

"JESUS TASTING AND NOT DRINKING"

Matthew 27:33, 34

Matthew 27:24-54

We have here in Matthew 27:33 and 34 what seems like a rather minor detail in the story of Jesus' crucifixion. It's even possible that we've read this account of Jesus' suffering and never realized that there were two occasions during Jesus' crucifixion when He was offered something to drink. Nevertheless, we must realize that this is, in fact, no minor detail, but part of the gospel of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. If it were not important and a part of the gospel it wouldn't be recorded for us.

There are many other things that we would like to know about the crucifixion that are not recorded. They're not included in Scripture, because they are not necessary for us to know. The things that are included are there because they are necessary. That's the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. That doctrine means that everything necessary for our salvation is recorded in Scripture, and, by the same token, that what is recorded, is necessary.

That's true of what we have here in Matthew 27:34: "They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink." That's the gospel. If Jesus had drunk that vinegar mixed with gall, there would have been no redemption for us, and we have to know He did not drink it because it was one of the things that had to be done for our salvation, and in order that atonement might be made for our sins.

With that in mind, let's look at the passage together this evening under the theme:

JESUS TASTING AND NOT DRINKING

I. His Bitter Cup

II. His Steadfast Refusal To Drink of that Cup

III. His Saving Purpose in Not Drinking

Let us notice three things in connection with that theme, and in the first place, then, let us notice "His Bitter Cup." We must say something about that vinegar mingled with gall that was offered Him. In the second place let us notice: "His Steadfast Refusal to Drink of that Cup" - that "when He had tasted thereof, He would not drink." And in the third place let us see: "His Saving Purpose in Not Drinking of that Cup." We have to ask ourselves in that last point the question, "Why? Why did this happen? Why did our Lord refuse that vinegar mingled with gall?" Indeed, we have to learn to ask questions like that whenever we come to any such detail recorded in the Word of God, however minor it might seem. Here the question that must be answered is: "Why did He refuse the vinegar mixed with gall?" The answer to that question is our third point and there we will learn that He had a definite, saving purpose in refusing that cup.

I. HIS BITTER CUP

Turning to our text, then, let us note again that the vinegar, mingled with gall, was not the only thing that Jesus had opportunity to drink on the cross. There were two occasions where drink was

offered to Him. This was the first. He was offered this drink just before He was actually nailed to the cross. The second occasion was, of course, at the end of those six awful hours of suffering, when He Himself said, "I thirst," and when someone gave Him vinegar to drink in a sponge. Of that we read in Matthew 27:48, though Matthew does not record the words He spoke at that time.

More importantly, there was a difference between what was offered Him on those two occasions. In this case it was vinegar, or wine (Mark calls it wine), mixed with gall, or, as Mark says, myrrh. On the other occasion it was just vinegar. Nor is there any significant difference between the two gospel accounts. The wine that they drank in those days, was a very thin, sour wine, that could very well be described as vinegar, and is so described here in Matthew. Likewise when Matthew speaks of gall, and Mark speaks of myrrh, they too are speaking of the same thing. Mark is simply identifying what it was that was put in the drink - it was myrrh - and Matthew is speaking of the bitterness of that myrrh. What Mark calls myrrh is called gall here in Matthew because it was almost too bitter to be drunk. That, mixed with wine, was what was offered Jesus just before He was crucified. Later on He was offered vinegar or sour wine alone. There was no gall or myrrh in that drink. There was no more need for that gall when Jesus was already crucified and near death.

Most important of all, however, is what happened on these two occasions. At the end of the crucifixion, Jesus Himself asked for something to drink. And, when they gave Him that vinegar, He did drink it. In this case, it was offered to Him without His asking for it, and when He had tasted it, as Matthew and Mark tell us, He would not drink it. That is what makes the question so interesting and so necessary to answer: "Why would He not drink it?" A few hours later He not only would drink, but asked for something to drink. Why would He not drink this vinegar mixed with gall?

