

What is a Christian?

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[0 : 00] So this morning's reading is from the book of John, starting at chapter 1, ending at verse 17. And you'll find that on page 1085 of the Church Bibles.

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper.

He laid aside his outer garments and, taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, do you wash my feet? Jesus answered him, What I am doing, you do not understand now, but afterwards you will understand.

[1 : 31] Peter said to him, You shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I do not wash you, you have no share with me. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

Jesus said to him, The one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.

For he knew who was to betray him. That was why he said, Not all of you are clean. When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, Do you understand what I have done to you?

You call me teacher and lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your teacher and lord, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

[2 : 59] If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. Valerie, thank you very much for reading.

Let me add my welcome. If you don't know me, my name is Michael Lynn, and I'm a member of this church here. Now, what is a Christian?

What is a Christian? Seems like a perfectly normal question to ask. I wonder if you've been asked that, or you've asked that yourself. And if we took a straw poll outside and just asked a random stranger on the street, what is a Christian?

What sort of answers might we get? Well, maybe a Christian is someone who's been Christian or baptized. Perhaps it's someone who goes to church. Some might say that it's something to do with doing good or being a good person.

Well, I'm sure if you ask 10 people, you probably get 20 answers back. Well, today we're going to look at how Jesus himself defined what is a Christian to the very Christians in the world, to the very first Christians in the world.

- [4 : 08] But more than just to know what a Christian is, my aim for us today is to marvel and rejoice in Jesus and what he's done for us so that we may know how to respond rightly.
- Now, we're following on from Sam James' excellent talks on chapter 12 of John, and we're starting a new series entitled Last Words. And over the coming weeks, we'll be exploring chapters 13 to 17 and Jesus' message during the Last Supper.
- And up until this point, Jesus' ministry is largely public. He's gone viral in Judea through his radical teaching and his signs or miracles. But it's a double-edged sword as he's drawn both popularity from the people on one hand and also vehement contempt from the religious establishment on the other, looking for ways to get rid of him.
- And all this culminated at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his mission cry, the purpose of why he came, warning people of imminent judgment and bringing salvation to those who trust in him.
- But from chapter 13 onwards, Jesus turns the focus of his teaching towards his disciples, his inner circle, if you will. He's been warning his disciples about his departure, and the time has come for him to go.
- [5 : 30] But with him gone, how would they continue? Why would they continue? In other words, what does it mean to be a Christian? And why does it even matter?
- And that's where chapters 13 to 17 come in because Jesus gives his keynote speech, if you like, to prepare his disciples for what happens when he's no longer physically with them.
- It's also sometimes known as the upper room discourse. Well, because it's, as far as I could work out, it's held in an upper room, and it's mainly Jesus speaking.
- Now, I've given my talk two main headings today, and it's on the handout and going to be on screen shortly. There it is. And these are, A Trust in the Crucified Jesus, and so Serve in the Pattern of the Cross.
- So firstly, trust in the crucified Jesus. Well, on the surface, our passage looks fairly straightforward, doesn't it? At first reading, it looks like Jesus washes his disciples' feet.
- [6 : 33] I mean, even our church Bible says that on the heading above chapter 13. Now, it's worth noting that these headings are not inspired text, nor are they part of scripture.
- They're added in later by editors for navigation purposes. And sometimes they're helpful, and sometimes they're way off the main theological point. And I say that because Jesus says there is more than meets the eye here.
- Now look at verse 7 with me. Jesus answered him, what I am doing you do not understand now, but afterwards you will understand.
- In other words, it's more than just washing feet. Jesus is connecting the dots to something profoundly more significant than just feet washing. The disciples need to dig a little deeper.
- We need to dig a little deeper. So before we go further, some context should help us prepare us as we approach this passage. And verse 1 gives us some clues.
- [7 : 36] Now look with me at verse 1. Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of the world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.
- Now here's three nuggets I'll draw our attention to. It's highlighted in bold. Passover, our love. So context number one, Passover.
- Passover harks back to Exodus, whereby God saved Israel through the sacrifice of lambs, sparing their firstborns while the firstborns of the Egyptians perished.

And it's not a coincidence that Passover and lamb references are mentioned in John. John uses it as a marker throughout his gospel to point to a more significant event.

It's there, right at the beginning, chapter 1, verse 29, John the Baptist declares as he saw Jesus coming towards him, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[8 : 38] And it was in the passage we looked at three weeks ago with Sam, and chapter 12, verse 1, six days before the Passover. The Passover points to the crucified Jesus, sacrifice as the ultimate Passover lamb.

Context number two, his hour. Like the Passover, his hour is a marker that's threaded into the very narrative of John. And it's designed to show us that Jesus is fully sovereign and in control of his own fate.

