

Communion

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Preacher: Chris Fry

[0:00] So it's Luke chapter 22, verses 7 to 23, and you'll always find the page number of any verses put on the screen, page number from the church Bible in brackets.

! Page 1057. Then came the day of unleavened bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.

Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover. Where do you want us to prepare for it? They asked. He replied, as you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you.

Follow him to the house that he enters and say to the owner of the house, the teacher asks, where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?

He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there. They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

[1:20] When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.

For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God. After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, take this and divide it among you.

For I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to them saying, this is my body given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The son of man will go as it has been decreed. And that's the reading.

[2:32] Dear Father, we pray that you would help us in this moment to be able to receive the word of God. And we pray especially for the application of the scriptures to our hearts.

However well we might think we know this subject, may we know it in a fresh way today. And in all this, may we see a brighter, fuller sight of Jesus Christ.

We ask in his name. Amen. So the title of this short series is called Optional Extras.

And you'll remember those who were here last week, but there may be a number who weren't, that I draw attention here to this very basic baked bean can. And said, the marketing people have recognised that there's a market out there for people who don't want the frills and the extras.

They just want the basics. And so it is with a car. A car, I remember a lady last night saying to us, as long as it gets me there, that's fine.

[3:43] Four wheels, as long as it gets me there, that's fine. But of course you have so many extra things inside your car, can't you? And here's the list, air conditioning, sports suspension, night vision, CD changes.

Amazing. Goes on. And they'll invent more and more things that make it attractive. And just wonder whether that can be a danger for us as Christians, that we think, well, these are all kind of superficial extras.

And I just want to be a basic Christian. Some think that being a Christian and living as a Christian is about choosing a belief system and a lifestyle that suits them under the general banner of the love and example of Jesus Christ.

It's become increasingly popular and accepted for people who not only call themselves Christians, but truly believe themselves to be Christians, to be selective about behavior and practices which are clearly spoken about and demonstrated by Christian people in the Bible.

Sometimes it's a case of just not getting around to taking something seriously. But for some, it's a deliberate choice. And we made reference last week and I draw attention to this again.

[5:07] If there would be one verse perhaps you would want to memorize and make sure that it's in your bloodstream as a Christian, it's this. All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

And I hope as Christian people that we come here today, not just to tick a box, go through the motions, but to be able to be challenging ourselves and to say, I want to be the best Christian that God could make me to be.

I want to be as holy a person as it's possible for a person to be. I don't want to dabble around in the shallows of the Christian life, but I do want to get deeply involved in my relationship with God.

That is the right and I think it's the normal place for Christian people to be. It is a wholehearted thing that you read the New Testament and you get no sense of those early Christians being sort of one foot in one camp and one in another.

It was a complete change for them to become a Christian. And they were fed on the word of God. We're fed on the word of God ourselves.

[6:31] So how important that is because we live in challenging days, days when we could easily get blown off course. But God says in his word that here is something solid and enduring.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will not pass away. So individually, there's a challenge and there's something definitely for us here as a church.

At the membership service, we repeat this praise. The strength of our church is according to the faithfulness or not of its members. So if we say we believe in something, but 50% of the membership actually doesn't practice it, then whatever the words say, they're completely undermined by our behavior.

We're looking at three topics. Baptism, which we saw last week. Communion, which is this morning. And church belonging, which will be in two weeks' time. And this morning we're thinking about communion.

And we have the demonstration of communion this morning. We'll be enjoying that later. And if you're a member of the church, here's one of the questions that you would have been asked if you stood up here.

[7:58] And it says this, question seven. Will you join regularly around the Lord's table? Carefully chosen words. And they're a challenge to us. All of us who are members of this church.

Would you regularly join around the Lord's table? Whether you're a member of a church or not. But if you are a Christian believer, I would say that that also holds good.

A definition might be this. Christian communion as taught and practiced in the Bible.

This is what we're going to be thinking about today. And to make a start, let me suggest some objections that people might make to this subject. And some of the reasons why people might stay away from it.

Of course, you might just forget that it goes on. And you've got no chance of forgetting this morning because it's here. But generally speaking, we meet twice a month for communion.

[9:02] But here we are. Here's a major objection. It's very confusing. And it is confusing. This subject has been riddled in history with confusion.

So I pick at random a picture. Many of you may have never been involved in something like this. But this is what might be called a high mass from a Roman Catholic church setting.

And I just want you to look at that and what sort of impression you gain from looking at that particular picture. Well, there's a cloud of incense here on the right-hand side.

A load of candles being lit. Many people are kneeling around here. And they're dressed in special ways. And there are two priests assisting this main priest here.

