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Perspective

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Perspective is a monthly journal with articles and book reviews. It is part of the “equipping” ministry of Mount Vernon Baptist Church, where we exist to KNOW, EQUIP, and SEND one another for the worship and glory of God.

SERMON SCHEDULE

November 2

Parenting: The Basics

November 9

Parenting: The Church

November 16

Open Doors and Open Hearts

Acts 16:11-40

Guest Preacher: Brad Thayer

November 23

He Promises a Place

John 14:1-14

November 30

He Promises a Helper

John 14:15-31

For a full list of past sermons,
visit www.mvbchurch.org.

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Reviewed by Eric Barbour

FIGHTER VERSE

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5 (ESV)

Preparing for the Lord's Supper

Aaron Menikoff

A pastor friend of mine tells the story of the day his church was celebrating the Lord's Supper. He was sitting on a platform overlooking the congregation as the bread was being distributed. He soon noticed something very strange: almost everyone was licking their lips. He'd never seen anything like this before. After the service, a very embarrassed church member told him what happened. Someone had accidentally bought flavored matzo bread! It was a Lord's Supper they'll never forget.

Sadly, many of us do forget about the Lord's Supper. It's a biblical tradition we know we must observe, but truth be told we don't give it much thought. We show up for the Sunday morning or evening service, we partake of the bread and the cup, we know we are supposed to think about Jesus and his sacrifice for us, but that's about the end of it. As Christians, we think too little about the Lord's Supper.

As a pastor, I'll confess that I teach too little about the Lord's Supper. God has gifted us with this simple meal in order to remind us of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though there is something very sobering about the Lord's Supper — we are, after all, remembering Jesus' death — it is also an occasion for immense joy. The tomb is empty, Christ has atoned for our sins, and he is coming back! All this is to be made clear as we celebrate.

Yet I wonder how many of us actually prepare to celebrate. We prepare for so many things in life. We prepare for school and work. We prepare to go out of town or to go on vacation. We prepare to go out on a date. We make sure we have just the right outfit. Women check to see that their make-up is just right. Guys make sure their clothes match. Care is taken to find just the right restaurant. Advance thought is even given to the topics of conversation that will take place. And none of us give this kind of preparation a second-thought. A date like this is a special event and worthy of special care.

How much more should we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper? Jesus, the King of the Universe, set aside his glory, took on human flesh, lived a perfect life, and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. He died for the sins of all who would ever repent and believe the Good News and then he rose from the dead, proving his divinity and his trustworthiness while he conquered sin and death. He sent the Holy Spirit that we might not only know him, but be filled with the power to obey him, and one day he's going to come back and judge the living and the dead. This gospel is pictured in the Lord's Supper. It's a celebration worth preparing for.

My guess is that not many of us take the time to prepare for this special meal. We let the Lord's Supper come to us instead of preparing ourselves to go to it. I want us to realize that God has gifted us with the tremendous privilege of celebrating his Supper. This isn't an event we should merely show up at. Imagine if you had a family vacation set to start on July 15, but you did nothing to prepare. You simply went about your daily life, woke up that morning, and matter-of-factly said, "Oh, I guess it's time to go on vacation." That would be ridiculous, and yet we can approach the Lord's Supper with the same lackadaisical attitude.

Preparation, therefore, is crucial. Do you know the next time you are scheduled to celebrate the Lord's Supper? Here are five ways to prepare.

(1) Look forward to it.

When Jesus sat down with his disciples and instituted the Lord's Supper, he told them to repeat this meal. He said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). The early church understood this to mean they were to eat the bread and drink of the cup regularly, in light of Jesus' work and because of Jesus' command (1 Cor. 11:24-25).

If you are going to look forward to it, you have to know it is coming! Find the dates when the church is going to celebrate the Lord's Supper and put them on your calendar. (At MVBC this is usually the first Sunday of each month). Especially on the days leading up to the event, pray that the Lord gives you an eagerness to gather with the body to participate in this simple meal.

If you are the head of your home, take the time to sit down with the family, talk about the Lord's Supper service, and encourage your family members to confess their sin to God and to one another. Help your family look forward to the opportunity to see the gospel on display in the Lord's Supper. Even if your children aren't old enough to take the Lord's Supper (it's appropriate to wait until they are baptized believers), you should take advantage of this celebratory meal to talk to them about the importance of one day making a public profession of faith by baptism and participation in the communion meal.

