if we judge ourselves we would not be judged, but he does not give the option of avoiding judgment by avoiding communion. The partaking of communion was intended to be when **“you come together”** (v. 17), **“whenever you come together”** (v. 18), **“when you come together in one place”** (v. 20) and **“whenever you come together”** (v. 33). And at the last supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples He said, **“drink from it all of you”** (Matt 26:27). I don't think that we could get a clearer example that we must eat than when Jesus served Judas Iscariot the bread and the wine knowing full well that Judas would be eating to judgment. But you see, Judas had not been excommunicated yet. He had to eat. You see, the Corinthians were not judged for partaking of the Lord's Table. They were judged for failing to repent when they came to the table.

Which brings up the whole question of partaking worthily. Partaking worthily does not mean partaking without sin or no one could partake. John Calvin pointed out that we come worthily to the Lord's table not because we are good, but because we recognize our only goodness comes from God; not because we are strong, but because we need his strength; not because we are satisfied with ourselves, but because we have a holy dissatisfaction with ourselves and have a desperate hunger and thirst for the Lord. In fact, if you are satisfied with yourself, you are partaking unworthily. Likewise, if you don't have a hatred for sin and a longing for the Lord you are not coming worthily. In those circumstances the Sacrament becomes a loving tool of discipline to bring us to the place where we do hunger for God. So if there is something you need to make right this morning and the person you need to confess to is in this room, feel free to take him or her aside while people are

standing in line and get it dealt with. If the person is not in this room, make a vow or pledge before the Lord that you will resolve it with the person you have wronged. And when you do that, you will be eating to blessing and not to discipline. And the Lord's Table is primarily good news, not bad news. It is primarily the assurance that He welcomes sinners who hate their sin and recognize their weakness and confess it and cast it at the feet of Jesus. If you have repented of your sin, please come. You don't earn your right to the table. Instead, you plead the blood of the One who earned it for you. Amen.