And he's raising a chalice. And something very solemn and holy is going on. Well, I know something of this from my own background. And I remember as a child knowing that at this particular moment I needed to close my eyes.

[10:09] And not to look. Almost as if there was something so special happening at that particular moment. When either the host was being raised or the chalice was being raised. That you couldn't look at it.

It was almost if you looked at it you might get blinded. So in Roman Catholic understanding of communion. This is an extraordinary moment which is occurring.

Don't use the word communion. It's called the mass. Which actually just means dismissal. Because that's the final word that's said at the end of this ceremony. Go. It's a bit strange, isn't it?

But this is the mass. And this is what has been repeated for centuries and centuries and centuries. And people are doing that this morning. So you might say, well is that communion?

Well you know we're going to test this by the Bible, aren't we? And here is a sort of much simpler demonstration. Here's a glass and there's a broken bread.

[11:15] Which looks rather similar to what we're about this morning. But nevertheless, one has to ask the question. What's going on? What's going on with the glass and the bread?

One might hugely criticise this for its elaborateness. And complication. And mystery. But equally we can be stumbled by this.

If we don't have some understanding of the meaning of this. And so people might say, well does it really matter?

Does it really matter to my spiritual life? Does it matter to the life of the church? Would it make a great deal of difference to us if we didn't have any communion at all? If we just took it off our calendar?

If we didn't bother? Well that's a good challenge. We need to just address that. And not just take it for granted and say, well we'll do it because we've always done it.

[12:21] But we need to look at this again and say, this is why we do it. Now there are a number of phrases and words that are used in the Bible for this act that we're calling communion.

I've just chosen the word communion. And actually, interestingly, in our membership service, it talks about the Lord's table. The Lord's table. Do you see that down there? Third bullet point there.

1 Corinthians 10.21. So we might just look at, just to confirm this to ourselves. Now, it's possible that your translation won't exactly say the same words.

But let's look at the Lord's Supper. You see, that's another popular way of describing what this is. 1 Corinthians 11.20. 1 Corinthians 11.20.

When you come together, says Paul to the Corinthians, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat. So this is one way of expressing what this is.

[13:31] The Lord's table is referred to in 1 Corinthians 10.21, previous page. 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. And then in the book of Acts, chapter 2, verse 42, talking about the practice of the early church immediately after the day of Pentecost, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The breaking of bread. I think brethren assemblies sometimes make reference in that kind of way. Sometimes people have said, breaking of bread, did that really mean this?

Or was it simply they got together and had a meal? Well, I think in a strange sort of way, both things happened. There was a meal taking place. But within that meal, there was spiritual content.

It wasn't just eating and drinking, but they probably concluded that meal in some rather special way in remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ. So breaking of bread becomes a shorthand here for a meal that is enriched by communion.

[14:49] You might also have heard the word Eucharist. We don't use that word at all, but just so you're not frightened off by it, it simply means Thanksgiving. So if people are doing what we intend to do and just call it Eucharist, well, then fine.

The one thing that we will not call this is Mass. It's not the same, and we'll see later why there is a big distinction to be made on the basis of the Bible.

So secondly, let's look at some history. Please turn to Exodus chapter 12. And in most Bibles, this particular chapter will be headed to the Passover.

The Passover. So do you remember in our reading in Luke a little earlier, several times there was reference to the Passover. Jesus says to his disciples, we need to eat the Passover meal.

Go and make a preparation for the Passover meal. And that's exactly what they did. And then actually at the meal itself, Jesus says to them, I've really looked forward to having this Passover meal with you.

[16:22] So there is a connection between that moment, the Last Supper, and the Passover. And that's what we find in what is described in Exodus chapter 12.

So this is before the people of Israel came out of Egypt, out of their slavery. There have been many plagues. They were about to be delivered. The final plague was a terrible plague.

It was the death of the firstborn males in the house of all the Egyptians. A terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible thing is about to occur.

The hearts have been made so hard that this ultimate plague is about to happen. And at this particular moment, the deliverer God gives to his people by command through Moses and Aaron, a very graphic way of being shown how they're going to be delivered from this destruction.

And they're told to have this meal. And the prescription behind it is spelled out here. And then in the first days after their deliverance, it's made more clear to them exactly what they need to do.

[17:39] So they are to eat together. They are to eat together in readiness for their deliverance. They're eating together a lamb. And the blood of the lamb is to be pasted and spread upon the doorposts of their houses.

And it is to be a very solid sign in the symbol that a sacrifice has been made, that blood has been poured out. And the blood is there represented so that when the angel of death came over, that he would pass over those houses.

