

What is the Benefit of This Eating and Drinking?

"Eat you carrots; they're good for your eyes." "Eat your spinach; it'll put hair on your chest." "Drink your orange juice; you need the Vitamin C." "Drink your milk; it will give you strong bones." Parents give kids reasons to eat and drink certain things by citing the benefits of doing so. Our Lord does the same thing for us by telling us that Holy Communion is His Body and His blood "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

We need the forgiveness of sins. In the explanation to the 5th petition we say, "We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment." Sin isn't just something we did when younger; it's not just something we did before we were brought to Christ. We sin everyday. When we read the Passion Reading, we shouldn't be thinking, "How terrible those Jews or those Romans were for crucifying Jesus!" No, we should be thinking how terrible we are. I wish that Lenten hymn which sings about all *they* did to Jesus would be rewritten like this: "I crowned Thy head with thorns, I struck, I scourged Thee. I gave Thee gall to drink. I still decry Thee. I crucify Thee." Then maybe we'd see reality. Jesus is crucified not just because the crowd's only king was Caesar but because our king is only Caesar too. Why else would we despair over what happens in Washington? Why else do we become so intense over earthly, political matters?

And Jesus isn't crucified just because Pilot washed his hands. No, it's because we do too. We don't take responsibility for our worry. No we say everyone does it. We don't take responsibility for our fears. No, we justify them saying, "Who wouldn't be afraid?" We don't take responsibility for not loving God above all things. No, we think it normal and natural that we love self, spouse, and family above God. We need forgiveness. Without it we will be punished now and in eternity. But that's not all we need. We also need what flows from forgiveness. We need life and salvation too.

Because we can feel our heart beating, we foolishly believe we have life in ourselves. No, sinners only have death in themselves. What ripens and blooms in us is not life but death. Within the first 18-25 years of our life, we grow. But what do we mature into? Death and decay. Teeth rot; hair falls out; strength diminishes. Even perfect Adam and Eve did not have life in themselves. They needed food from God, the Tree of Life, to preserve the life God had given them.

But fallen Adam and Eve needed something else. Not just life but salvation. God could've given them unending life even in their fallen state by just allowing them to eat of the Tree of Life. But God drove them out of the Garden lest they take from that tree and live forever in their fallen state. So it is with us. We need much more than just our heart to continue to beat. We need to be redeemed out of this fallen condition. We need not just life but salvation. Not just this life extended by years, but a new redeemed life.

We need forgiveness, life, and salvation. But we don't seek them in the Body and Blood of Christ anymore than the Romans and Jews did. They could use the Blood of Christ as a curse. They could pity the Body of Christ. But they didn't look to these for forgiveness, life, or salvation, and neither do we. No, we look to our self for forgiveness. That's why we say or think such things as, "How can I ever forgive myself?" Or, "I'll never forgive myself." That's why we're such suckers for self-esteem movements. We really do think that being forgiven involves our view of ourselves. If we didn't think that, we wouldn't be so quick to justify ourselves, that is, to engage in self-justification. "I had to do this or that because there really was no other way," or "they deserved it."

We look to ourselves for life too. Before you take issue with how I say we do this, consider our Lord told us that we have no power to extend our life. But we believe we do. We look to what we eat and drink thinking that less fat, more bran and antioxidants will extend our days. We look to our running, walking, riding, or health clubs to lengthen the life, that God said we can't extend. We look to the medicines of mere men to lengthen the life of this body given by God.

It is the same with salvation. Although this is an even greater miracle than physical life, we think the ideas of men have at least some merit to them. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, men turning into angels was a plausible means of salvation. In the 60s and 70s salvation seemed plausible in the Hindu teaching of reincarnation. In the 80s the idea that salvation would come from extraterrestrials was popular. In the '90s, eternal life was found in everything from spirit guides, to comets, to vampires. In the 21st century it's technology, uploaded consciousness, avatars, exoskeletons.

Fallen humans crave forgiveness, life, and salvation. Our Lord wants us to seek them in this Meal. That's why He told us this is His Body and Blood given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins. He wants us to come to this altar seeking these things from Him. We come not to show our love but our need, not to give something whether it be devotion or obedience to Him but to get things from Him. Yes, I know this appears to be a lowly place to seek such high things from. Yes, it seems more likely that forgiveness would be found in my heart; that life would be found in my diet and exercise; that salvation would be found in alien technology. It doesn't look like there should be forgiveness, life or salvation in these things anymore than these things looked to be in Jesus Himself.