(2) Look beyond it.

When Jesus inaugurated the Lord's Supper, he set the eyes of his disciples upon a future meal, "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). There will come a day when we will dine with the Lord, and on that day we will enjoy his perfect presence. Later on, this meal is called "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). Believers will be with Christ. We will be aware of what he has done for us. We will marvel at his grace and his goodness. We will be overwhelmed by the privilege of feasting with him.

We know that it is very special to be able to dine with someone. I went to a fundraiser a couple of years ago where one prize being auctioned off was dinner with a celebrity. It is one thing to get an autograph, another thing altogether to break bread. I remember the first real date I had with Deana, who is now my wife. We went out for a spaghetti dinner. We both knew, in an awkward, college-age sort of way, that this meal meant something.

One day every believer will dine with the Lord. So it is good to gather with the body of Christ and celebrate the Lord's Supper and anticipate an even better meal. Please don't miss the forest through the trees. We gather anticipating the Lord's return (1 Cor. 11:26). We gather

with the promise of one day eating with him in heaven. Prepare for the Lord's Supper by reminding yourself that this simple meal is a small taste of a much more impressive feast.

(3) Revisit the gospel.

It has been said by more than one person that the Lord's Supper is a visible presentation and proclamation of the gospel. This is obvious from Jesus' own words about the Lord's Supper. He called the bread "my body" and the cup "the new covenant in my blood." Everything about this meal pointed to him and, specifically, his sacrificial work on the cross.

The Lord's Supper is the gospel in a visible nutshell. It is the reminder of God's promise to write his law on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:33). It is a reminder of God's promise to give his people a new heart and to fill them with his Holy Spirit (Eze. 36:26-27). It is a reminder that through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ there is now hope for sinners who were once God's enemies and are now his friends (John 15:13; James 2:23).

Prepare for the Lord's Supper by revisiting this gospel. Re-read passages of Scripture that lay out the heart of the gospel clearly (1 Cor. 15:1-11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 2:1-10; 1 Peter 2:21-25). As you do, pray that God would give you a deeper appreciation both for who you were before he saved you, and who you are now. More than that, pray that God would give you a deeper appreciation for Himself. He is, after all, our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend.

(4) Assess your personal spiritual life.

The Bible is chock-full of calls to examine yourself, to check your heart, to make sure your faith is genuine. You could look at the Parable of the Soils (Mark 4:1-20), Peter's call to make your calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10-11), and the author of Hebrews who urged us to hold to our original confidence "firm to the end" (Heb. 3:13-15).

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is to be an occasion for serious self-examination, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:28-29). The "body" in verse 29 is probably a reference

to both Christ himself and the body of Christ, the church. So before we take the Lord's Supper we should examine our hearts for ways that we've sinned against Christ and his bride. That's what it means to "discern" the body.

You should not take the Lord's Supper if you are living in ongoing, unrepentant sin. In other words, if you are feeding a secret sin without battling against it, you should not take the Lord's Supper until you have repented of that sin. To do otherwise would be to eat and drink "in an unworthy manner." We should all assess our personal, spiritual lives to be sure we have turned away from our sins, and are pursuing a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Most good jobs have built into the work year an opportunity for review and assessment. This usually comes in the budget season as employers are considering whom to promote and pay more, and whom to demote, or even to fire. A good employee knows that an assessment is going to take place, and he prepares for that assessment by working diligently.

No Christian can work his way into heaven. It is God who finally judges us, and the only right assessment is the determination that we have fallen short. And yet the doctrine of justification teaches us that God declares us righteous, through faith in Christ alone; not on the basis of our works, but on the basis of Jesus' atoning death.

Yes, no Christian can work his way into heaven, but every Christian must work to provide evidence that he is justified, saved, and forgiven. Paul warns us not to celebrate the Lord's Supper until we have done the hard work of looking inward, examining our hearts, recognizing and confessing our sin. We are all unworthy recipients of God's grace. If you wait until you are good enough to celebrate the Lord's Supper, you will never eat of it.

Prepare for the Lord's Supper by taking an inventory of your personal, spiritual life. Write about or talk about how you are struggling. Confess those struggles; confess them to another brother or sister in Christ. Take the upcoming celebration of the Lord's Supper as a wonderful opportunity to assess your spiritual state. Be honest about the condition of your soul.

