

The Lord's Supper

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[0 : 00] Well, as we've said today, we gather together around the Lord's table. And so I thought I would take the opportunity for us to consider what the Lord's Supper means, to think about what happens when we partake in the Supper together.

For example, just say somebody stopped you down on the street after church this afternoon, and they said to you, where have you been? Well, your answer would be, well, I've been to church. I've been to that great church called Christ Church Glasgow. It just meets there in Annie's Land Hall. And let me ask you, well, what did you do? And so you would say, okay, well, we were singing, we were praying, there was a Bible reading, there was a guy at the front, he spoke about the Bible passage, and we celebrated the Lord's Supper. And they might ask, well, the Lord's Supper, what happened during the Lord's Supper? I wonder what you would say. What answer would you give them if they asked you what was going on as we celebrate this meal together? What happens when we sit at the table and eat the bread and drink the wine? What is the significance of it?

And why does it matter? Well, it strikes me that when it comes to the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, we probably spend a lot more time as the Christian church in general talking about baptism than we do about the Lord's Supper. And here's the thing, we get baptized once, whereas we celebrate the Lord's Supper on an ongoing basis. And so the Lord's Supper is so important, and it's important because the scriptures tell us how important it is. The Lord's Supper helps us understand the gospel story, the story of the Lord Jesus Christ, his coming, his life, his death, his ministry. And it explains the gospel story in a visual way. We can see the gospel story being portrayed, explained in these elements of bread and wine. The Lord's Supper is for our personal spiritual growth in our relationship with God. But the Lord's Supper is also for the health of our church here in Christchurch, Glasgow, or any church. Now, the Lord's Supper has always been a feature of church worship throughout church history. And its practice has been much debated. After all, there are a number of different names that are used to describe the Lord's Supper. There's the Lord's

Supper, obviously. There is the breaking of bread. There is the Eucharist. There is also communion. All these words you'll find in the pages of the New Testament. Churches will celebrate the Lord's Supper with different degrees of frequency, weekly, monthly, every second month, maybe even just twice a year. There are different methods for conducting it, like participants remaining seated, and then the elements are passed round, or participants coming forward to receive the bread and wine. Churches will also differ on whether they use alcoholic wine or non-alcoholic grape juice, and whether they share a common cup or individual glasses. When I was training for ministry in the Church of Scotland, I went and did a placement in a church, which was a very high church, and they had a particular practice for how they celebrated communion. They wanted to cater for everybody. And so the church was basically divided into four, four sections. And so in one section, you could have the common cup with alcoholic wine, and another section, you could have the common cup with non-alcoholic wine.

[3 : 53] In a third section, you could have individual shot glasses with alcoholic wine, or in the fourth section, you could have individual glasses with non-alcoholic wine. And so if you're here today, and you're thinking, it would be great just to think about how these different churches practice it, and therefore, what should we do? Well, we're not going to waste our time thinking about all of these details. Far better for us to focus on what the Lord's Supper means, and what happens when we receive it. And we'll do this by asking two simple questions up on the screen. First, why did the Lord's Supper start? Second, what does the Lord's Supper signify? And the second question, we'll spend a lot longer on that. But first of all, why did the Lord's Supper start? Jesus himself instituted the Lord's Supper. It came from the Last Supper, which you'll know is recorded in

all four Gospels in the New Testament. And the Last Supper took place the night before Jesus died on the cross. And it happened as Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples.

Well, what's the Passover meal? Well, the Passover meal commemorates Israel's exodus from Egypt. You read about this in Exodus chapter 11, 12, and 13. And this exodus, this was a defining moment for the people of Israel, for God's people, because God rescued them from their slavery in Egypt and led them to the promised land. Now, if you remember the story, God sent terrible plagues on the Egyptians to force Pharaoh to set his people free, with the final and worst plague of all being the plague of the firstborn. But God told the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb and then to paint its blood on the door frames of their homes. So that, that Passover night, the angel of the Lord would pass over the homes of the Israelites whilst killing the firstborn of the Egyptians. And so the Passover lamb was sacrificed as a substitute and its blood turned away the judgment of God so people could be saved.

And so God commanded the Israelites to commemorate this great saving act. And they were to do it every single year. And so every single year, Israel would sacrifice a lamb who would share this special meal together. And so that's what Jesus was doing the night before he died. Passover meal with his disciples.