To most people who met Jesus on earth, He wasn't God in the flesh. No, only those whose eyes the Holy Spirit had opened said, "The Word was made flesh, and we *saw* His glory" (Jn 1:14). The Jews could only see Jesus as God's enemy, not God. Pilate could only see a deluded man, not God. Herod could see a Man worthy of ridicule, not God. The women on the *Via Dolorosa* could only see a pitiable man, not God. So, what do you see here? Bread and wine? Yes, but also the Body and Blood Jesus gave for sinners to get forgiveness. Ambrose said, "'If every time the Blood is poured out it is poured out for the remission of sins, I ought to receive it always, that my sins may always be forgiven me; because I constantly sin, I constantly need to have the remedy'" (Exam. Council of Trent, II, 354). Here is the remedy for your sins. Look no more to your heart for forgiveness; it matters not to God whether you do or don't, can or can't forgive yourself. It matters not to Him if you can figure out how come you should be forgiven. What avails before God is the Body and Blood of His

Son. He can't get past these to get to your sins. The perfect Body of His Son stops Him. The Perfect Blood of His Son prevents Him. He can't find your sins because they've been carried away by Jesus' Body and swept away by His Blood.

Here too is the life that you ache for. You feel yourself aging, decaying, dying. Luther said of this Sacrament "in a visible way the Tree of Life bends down its branches to earth, and puts its fruit within our reach" (*Serm on the Cat*). In our Large Catechism we say, "We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing...but as pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us *in body and soul*" (v,68). Chrysostom said, "'This table is the strength of our soul, the power of our minds...our very life'" (*Exam. II, 234*). The 4th century *Apostolic Constitutions* directs the deacon to give the cup with these words, "The Blood of Christ, the cup of life" (VIII, XIII). Ever since fallen man was driven from the Tree of Life, he has searched for a Fountain of Youth. If you knew where one was, you'd go to it, wouldn't you? You would sell all you had, make the most treacherous journey if need be to get there. Well here it is. Jesus said His flesh is life-giving. Here is His flesh for you. Jesus said the person who ate His body and drank His blood would live forever. So, Eat. Drink. Live.

I *don't* encourage you to stop taking medicine, but I do urge you to take the Medicine of Immortality. That's what the early church called Holy Communion. They viewed Communion as God's means for transforming these bodies of death and decay into immortal ones. We count on the protein we eat to turn into cells. The Vitamin D we take in to turn into bones. We count on the carrots we eat to help our eyes. What *can't* eating and drinking the Body and Blood of God do?

That brings us to the last benefit of Holy Communion. It gives eternal salvation. Luther said this too: "The mouth, the throat, the body which eats Christ's body should also profit from it so it will live eternally and be resurrected on the Last Day....This is the heavenly power and the profit of Christ's body going into our body during the Lord's Supper" (*Oberman, Luther, 243*). In another place he says, "This Food changes him who eats it into itself and makes him like itself, spiritual, living, and eternal" (*LW, 37, 100*).

If this doesn't blow your mind, you're not listening. I'm telling you with a heavy conscience: come here for relief. I'm telling you who hear your bones creaking and your hearts faltering: come here for life. I am telling you who know that this life can't be all there is: come here for eternal salvation. I admit this sounds like the raving of a lunatic, but this is the Word of the Lord. That's where Luther finally comes down. He says, "forgiveness, life and salvation are given us *through these words*" given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Luther doesn't ask us to understand it or reason it out. He says these benefits are here because Jesus said so. And that's how I commune. I say, "Lord I feel no forgiveness in my heart, but you say forgiveness is at your Table for me. I see no life on that Table but you say it's here. I see nothing eternal but only temporal bread and wine there, but you say eternal salvation, life, and forgiveness are all here, and so I come for them.

Perhaps it would help if God labeled Communion the way food products are. We'd read: "Ingredients: bread, wine, Body and Blood. Amount Per Serving: Forgiveness - 100%; Life - 100%; Salvation - 100%" Number of Servings: Countless. Amen

Rev. Paul R. Harris
Trinity Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas
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