(5) Assess your public spiritual life.

Paul tells us that the church in Corinth abused the Lord's Supper by allowing divisions to infiltrate the body of Christ. He rebuked the church, "For when you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk" (1 Cor. 11:20-21). These believers went ahead and ate the Lord's Supper with little or no regard for their brothers and sisters in Christ. It should not be this way. The Lord's Supper is to be a picture not simply of our individual discipleship with the Lord, but of our communion with each other as a family of faith.

Prepare then to celebrate the Lord's Supper by taking an inventory of your public, spiritual life.

•How are your relationships in the church?

•Are you holding a grudge against another brother or sister in Christ?

•Have you offended someone else?

•Are you taking seriously your commitment to be involved in the lives of other believers?

•Are you making time with other believers a priority in your life?

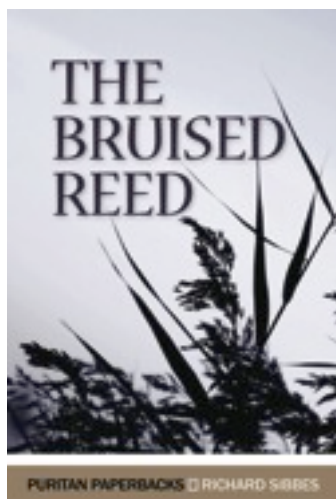
Prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper by asking these types of questions.

At Mount Vernon we celebrate the Lord's Supper once a month. Three times a year we celebrate during the morning service. Nine times a year we celebrate during the evening service. We often begin by reaffirming the promises we have made to each other in our Church Covenant (a simple statement that notes the commitments we have made as church members to God and to one another). We do this to remind ourselves that we are part of one church, and that we have real obligations toward one another. Prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper by looking at the Church Covenant yourself. Ask yourself how you are doing bearing the burdens of your fellow church family members.

A few times a year, after we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we stay around for a church wide fellowship meal. We try to sit with someone we don't know. We aim to have purposeful, spiritual conversations during this meal. Of course, we want every meal with believers to be marked by purposeful, spiritual conversations. And yet this fellowship meal is a unique opportunity to gather as one church and pursue the unity we just professed when we celebrated the Lord's Supper.

However you do it, remember that the Lord's Supper isn't just another, personal, spiritual discipline that we are supposed to do as individual Christians. It is a precious reminder that God has saved us into the body of Christ. He has given us brothers and sisters with whom we can and must live together. So prepare for the Lord's Supper by taking an inventory of these public, spiritual disciplines.

It's a real privilege to gather with the body of Christ and celebrate the Lord's Supper together. The next time the church celebrates, let's be sure to prepare for it.



Book Review

The Bruised Reed

by Richard Sibbes

Reviewed by Eric Barbour

In this encouraging Puritan Paperback, the late Richard Sibbes masterfully encouraged the reader with sound

exegesis, pastoral insight, and heart piercing application that demonstrates to believers the necessity of “bruising” for salvation and sanctification. This book has many strengths, but one that is clearly carried through the whole book is the sovereignty of God and the centrality of Christ in all things, including the times of discouragement, suffering, and struggling in sin. Sibbes addressed these issues with care and diligently pointed to Christ as the healer of the sinful and broken hearted, the sustainer of his people, and the victor over sin and death.

Initially published in 1630, the timeless truths taught in *The Bruised Reed* provide comfort and wisdom to the new believer as well as helpful insight for the Christian who has walked with the Lord for decades. As C. H. Spurgeon wrote, “Sibbes never wastes the student’s time, he scatters pearls and diamonds with both hands” (vii).

In *The Bruised Reed*, Richard Sibbes presented a faithful exposition of Isaiah 42:1-3 and points to Christ as the fulfillment of the text. *The Bruised Reed* centers around three central themes: “The Bruised Reed,” “The Smoking Flax” and “Christ’s Judgment and Victory.”

“Bruised reed” and “smoking flax” aren’t terms used by many today, but the powerful imagery used in Isaiah 42 and Matthew 12 offer a glimpse of God’s divine purposes as he bruises and heals, justifies and sanctifies a people who are to love and worship him. So who are the bruised reeds and what does he mean by bruising? As Sibbes put it,

By the bruised here is not meant those that are brought low only by crosses, but such as, by them,

are brought to see their sin, which bruises most of all... Now, he that is thus bruised will be content with nothing but with mercy from him who has bruised him (10-11).