The answer lies first of all in the drink itself and in the fact that it was offered to Jesus before He was crucified. We know that it was offered to Him before He was actually crucified because we read of this drink in verses 33 and 34 and then in verse 35 we read: "And they crucified him." He was not yet nailed to the cross when they tried to give him this vinegar to drink. They offered it at that time because that vinegar mixed with gall was a drug - a kind of narcotic - that was used at crucifixions to sedate those who were being crucified. Though we don't read of it, the same drink was probably given to the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus, and was given to make the job of the Jews and of the Roman soldiers that much easier.

That this wine was intended to be a sedative is clear from the Word of God in Proverbs 31:6. There we read: "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish." In this case, however, it was offered not out of pity, but that they, the Jews and Romans together might the more easily carry out their wicked purpose. You can imagine how some at least would have struggled and fought with the soldiers as they attempted to nail their hands and feet to their crosses. If they were sedated then it would be easier for the soldiers to carry out their cruel task. It was not pity, therefore, that offered this drugged wine to Jesus. For Him there was no pity as He Himself tells us in Psalm 69:20; "I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none."

Having said that, however, the question is all the more urgent: "Why did Jesus refuse the drink that was offered to Him?" After all, that drugged wine would have meant that His suffering would have been eased in some measure, and it was that suffering He dreaded so very much that the thought of it made Him sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemanae. Why would Jesus not drink?

II. HIS STEADFAST REFUSAL

We should notice that Scripture is very definite about His refusing this drink. It was not just that He did not drink but He would not. Both Matthew and Mark emphasize this. Mark says that when they gave it to Him, "he received it not." That's Mark 15:23. Matthew is even stronger. He tells us that Jesus first tasted this sour wine mixed with gall and that when he had tasted thereof, he would have nothing to do with it.

You even get the impression when you read these verses, and the parallel passage in Mark, that this drink was urged on Him. Matthew doesn't say for example, "He didn't drink it" but "He wouldn't". They wanted Him to drink it. They urged it on Him, and He wouldn't drink it. Once He had tasted it, He would not have it.

This cannot be explained as an act of stoicism. There are some people, you know, whom seem to take a kind of perverse delight in pain and suffering, and who refuse anything that would ease their suffering. That cannot be the explanation here, especially in light of Jesus' agony in the Garden. There was nothing He dreaded so much as the suffering He would have to endure on the cross, and anything that would have eased His suffering would have been welcome if it had been possible for Him to have it. But, having tasted this vinegar mixed with gall, He realized that drinking it was something He could not do if He was to finish His work and fulfil His Father's will.

There are those who try to find an explanation of this in the bitterness of drink. Christ speaks of that gall in Psalm 69:21 and tells us that it was part of His suffering. He says there: "They gave me also gall for my meat, and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." The bitterness of the gall was a part of the bitter suffering that He had to endure on the cross. Those who focus on that bitterness suggest that He refused it as a testimony against their cruelty and wickedness - to show that it was not out of pity or mercy that they offered it, but out of bitter hatred and cruelty.

Nevertheless, though there may be an element of truth in this explanation, it is not adequate. In so far as Jesus was there to suffer for our sins, and insofar as that gall was symbolic of His bitter suffering, one would have expected that His obedience to the Father would have required Him to drink it. Just as He was willing, for our sakes, to suffer all things, so He would not have refused something that was part of that suffering and a symbol of it, if it had been possible for Him to drink it. There must, therefore, be another reason why He refused that bitter cup.

In general that reason for His refusal has to lie in the fact, that in everything He did on the cross He was working out our salvation. He was coming at this point in His brief life to the climax of His work. Every step of His earthly life had led Him here. And everything He did here was somehow related to our salvation and involved in that great work of making atonement for our

sins. There wasn't a word He spoke, nor anything He did, that did not have to do with the work of redemption. He was, in this too, fulfilling the will of His heavenly Father and saying: "Not My will, but Thine be done" - saying, "It's my meat to do the will of my heavenly Father and so redeem my people." He had His calling and He knew exactly what His calling was. So, too, because He knew His calling so perfectly, He would and could not drink this vinegar mixed with gall.