Because the penalty had already been paid. Death had already happened. Judgment had already fallen. And because of that, they were safe. But everywhere where the blood was not seen, there was going to be destruction.

Do you know what it is to be covered by the blood of Jesus Christ? How important this was for these people. This ceremony, which began maybe 1,200 years before Christ, was to be held annually, once a year.

Once a year. A very solemn preparation for this moment. The Passover meal. And all Jewish people would do this. They would gather in their families. The children would be there too.

[19:11] And they would ask the question, What do these things mean? That's why we're going to have the children coming back in at the end of this meeting. You want them to see. So they need to be asking the questions when they go back home.

What do these things mean? And actually in the meal itself, whoever was supervising was to give answers to that.

So one might just pause at this very moment and say, If there's a connection between Passover and communion, and there is. And if the children are to ask the question, What do these things mean?

And the supervisor is to give the answer to that. How important it is for us to both ask the question and to receive the answers. And to recognise that this has meaning.

This is not mystery. This is meaning. This is rich with meaning. And it is our responsibility to mine hard in the riches of scripture.

[20:14] To dig out the fullness of meaning. Firstly, communion is commanded and was practised by the first Christian believers.

So David reminded us earlier. And I'll remind you again from the passage in Luke chapter 22 and verse 19. Jesus says, This is my body given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. As I was looking at this, I was wondering if someone might say, Oh, well he was simply saying, Do this at this precise moment to remember me.

Finish. But I don't think the context allows us to think of it in that way. There is a command and encouragement. And it was certainly taken by the early believers in this way.

That this was to be a repeated meal. And that they were to do it regularly. 1 Corinthians 11, 17, 24 and 26.

[21:23] Perhaps we'll just look at one of those verses there. 1 Corinthians 11, 17. So Paul is criticising them for the way they're doing this rather badly.

I don't have any praise for you. Your meetings do more harm than good. That would be a terrible thing to say, wouldn't it? If we met here today and someone could say of us, It's doing more harm than good.

When he had given thanks, verse 24, Jesus broke bread and said, This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

And that phrase is repeated. And Paul, this is the clearest passage of all in describing the necessary behaviour of Christian believers.

We do it. We're commanded to do it. They were doing it badly. But he didn't say stop doing it. He said, you need to do it well. You need to do it right. It definitely was the practice of the first Christians.

[22:25] We saw in the book of Acts. They broke bread together. It is a sign of our being disciples that we are obedient to this command. And it is a matter of pleasing the Lord. So, again, I'm not going to tangle with someone who says, Well, is it really so important?

I would just say, well, please search your heart. If you're going to take an attitude that says, Well, I don't really know how important it is. It is commanded. So it's something we should be doing. But don't let us do it just because it's commanded. But let us do it with an understanding of what it's about. And maybe when we begin to understand the meaning of it, we'll enjoy the richness of it. And we'll want to do it more. Christian communion as taught and practiced in the Bible does have clear meaning. It is, firstly, remembrance.

It's remembrance of Jesus. Do this, he says, in remembrance of me. How easy it is for the Christian life to become trammled and surrounded by so many things that don't actually have much to do directly with Jesus Christ.

[23:37] They can do with our traditions and our behaviors and our meetings and our conversations and so forth. But to do something directly to do with Jesus, we've been reminded in recent messages about, What is it to be a Christian if there is no presence of Jesus?

It all falls apart. Christianity has no substance and reality without personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

And this is given to us that we might remember him. It is clearly a visible sign. We don't have virtual drink and virtual food.

We don't even have it on a screen. We have it in reality. It is to be touched, handled, tasted. And I think that continues to be extremely helpful for us.

It gives us time to pause. It gives us time to process. I was wondering whether to do this experiment.

[24:42] Perhaps we won't try it because it will take too long. But I just thought, if I was to say, close your eyes now and just think for a minute about your mother-in-law. If you've got a mother-in-law.

What sort of thoughts would come into your mind? I don't know. But I'm pretty sure that within about 10 seconds you'd be thinking about what's for lunch today or what's going on in the Olympics or something else.

Because it's just the way our minds operate. It's very hard for us to actually close our eyes in a virtual way and just to say, Oh, I'll think about this. And I could encourage you and really sort of look to you and say, Think deeply about Jesus.

But here in the simplicity of this method, Jesus is saying, This gives you opportunity just to put your bags down.

To just sit down, just to be quiet and to think about him. And in particular, this bread means something. This drink means something.

[25:47] It reflects something which is important for us to chew over, to have into our thought patterns. It is remembrance.

This is fundamental. And why we meet. We could go on on that point.

But I'll move on now to this. This is God's pledge to us. The word covenant is used. We saw that earlier.