The Bruised Reed presents a wonderful picture of God bruising sinners so that they are then able to see their sin and desperate need for a Savior. As if anticipating the objections of the 21st century mind, Sibbes not only pointed out that bruising is justified, but also necessary for the unbeliever and believer alike. He wrote,

This bruising is required before conversion that so the Spirit may make way for himself into the heart by levelling all proud, high thoughts, and that we may understand ourselves to be what indeed we are by nature...It is a very hard thing to bring a dull and an evasive heart to cry with feeling for mercy. Our hearts, like criminals, until they be beaten from all evasions, never cry for the mercy of the judge (4).

Our hearts, unless bruised by the Lord, remain hardened to his grace and mercy. The hearts of men will always seek to justify themselves.

Sibbes also made a clear distinction, that bruising does not end with conversion, but will continue all the days of our lives. He contended that bruising plays a role in sanctification. He stated, “After conversion we need bruising so that reeds may know themselves to be reeds, and not oaks”(5). This bruising is meant to demonstrate our helpless state and to point us to Christ, the only one who can truly heal. The Lord’s bruising “makes us set a high price upon Christ. Then the gospel becomes the gospel indeed; then the fig leaves of morality will do us no good” (4). Through seeing the depth of sin, the Lord graciously demonstrates human weakness and our total dependence upon him for salvation and obedience.

While Sibbes began his work with the necessity of bruising, he also pointed to the comfort that can be found in the assurance that the Lord will not break those who are his children. The Lord may bruise his children, but he is also the great healer. As Sibbes stated, “He died that he might heal our souls with the plaster of his own blood, and by that death save us...” (8). For the child of God, the promise of bruising comes with the assurance that Christ heals our greatest affliction, sinful souls.

The second theme, “The Smoking Flax,” is a term that sounds a bit odd to modern readers. The ESV translation of both Isaiah 42:1-3 and Matthew 12:20, uses the phrase “smoldering wick.” This imagery is much more familiar, and calls to mind the smoke that rises from tiny orange glow of a candle’s wick as it remains barely lit. The language is used in reference to the tiny ember of faith that exists in those who have been newly saved or perhaps even believers who are struggling mightily. The smoking flax image is used to show the sustaining power of Christ. He will not quench the smoldering wick or let its spark go out. Christ gently sustains the tiny spark of true converts and slowly fans it to flame. Whether a new convert or long-time believer, the illustration of the smoking flax offers great comfort during difficult seasons. The crux of this portion of *The Bruised Reed* centers on Christ sustaining even the weakest of true believers and giving them the strength to endure.

What wonderful words of comfort for those who are struggling in sin, downtrodden, or suffering! The Lord initiates the necessary bruising but gives the strength and grace to endure those troubling times. Sibbes noted that Christ gives perseverance to the saints because “this spark is from heaven: it is his own, it is kindled by his own Spirit. And secondly, it tends to the glory of his powerful grace in his children that he preserves light in the midst of darkness, a spark in the midst of the swelling waters of corruption” (20). This truth is one of the most helpful in the entire book, that for the believer, the promise of bruising is accompanied by the assurance that Christ will sustain them to the end.

The third theme further orients the reader to Christ, his judgment and ultimate victory over sin and death. Sibbes uses judgment in a way that most readers would not immediately be familiar with. He intends judgment to mean “the kingdom of grace in us, that government whereby Christ sets up a throne in our hearts” (77). This

portion of the book is filled with wonderful application as Sibbes illustrated what it means to have the Spirit govern our lives, how he applies the truth of God’s word to our hearts and conforms us to Christ. Christ’s victory not only over the sinful hearts of his people, but over death gives hope to believers. The last section is particularly helpful as it is filled with practical application for walking with Christ, dealing with struggles, and resting in Christ’s victory.

The Bruised Reed is an incredible book and one I would recommend to every believer regardless of where you are in your walk with the Lord. There are far too many good things to say in this short review to fully indicate how valuable this book has been. Sibbes does an incredible job balancing exposition, insight, and application. In *The Bruised Reed*, the “heavenly Doctor Sibbes” as he was often referred to in London, encouraged readers to grow in both knowledge and affection to the Lord. Sibbes has given Christians a wonderful source of encouragement that is rooted in Christ, the only source of lasting comfort and peace.