In fact, in light of His refusal, we can go so far as to say, that this was Satan's last attempt to turn Christ aside from the work that God had given Him to do. All through His ministry He had to deal with Satan. In the three temptations in the wilderness, Satan had purposed to turn Him away from what God had given Him to do, so that there would be no redemption for you and for me. Satan had used even Jesus' disciples at times to that end, so that Jesus had to say to Peter on one occasion: "Get thee behind me Satan." It is not difficult, then, to believe that Satan was behind this also. That doesn't mean that the Roman soldiers or the Jews, those who offered Him this drink, saw Satan's hand in what they were doing. Nevertheless, through them Satan was once again seeking to turn Christ aside from that great work which God had given Him to do for our redemption, to make it impossible for atonement to be made for our sins. And so Christ refused the temptation that this drink represented.

III. HIS SAVING PURPOSE

Yet even that is not a complete answer. We still have not explained why this vinegar mixed with gall or myrrh was incompatible with His calling - why He could not drink if He was do His Father's will to the uttermost - why He had to refuse it in order to atone for our sins. There are, then, a number of passages we must look at in order to come to a complete understanding of this incident. They will take us, step by step, to see the saving purpose in Jesus' refusal to drink of this cup.

The first verse we must look at is found in Matthew 26, just a page or so back from our text. In Matthew 26:39 we read of a cup, a drink: "He went a little farther, and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." This, of course, is a different cup than the one the Jews and the Romans wanted to give Him.

Of that same cup we read Psalm 75:8. That verse says: "In the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and He poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them." That was the cup that Jesus might not refuse but had to drink.

What cup is Jesus talking about in these verses? All of you, including the children, know that the cup in these verses is not a literal cup, but a figurative cup, the cup of the wrath of God against our sins. That cup, because it was filled with the wrath of God against the sins of His people, was a cup ever so much more bitter than the vinegar mixed with gall. That cup was so bitter that the thought of drinking it made Jesus, the Son of God, prayed three times in the garden that it might pass from Him. That cup was so bitter, that the very thought of drinking it pressed out of Him, as our Form for the Lord's Supper says, the bloody sweat in the garden. He, the Son of God, could hardly bear the thought of drinking that cup.

That's the cup described in Psalm 75:8: "In the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; It is full of mixture; and He poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them." There we see that this was the cup of the eternal and unchangeable wrath of God against our sins. We cannot, in our most vivid imaginations, imagine what the drinking of that cup was like. The only ones who will ever have a taste of that cup are, as Psalm 75:8 suggests, the ungodly in the terrors and fires of hell.

Christ refused the vinegar mixed with gall, because He had to drink the cup of which Psalm 75:8 speaks. That cup of Jehovah's wrath He had tasted in all the suffering that was part of His life on earth. In being forsaken by His own, rejected of men, and despised he always tasted God's anger with our sins. But now He had to drain that cup to the bottom and taste its bitterest dregs, and the cup of drugged wine or vinegar which was offered Him would not allow Him to taste the bitterness of the cup that God had given Him to drink. He could not drink both. Even then, however, the question still remains: Why could He not drink both?

Again we must turn to Scripture, to two more passages, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. The first passage is Leviticus 10:8-10: "The Lord spake unto Aaron, saying, Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations: And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean."

Ordinarily the priests, just as we are, were allowed to drink wine, but not when they were doing their priestly work. In the tabernacle or temple, however, as they went about their duties, they were forbidden any wine or strong drink. The reason is that wine and strong drink affect one's judgment and one's ability to think and act. That's why the laws of the land forbid us to drink and drive.

And, because the priests were in God's presence, involved in the work of representing the people to God as the people gathered to worship God, they had of necessity to be able to remember all the laws that applied to worship and to carry out those laws in every detail. Their judgment and ability to perform their work might not be affected by wine or strong drink. To fail in detail of the worship of God was dishonoring to God and dangerous to them. You remember what happened to the two sons of Aaron who failed in one small detail as they brought the incense offering into the tabernacle, don't you?