This is the blood of the new covenant. The new covenant. So let's refer to Matthew 26, 28. He took the cup, gave thanks and offered 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. Let me just say at this point, the Passover meal has begun.

[27:01] And if you were following carefully in that passage in Luke, you'll see there was a cup that he took. And he gave thanks for it. And he said, I won't drink of this again until the kingdom comes.

And then there's bread. And then there's another cup. And this is exactly what the Passover meal is about. But everything was going in a way according to plan, according to the Passover. Until he gets to this point of the breaking of bread and the taking of the second cup.

And he suddenly transforms the normal Jewish Passover meal into something Jesus-centered. All about him. I can't imagine what those disciples were thinking was they're around that same table.

They'd had, how many times have they'd had that Passover meal? How many times? On this occasion, Jesus is transforming it. And he's saying, this is the blood of the covenant.

What's that about? 1 Corinthians 11.25. So again, we're going back to the most famous expression of it. In the same way, after supper, he took the cup, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

[28:14] Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me. God pledges to be our God. God pledges to be our God.

When you see the bread, and especially as you see the wine, because you notice that he doesn't talk about the bread being the new covenant, he talks about the wine, the cup is the new covenant. And the significance is this, that God is making an agreement with us, and he's sealing and making sure that agreement by blood.

Think back to the Passover time, what the Israelites had to do. They had to have a lamb sacrificed, and the blood put on the doorposts.

And it was the blood that actually provided security for them. It was the blood. And why blood?

[29:15] I mean, why didn't they just put water on there, or paint or something? No, it had to be blood, because it was the symbol and the demonstration that a life had been poured out.

That a real death had taken place. And it was the solemnity of that moment, that this little lamb, they had thousands of lambs, every family had a lamb, the blood of the lamb, a life has been given up. So every time they had this Passover meal, there was the lamb, the blood of the lamb. It was a big reminder to them. Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin.

But they knew, and we know, that the blood of a lamb is not enough to save a soul.

Something more is needed. Something more that they could never find within that lamb. So every Passover meal was always sort of left pregnant, because it didn't actually have the full significance.

[30:31] And now Jesus, at this meal, is giving that full significance.

And he's saying, here's something you can really trust in. Here's something you can really rely on. I have come, the Son of God.

I have become the Saviour. I am the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And this is the pledge, the solid pledge of God's love and favour toward you, that my blood has been spilt for you.

Blood of God's own Son, given for us. It's a solemn promise that God is making. And that is so reassuring and so helpful for us, as we come as weak Christian believers, who fail every day.

And we need to come to this point. And we're able to see and to hear God's message and promise to us. I love you because of my Son, Jesus.

And the measure of my love for you is this. That I've sealed that promise to you by the shedding of his own blood. I draw your attention to this also, that this was in the context of a meal.

[31:51] This isn't much of a meal here today, I have to say. And perhaps we ought to think sometimes about sort of enlarging it so it was a meal.

But the significance of this is made painfully obvious when the person of Judas comes into the story.

Do you know when you read these stories of the Last Supper, it's a bit disconcerting and upsetting to have this person of Judas there who is going to betray Jesus.

And the reason why it's particularly upsetting is because in Jewish culture, the meal, the meal is the symbolism of deep friendship and loyalty.

To break bread with somebody like this is to say, you are my friend. You will come to no harm. You are sharing this meal with me.

As it were, that Last Supper, Jesus was sort of spreading that loyalty to his followers and saying, you'll come to no harm.

[33:03] I pledge my love and allegiance to you. That very meal, Judas was there. And that's why it's such an awful thing that he did.

He betrayed the Lord even though he'd broken bread. May we never come to communion with betrayal of the Lord still in our heart, unconfessed sin.

That would be a terrible thing, wouldn't it? In the face of such amazing love, such sacrifice, for us to come to that meal and take bread and take wine.

But determining in our hearts that Jesus is not really our friend. He doesn't have the highest place. Then it's fellowship.

The word in Greek is *koinonia*, togetherness. Here's another part of the meaning. We do this together. And Paul was saying to the people, well, you're doing it together, but you're here in body, but I'm afraid the behaviour between you is not good.

[34:15] There's people being greedy. He says, if you want to eat a proper meal, go back to your homes. You're not sharing together. So we do this together. We recognise what really unites us, who we really are.

1 Corinthians 10, 17. Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body.

We are all partaking of the one loaf. It's at this moment that Christianity is boiled down to its essential core. There are many things that split Christians in their lives.

There are many points of discussion, many issues of personality and different gifting, and all kinds of reasons why Christians could fall out with one another. But this table is a most amazing and wonderful place where we can see what really unites us, what brings us together.