The last supper with his disciples was the Passover meal. And so Jesus used this occasion to reinterpret the Passover to explain the meaning of his own death. And so we read these words in Matthew chapter 26.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, take and eat. This is my body. And he took a cup. And when he had given thanks, he gave it to them saying, drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it and you with you in my father's kingdom. So Jesus says he was establishing a new covenant relationship through his death on the cross where the bread was a sign of his body broken on the cross and the wine was a sign of his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins on the cross. And Jesus himself was claiming to be the Passover lamb. He would be the one who would be the substitutionary sacrifice so that the judgment of God can pass over us. So the judgment of God struck Jesus on the cross when he died in our place. And so it's only through the death of Jesus Christ, the Passover lamb, that our sins can be forgiven and we receive God's salvation. So in a sense, Jesus's body was broken so we can be made whole.

[8 : 18] Jesus's blood was poured out so we can be washed clean. And so Jesus redefined the elements of the Passover meal around himself so that he could teach his disciples and us what God's salvation really is all about. Where just as God gave the Passover meal to Israel as a visible reminder of his salvation, so Jesus gave the Passover meal to his people, his disciples to us as a visible reminder of God's salvation. And that's why his words at the supper are so significant. Jesus said, do this in remembrance of me.

Now Jesus gave us this meal on his last night on earth to remind us of the gospel and that's what we do every time we partake of it. So the bread and wine engage our physical senses of sight, touch, taste, and smell. And they become a palpable sign because Jesus is present with us when we eat the bread and drink the wine. The Scottish minister, minister of the 16th century, Robert Bruce, put it this way, not Robert the Bruce, but Robert Bruce. He said, we don't get a better Christ at the Lord's Supper than the Christ we get in the preaching of the word. But we do sometimes get the same Christ better.

And that's why the Lord's Supper is for those who are already Christians. Because God uses this physical activity to do us spiritual good as his people. We're just like a physical meal, it's obviously meant to nourish you and to strengthen you. So this spiritual meal is also meant to nourish you and strengthen you because Jesus is with us. It nourishes our souls because we join in fellowship with him. So it's a spiritual meal. So why did the Lord's Supper start? It started because Jesus wants to enjoy a meal with us, to have fellowship with his people in a spiritual way.

So secondly then, this leads on to our second point. What does the Lord's Supper signify? Well, the Lord's Supper is a sign of Christ's death for our sins and it's a seal of the benefits of his death for us. And so along with the Last Supper in the Gospels, all four of them, we get at the fullest explanation of the Lord's Supper in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in those passages that we read from chapter 10 and chapter 11. Now Paul is addressing the shocking behavior of the Corinthians when they gathered together for worship. But amidst Paul's harsh rebuke, Paul teaches

them about the Lord's Supper. Now Sinclair Ferguson, the theologian in his book devoted to God's church, he helpfully walks through Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper. So I'm going to pick up some of the words he uses to help us see what the Lord's Supper signifies. And we see this in these two passages in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. So let's look first of all at 1 Corinthians chapter 10. And the first word is communion. Now this is the most important aspect of the Lord's Supper, it is that we have communion with Jesus Christ. And so 1 Corinthians 10:16 says, is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ, and is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? So when we eat and when we drink, we participate in the body and blood of Jesus. Now that word participate in the Greek is the Greek word *koinonia*, which describes a deep, close fellowship, a communion. And so when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we have communion with Jesus. Jesus is himself present with us when we feast in faith. Now there are different views about Christ's presence with us in the Lord's Supper, and about how we understand Jesus' words. This is my body, this is my blood, and there are essentially four views. We're not going to go into them. But what we believe is that Christ is spiritually present in the supper. Jesus is with us at the table by his spirit when we have communion with him by faith.

[13:02] Now I thought about how best to try and illustrate this. In my wallet, I've got a picture of my family. And if I show you the picture and say to you, this is my wife, this is my oldest boy, this is my youngest boy, this is my daughter, you know that the picture represents them. You know what I mean. Nobody's going to think that the actual bodies in this photo are the real bodies of my family. Kind of two-dimensional, not three-dimensional, and they don't do much. So nobody's thinking that it is really them. It represents them. And so some parts of the church will say that the elements transform into the physical body and blood of Christ, but they don't. That's impossible. Jesus is not with us in that literal sense, but he's with us in a spiritual sense.