And you must remember in that Jesus is our great and only High Priest. All His life, but especially on the cross He was doing the work to which all the work of the Old Testament priests pointed. In that work He, too, might not labor with His judgment and senses affected by wine or strong drink, and especially not by wine that was drugged. No detail might be omitted in the work He was called to do, no prophecy left unfulfilled. He was under the law of Leviticus 10:8-10 and obeyed it, not merely as a matter of form, but because He could no more do His work as priest carefully and perfectly under the influence of this drugged wine, than could the priests in the Old Testament. Only when His work was finished could He drink the vinegar or wine that was offered Him.

But there is more. We must also look up that marvelous verse in John 10 where Jesus says, "I lay down my life, that I might take it again." That's John 10:17. The giving of His life, so He says, was an act of self-sacrifice. He enforces that with the words, "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father."

He proved that His life was given and not taken in the Garden. When they came to capture Him He made them all go backward and fall to the ground, before He surrendered Himself to them. That was His way of saying, "You are not taking Me to My death. I am going of my own will." He proved that on the cross when He did not respond to their cruel calls to come down. He could have, you know. Even you children know that when they said, "Come down, and we will believe you," He, the Son of God, could easily have done that. But He did not. He was laying down His life!

Putting Leviticus 10 and John 10 together we see Jesus, as the great High priest of His people, coming, as it were, into the sanctuary, to do the work that God had given Him to do. But that work meant that He had to be not only Priest offering the sacrifice, but also the lamb laid upon the altar as an offering for sin. He had not only to be the Offerer, but the Offering - not only the bringer of the lamb, but the lamb itself - not only the sacrificer, but the sacrifice. That's what He was talking about in John 10 when He said, "I lay down my life."

We may not do that. For us that would be suicide. Our lives do not belong to us and we have no right to dispose of them as we wish, not in life nor in death. But for Jesus, who is God and to whom belong all the issues of life and death, it was not suicide, but the very heart and soul of the work that God had given Him to do. And, in doing that work of bringing Himself as an offering for sin, He could no more drink that cup of drugged wine that was offered to Him, than the priests could drink wine before they went into the tabernacle to go about their various duties in the service of God.

But He could not drink it either as the Lamb who was being offered! You see, there never was in all the history of God's church a lamb like this. As the Lamb of God He laid Himself upon the altar. He did not have to be brought to the altar, like the sacrificial lambs of the Old Testament. He did not have His life taken from Him as they did. He climbed the altar of His own accord and gave His own life there as an offering for sin.

That is what's sometimes called Christ's active obedience. Theologians distinguish between Christ's active and His passive obedience. His passive obedience, they say, refers to the fact that He bore and endured passively all that was laid upon Him for our sakes. He went, as the prophet Isaiah says, like a lamb to the slaughter, making no protest - passively enduring shame, and reproach, and spitting, and beating, and finally, even death itself, for our sakes.

His active obedience, so it is said, refers to the fact that He went to His cross willingly. That He brought His own body to the sacrificial altar. But the suggestion is made, sometimes, that His active obedience ended with His being nailed to the cross, and that the hours He hung there were hours in which He passively suffered the punishment for sin - that His obedience was no longer active, and so, indeed it would seem. But that is not really correct. All Christ's obedience was

active, even when He was hanging on the cross. He did not just passively endure all that suffering, but actively took it upon Himself.

Even while He hung on the cross He was active, busy, doing what was necessary for our salvation. Especially that was true in the giving of His life. For all that Pilate did and for all that the leaders of the Jews did, it was still true, as Jesus Himself reminds us in John 10, that no man took His life from Him. He gave it. He laid it down, actively. He poured out, as we sometimes say, His own blood as a sacrifice for sin. He poured it out drop by awful drop. Every drop that fell was a conscious and deliberate act of His own. And when finally He was ready to die, He determined the moment of His death and He gave His life to His Father with the words: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." He did not die like us - not like us, who always have our life taken from us, but He gave it, gave it into the hands of His heavenly Father.