If you're a Christian, you have been washed by the same blood of Jesus Christ as I have been. If you're a Christian, the death of Jesus Christ is as precious and effective in your life as it is in mine.

[35:33] We are all completely united on this point. This has nothing to do with our worthiness or our abilities or the state of holiness that we might enjoy.

but it has everything to do with what God has by grace done within each one of us. What a precious thing it is for us if we're feeling a bit grumpy and out of sorts with a fellow Christian to be able to come to communion and to say, well, you're my brother and sister because you have experienced God's grace no more or no less than me.

we are united together. And there are some implications behind that. It does put a pressure upon us and challenge us to make sure that as communion comes around that as much as we should be trying to keep open relationships with one another that we are careful that we don't have unconfessed sin in the body.

Because that really would be a betrayal of what this is about. So it's very important that we should keep short accounts. I'm astonished and appalled to hear of places where someone says in a church I haven't spoken to that person for years.

They cut me off at some point in the past some action and I'm thinking are they still taking communion? Are they still taking communion? when they've decided in themselves they're not going to talk to somebody in the church?

[37:20] That can't be right can it? Brothers and sisters that can't be right. We don't have to agree with everybody in exactly the same way but there has to be an identification.

You're my brother you're my sister and at the deepest and most precious level we share bread and drink wine together. Secondly I'll let you into a secret here this is not wine it's actually grape juice and I think this is a symbol of fellowship as well because although actually personally I'll be quite

happy to go for wine but but actually there are some people who will not drink alcohol for very good reasons you know maybe they've seen the damage it's caused in somebody else's life or know the damage it might cause in theirs so they won't take even a drop of alcohol so we don't want to exclude those people we don't want to be saying to them just eat the bread and have something different we're saying that we're all together in this I don't really think it's significant whether this is alcoholic or not to the meaning this is red grape juice it's the fruit of the vine and therefore this is what we do to embrace the fullest number of people

Christian people who can enjoy it together and we have hope when you read the word remembrance it kind of brings back to you the idea of 11th of November and remembrance Sunday and everyone being rather solemn and sad and it would be very sad if this was sad it would be very sad if the solemn occasion became actually a mournful occasion I remember as my days as a Catholic we had something called the stations of the cross sadness sadness sadness just so concentrating upon the cross which was sad but the story doesn't end there does it the story does not end on a cross the cross is empty the tomb is empty Jesus is risen we will be with him we have the hope that he's coming back we do this until he comes and he himself at that last supper he looks beyond the cross and beyond the resurrection until the very end of time and he says I won't drink this again until the fulfillment of the ages there's going to be a wedding there's going to be a feast there's going to be the grandest supper possible there's going to be a meal rich with loyalty there's going to be a oneness there's going to be a realization when the symbols will fall away and we shall see him face to face everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure as we have this hope in us we purify ourselves we come to this table and we put our pledge to him oh God you have pledged yourself to us you've given us forgiveness thank you for the promise of your word I pledge myself to you so we are not onlookers not spectators we are participants we're taking part in this we take bread and we drink the juice and we do so with gratitude in our hearts to the Lord and say

Lord Jesus Christ I am yours and you are mine and there's some passages there that you can refer to there this is why this can never be a sad remembrance but rather deeply joyful the king is coming hallelujah let me just say a few things in closing the bread remains bread the wine remains wine that is not catholic theology where there is a belief that though the bread looks like bread it has become the body of Christ upon the words of consecration and though the wine looks like wine it has become the blood of Christ upon consecration that is why it is such a special moment that is why the consecrated bread is kept in a special place and paraded before the people and they bow because they really believe that this has become the body of Jesus Christ I find no trace of this at all in the scripture and they base it on well a mass of developments

[42:17] I suppose in bold terms it might be this is my body this is my body Jesus is sitting there this is my body Jesus is sitting there and he's saying do this in remembrance me they say no no he must mean this becomes his body I don't think that's scriptural it's not helpful it's not bringing out the riches that we've been talking about this morning the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine and who is this for I think we've answered that question really haven't we this is not for people who are not Christian believers you can't enjoy this it's not for children of believers either unless they become believers themselves they can look at this and they can ask the question what does this mean and one day by God's grace they'll be able to take it for themselves this is not for the perfect but the needy who are trusting in Jesus only please don't hold back from taking bread and wine bread and juice this morning on the basis that you're not perfect

I don't know how many thousands of people over the centuries have failed to take communion because they say I'm not good enough this is not about being good enough this is about God's pledge to you that you a sinner can receive his forgiveness and if that is you please come eat and drink we're going to sing a song the children are going to come in join us