And so when we participate in the Lord's Supper, we experience real communion with Jesus by faith, where the bread and the wine are visible and they're tangible signs of an invisible spiritual reality.

Jesus comes to us by his spirit and we come to him through the same spirit. Participation, communion, fellowship. And so the Lord's Supper is this wonderful invitation by Jesus to us to be with him and to enjoy communion with him as we eat the bread and drink the cup. So that's the first word, communion. The second word is union. Union. And this is chapter 10, verse 17. The Lord's Supper strengthens our communion with Christ, but it also expresses our union as Christ's people. So verse 17 says, because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all share the one loaf. Now Paul repeats the word one, you'll notice three times, because the Lord's Supper demonstrates the unity that there is in the body of Christ.

Now the problem in Corinth was that the believers didn't reflect this unity. They were divided. They were fighting against one another. And so when we gather around the Lord's table, we've got to recognize the profound spiritual unity that we have as believers in Christ and also encourage it as we come together. Because we don't come to the table as individuals. That's why we celebrate communion together, not in people's homes, but as a body. We join with our brothers and sisters in Christ, in union with one another. Okay? Communion, union, third, consecration. This is chapter 10, verse 18 to 22. So Lord's Supper is for all believers, for people who are devoted to Jesus Christ. And that's what Paul's got in mind in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 21. He says, you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too. You cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. So he's telling the Corinthians to be consecrated to Christ, to turn away from idols, to turn away from pagan sacrifices, because in their city there was pressure for them to compromise. And so Paul is forcing them to choose who they will serve. Will he belong to Jesus Christ or will he belong to this world? And we too are forced to choose. Will we be consecrated to Christ? Will we be fully devoted to the one who died for us? And the supper helps us because when we partake in the supper, what we're saying to Jesus is, Lord, you gave everything for me when you died on the cross. And so now as I receive the benefits of your death in the bread and in the wine, I want to give myself to you in return. And so our participation in the Lord's Supper tells Jesus and also tells the world around us where my allegiance lies. Who am I devoted to? Who is most important in my life? Okay, consecration.

[17:31] The fourth word is commemoration. And so we commemorate Christ's death by obeying his command. Do this in remembrance of me. So now we're on to chapter 11. Look at what Paul

says there, verse 23 to 25. For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you. The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body, which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, after supper, he took the cup saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me. So Jesus instituted this supper for his church as a memorial of his death. He taught the apostles who then taught the church to do this in memory of him. In other words, we are to keep celebrating the Lord's Supper often to remember the once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He's not being sacrificed again and again. He was sacrificed once. And we remember that when we gather around his table.

The next one, fifth word, is proclamation. The Lord's Supper is a proclamation of the gospel. And this is verse 26 of chapter 11. Paul says, for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. So Paul's not talking here about proclaiming the Lord's death in a sermon before the supper, like what we're doing today. Though that is what we do every time we celebrate the supper, we preach God's word and then we gather around the table. Now what Paul is saying here is that the Lord's Supper is the proclamation of the Lord's death, where there's a sense in which the supper is a sermon. So the preached word is an audible sermon and the supper is a visible sermon. One that proclaims Christ crucified for our sins through the broken bread and the poured out wine.

And we proclaim Christ's death to each other as we celebrate the supper together. We proclaim it as we serve one another the bread and the wine. That's why our practice is that you remain seated and you serve one another the bread and the wine as you pass it along the row. And so whether we say, take eat or take drink with our mouths or simply with our hands as we pass the bread and wine to one another, we are preaching the gospel to each other. We're doing it in a dramatic way. In essence, we are saying, Jesus Christ died for you. What a great thing to remind your brothers and sisters in Christ of.

And so in this very action of gathering around the Lord's table, we proclaim the gospel, we proclaim his death until he comes. And so whilst the Lord's Supper is for Christ's people, it is for believers, believers, as we celebrate it together. It is also a visible way to proclaim the gospel to those who don't know Jesus Christ. And as we do so, we long for them to see and to hear and to reflect on the death of Jesus so that they would come to know Jesus as their saviour too. That's the fifth word, participation.