Even whilst Judas was about to betray him. In chapter 2, verse 4, he turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana. My hour has not yet come.

In chapter 7, verse 30, and then again in chapter 8, verse 20, the Jews couldn't arrest him because his hour had not yet come. But now, chapter 13, verse 1, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.

His hour is not yet. His hour is not yet. His hour is here. Jesus would return to the Father, but not without first dying on the cross.

[9 : 59] His hour is the event of the cross. It is the event in all of human history. The cross is where Jesus is both cruelly lifted up, expiring, yet simultaneously crowned as the King of Kings.

The cross is where Jesus looks most humiliated, yet is most glorified. Context number 3, his love.

His hour had come to depart out of the world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. Love for his people was the motivation for Jesus to willingly get arrested.

It's why he bore the marks of shame and endured the torture of crucifixion. It was his love for the very people who wanted him dead that he went on to complete his mission on earth.

He loved them to the end. Now Isaiah, written, 700 years before Jesus, predicted the suffering servant in the ultimate act of love.

[11 : 03] Isaiah 53, verse 3. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. There is no love that came at a greater cost.

[12 : 10] No love even more pure or more selfless than the love of Jesus dying on the cross as an atoning, propitiatory sacrifice so God's people might be saved.

Passover, his hour, his love, are effectively all arrows, if you like, pointing to the target that is the crucified Jesus. So already clues are laid before us here so we could see it's not just about feet washing.

So while the Passover supper is in motion, Jesus got up and took off his outer garments, which in those days mean he's down to nothing but a loincloth, an outfit of a slave.

It's deliberate because feet washing is normally reserved for slaves of the lowest pecking order. The streets in first century Judea wasn't exactly clean places.

Streets were often dusty and filthy places and there's no public sanitation as we know it. Human excrement was tipped out of the houses into the streets.

[13 : 13] There would be bits of animal waste and manure and other stuff and so on. The closest to home sort of example I could think of as sort of the back alleys of Chinatown.

You know, always kind of covered in suspicious layer of something, slimy something, but much, much worse. It's no surprise then that that feet washing was considered an act only fit for the lowest of slaves.

Jewish slaves weren't even allowed to do it. It's an act so low that feet washing was virtually considered synonymous with slavery itself. And so it's probably understandable for Peter then to protest in verse 6.

Lord, do you wash my feet? In verse 8, Lord, you should never wash my feet. Lord, what are you doing? You can't be doing that. Surely that's for slaves.

That's not for you. You're our teacher and our Lord. Yet Jesus answered, if I do not wash you, you have no share with me. In other words, if you are to be my disciple, if you are to be saved to eternal life, you need to be washed by me.

[14 : 29] Jesus is the only one who can truly wash anyone clean. But it's only after Jesus has died and rose again that the disciples fully understood the deeper meaning.

This whole episode of Jesus washing his disciples' feet is, if you like, a visual aid of the cross. It's an enacted parable of the cross. Jesus sacrificed as the ultimate Passover lamb whose blood is the only thing that could wash us clean and save us.

The feet washing, then, is much more than cleansing a part of somebody's limbs. It's a parable of washing the filth of someone's hearts. Anyone wanting to be saved, to be truly forgiven by God, must be washed by Jesus.

It is the only way to eternal life. Therefore, Christians trust in the crucified Jesus. But Peter wanted to share in Jesus' kingdom, yet he doesn't fully understand the parable yet.

So he goes slightly overboard and he says in verse 9, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Well, Peter thinks it's about the quantity of washing.

[15 : 46] The more, the merrier. He thinks somehow he can be more clean by having more of his body washed. But what is Jesus' response? Well, the one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean.

And you are clean, but not every one of you, for he knew who was to betray him. That was why he said, not all of you are clean. I think there's a couple of things we can learn here.

Firstly, Jesus' washing is sufficient. No, you don't need additional washing. Jesus' washing is sufficient. There's no adding to it.

You simply just receive the washing. And friends, let me just say that that is great news and wonderful news for us and we can rejoice in it because in a way, gaining internal life costs us nothing.

None of us are good enough for God. None of us have lived perfect, pure, sinless lives. I know I certainly haven't. Yet eternal life is available to us not by our own efforts because none of us can, but simply by accepting Jesus.

[16 : 57] And if you haven't yet put your trust in Jesus, let me just say that there's no better day than today to do so. And for Christians, we may already trust in Jesus, but as I prepare for this talk, I'm even more struck by my own sins and the depth Jesus went to so that I might be saved.

And I hope this will help all of us see our sins more clearly and trust in his washing more dearly. And secondly, washing is also an ongoing thing.

Now Jesus here changes the washing analogy slightly. If we've taken a bath and gone for a walk, we're still clean when we return. We just need to wash our feet. The idea is that the disciples would have the one-time cleansing of the cross, but the ongoing cleansing will require ongoing repentance and listening to the word of God.