And He was doing that already here when He refused that wine mingled with myrrh. By that act He was saying us, and to all who will understand: "I must give My life. I may not go to the cross drugged and insensitive, but must feel the anguish and the pain, and above all must drink and taste every bitter drop of the cup of Jehovah's wrath, and must know what I am drinking. I may not just hang here passively, enduring My suffering, but must take it all upon Myself, and feel it to the uttermost. There is no other way that atonement can be made for the sins of My people."

That is Christ's active or willing obedience. And we must understand what that means and especially that even the hours on the cross were characterized by such willing and active obedience. He did not just resign Himself to His suffering and say: "Thy will be done," but willingly, even eagerly, He took all this shame and sorrow and death upon Himself - embraced it for our sakes - knowing that thus, and thus only, might atonement be made.

When we realize that, then we begin to understand what Paul says in Ephesians 2 when he talks about the immeasurable love of God. It is immeasurable, is it not? When you think of our Lord Jesus Christ not merely going to the cross, but going willingly, going in such a manner as we've described, to suffer all these things, it's almost more than you can bear to think about.

As part of His willing and active obedience, there were many things that He had to do on the cross. And that drugged wine would have made it all impossible. He had to make intercession for ignorant sinners like us, and say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Think what would be missing if He had been unable to say that because He had drunk that vinegar mingled with gall. Intercession, priestly intercession, would not have been made for you and me at the cross. He had to save that dying thief and the Roman centurion who confessed Him after He was dead. To do that He couldn't be drugged and insensitive. To the ungodly it seemed that He hung there helplessly, but we know that He was busy, very busy with the work that His Father had given Him to do.

As part of that saving work He Had to tell us out of the darkness of the unthinkable wrath of God against sin, something of what He was enduring, and what we will never endure, when He said, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And, after doing all this, He had with a shout of triumph, to announce to you and to me the complete, finished victory over sin, with those wonderful words, "It is finished."

That's what we meant when we said at the beginning that if He had drunk the vinegar mingled with gall, there would have been no redemption. The work that God had given Him to do, would not have been finished, and would not have been finished because, He had to do that work to the end and be obedient unto death. Even there on the cross, He was working and doing, actively doing, what was necessary for your salvation and for mine.

But there is a further application of this that must be made also, an application that follows from our belief in the doctrine of limited atonement. Remember, He didn't drink that vinegar mingled with gall, in order that He might drink the cup of Jehovah's wrath. And do not forget, that He drank that cup of Jehovah's wrath only for some. That's the doctrine of limited atonement. You know that doctrine. The cup He did drink, He did not drink for all.

And that means, you understand, that one of two things is true. Either Christ drank that cup of Jehovah's wrath, refusing the vinegar and gall, for you, or you will have to drink it yourself someday. That's really the point of Psalm 75. Christ drank it for His people. But Psalm 75:8 says "The dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them." Think about that!

Jesus drank the cup of Jehovah's wrath - drank it because, having loved His own, He loved them unto the end. But not for all, and if not for you, then you yourself will, as Psalm 75:8 says, drink the dregs of that cup someday. Being a member of a church won't save you from that. Going to church twice on the Lord's Day won't save you from that. All the works of charity and mercy you might ever do in a life time will not save you from that. Being a good person won't save you from that. The only thing, beloved, that saves us from having to drink the cup of God's wrath against sin is faith in Jesus Christ, the faith that unites you to Him, so that you can say: "He drank it for me. I am in Him by faith."

By the same token, you understand, if He drank that cup for you, that bitter cup of the wrath of God, then all that's left is the cup of blessing - the cup of blessing that you drink in all the circumstances of your life - the cup of blessing that you will drink to the fill when you stand in the presence of God and are present at the wedding feast of the Lamb. Of that cup we in Revelation 22. To that cup the Spirit and bride call us and say, "Let him that heareth, come." Come, then, Beloved, drink of that cup by faith in Christ, and not of the other. Believe that Jesus drank that cup for you and that you may now without fear drink of the cup of all the blessings of salvation that are in Him. May God grant it that you drink freely of that cup of blessing and not the other. Amen.