[21 : 19] The sixth word is anticipation. Verse 26, the Lord's Supper anticipates the return of Jesus. 1 Corinthians 11 26, for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Until he comes. Jesus is coming again. And so the supper anticipates that the Jesus whose death we proclaim is the risen Lord who will return. And so the communion with Christ that we enjoy at the supper right now is a foretaste of the marriage supper of the lamb, which we read about in the book of Revelation, where we will enjoy even greater communion with Jesus. So we enjoy it now around the table, but we look forward to it in an even greater sense in the future in heaven.

And so as we gather around the table today, as we will do in a moment, we're already beginning to taste what we will taste fully for all eternity, where the invisible presence of Christ Christ with us now assures us of the visible presence of Christ that we'll experience then.

When one day, as the Bible tells us, we will see him face to face. That is coming. And so the supper now is a preview, a trailer of what will be the main event. And then the seventh word is examination. It's the last one. The Lord's Supper requires self-examination. So the Corinthians behaved in a disgraceful manner when they gathered together. And so Paul states that anyone who participates in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. And he goes on in verse 28 and 29. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, eat and drink judgment on themselves. Now, when Paul says they're discerning the body of Christ, he might be referring to the body of Christ in the sense of the bread and the wine, or he may be referring to the body of Christ in the sense of fellow Christians, the body of Christ. But either way, the point is he's saying anyone who dishonors Christ either directly through the supper or indirectly through his people eats and drinks judgment on themselves. And so this is a sobering warning for Paul to the Corinthians, but also to us.

Because if we do come to the Lord's table in an unworthy manner, Paul is saying you won't walk away unaffected. He says, no, we eat and drink judgment on ourselves, just like those in Corinth did.

[24 : 22] Verse 30. That's why every person who comes to the Lord's table must examine themselves by reflecting on our relationship with Jesus, first of all, but also reflecting on our relationships with Jesus's people, with his church. And so we should be asking ourselves, well, am I living in obedience to Christ's lordship in my life? Am I fleeing from sin, fighting against sin? Am I seeking to obey what God wants me to do?

Am I trying to live the way God wants me to live? And also we should be asking, am I united to Christ's people? Am I loving them as brothers and sisters in Christ? Are there any areas in our relationships that we need to reconcile before we come to the table? Because if we have experienced the love of Christ for us, and yet fail to love Christ's people, then we essentially make a mockery of Christ's table. Now, Paul's not suggesting that we can examine ourselves so as to make ourselves worthy to sit at the Lord's table, because the reality is that we are and always will be unworthy to be invited as a guest at the Lord's table. But the good news is that the Lord's supper isn't for perfect people. It's for those who are well aware of their unworthiness, who know of their sin, who know that they are a sinner who needs forgiveness in Jesus Christ, but who have gone to Jesus in repentance and in faith, and who recognize that we are only invited to the table because Christ's death has paid for our sin. We've no right to be there, yet Jesus takes away our sin, and he welcomes us. I love the old communion story of John Duncan, also known as Rabbi Duncan, Scottish minister in the 19th century. At the communion service, people would come forward to a table and would sit around the table to receive the bread and wine from the one who was presiding. And on one occasion, Rabbi Duncan was presiding at the table. And as the cup went round the table, he noticed that there was a woman there. And she was sitting there and tears were streaming down her face. And so when the cup came to her, she held it for a moment. She looked and then she passed it on.

She just felt so unworthy as she examined herself. She couldn't drink from the cup. Didn't think she was able to receive communion. And then when the cup came back round to Rabbi Duncan, he did something very unusual. He picked the cup up.

He walked around the table to where the tearful woman was sitting and he put the cup in her hands and he said to her, Tack it, lassie. It's for sinners.

You know, the wonder of the Lord's Supper is that we are great sinners, but we have a great savior.

[27 : 54] Jesus loves us. Jesus died for us. And Jesus invites us to drink with him. And so the Lord's Supper signifies communion, union, consecration, commemoration, proclamation, anticipation, examination.

And so as we grasp more of what is happening when we gather together around the Lord's table, then the table should be ever more precious to us. Why? Well, because it gives us sweet communion with the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who gave his life for us, the one who longs and wants to feast with us.

Because as we take, eat and drink, we experience Jesus in a real and a special way. We're made to be in relationship with him. And this is how that relationship grows in the way that Jesus has said. Let's pray together.