But Judas, who would betray Jesus, his feet was washed, yet the rest of him was still dirty. He may have been a follower of Jesus over the past three years or so, doing the same things as the other disciples did, but he never truly believed in Jesus.

His heart was never cleansed. Now we shouldn't let dirt build in our own hearts. We need the ongoing cleansing by Jesus. And that can happen through prayer, through repentance, and as God's word worked in our hearts as we read the Bible, and as we do, we are washed by Jesus.

[18 : 31] So being a Christian means to trust in the crucified Jesus and him alone, but also demands a right response, which leads me to my second point. Trust in the crucified Jesus and so serve in the pattern of the cross.

And now Jesus teaches his disciples how to rightly respond. Look with me at verse 13. You call me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for I am.

If then your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet, for I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus' authority and position was clear. He was teacher and he was Lord. He had all the power and authority from God. He could have led with an iron fist. Now we look up to our leaders, don't we?

[19 : 37] Or at least there's supposed to be a model for us to follow. Yet hardly another week goes by where there's not another leader caught in some sort of moral failure.

Boris' party gate, Novak Djokovic's visa gate, even the royal family isn't immune to moral bankruptcy. But these failures aren't just among those in power, is it?

Here in Dulwich, many of us hold leadership positions in some shape or form. Yet if we're honest, none of us are perfect all the time. We too suffer from the moral failures more frequent than we'd like to admit, myself included.

That's why we need a leader who we can trust, whose pattern we can follow. Here then is Jesus. Here is a leader who gets down like a slave to clean the dirt and grime off the feet of his disciples.

The Apostle Paul in Philippians 2, verses 6 to 8, puts it like this. It's Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

[20 : 57] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Here then is God in human form, the creator and sustainer of the universe, the king of kings, the name above all names, yet he took on the form of a human slave, willingly suffered, humiliated, and to die on a cross so that whoever believed in him might be cleansed of this sin and be saved.

He did what none of us could ever do to save ourselves. Here then is a leader worthy to be our ultimate example, and he shows us the only way for a Christian to live is to serve in the pattern of the cross.

The feet washing then is not only about cleaning filthy hearts, but how to live. If the way Jesus demonstrates it is through loving sacrificial service, how much more are we to live likewise?

Some implications then. For Peter and the first disciples, the hour has come for Jesus to leave them. How would they carry on?

Why would they carry on? Well, they can carry on, confident that they are fully cleansed by the crucified Jesus, and they would carry on bringing the gospel to a needy world because that is the most loving, most sacrificial thing for a Christian to do.

[22 : 30] And indeed, tradition has it that every apostle died as martyrs, sacrificing everything for the sake of the gospel, a sign that they truly grasp what it meant to be a Christian.

Today in Dulwich, we might not face the same levels of persecution, but nonetheless, we are called to sacrificial service. Those of us who follow Jesus, those who trust in the crucified Jesus, ought to respond rightly, serving one another in love in the sacrificial pattern of the cross.

We're to consider ourselves a slave, willing to go the extra mile, to give our life for the sake of the gospel so that others might know Christ. But it's hard work, and naturally, we just don't want to do it.

We'd much rather kick back, indulge in some good R&R; and some me time. And it's costly. There may be financial implications.

We may have to give up buying the latest home entertainment system or whatever other things so that we might have enough to give to mission organizations. And we're time poor people.

[23 : 47] We may have to give up our lunch time so that we could read the Bible with a colleague or join a CU meeting. It might be emotionally taxing.

I mean, sharing the gospel could alienate family or lose friendships. And for those of us with children, how much of our children's activities and education do we sacrifice so they may know Jesus better?

Yet, gospel-centered sacrificial service is the most Christian thing we could possibly do. And in doing so, Jesus said in verse 17, if you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

As we serve in this way, we partake in Jesus' suffering. In Jesus, as he is most glorified, and in the transformative, wonderful cleansing that he brings and that we can rejoice in.

This side of heaven, there can be no more glorious privilege than that. So, going back to our question, what is a Christian? Well, it's simply an ordinary person who trusts in the crucified Lord Jesus, and so loves and serves others in the pattern of the cross.

[25 : 06] Why does it matter? Because the world is under judgment and desperately needs a gospel, and Christians are the ones to proclaim it to the world.

Trust in the crucified Jesus, and so serve in the pattern of the cross. Should I pray? Heavenly Father, thank you so much for sending your Son.

Thank you that he fulfilled scripture as our ultimate Passover lamb, so by trusting in his finished work on the cross, we may have life in his name.

Thank you that we can be fully confident that he has washed us clean, and help us to continue to be cleansed by him. Help us, therefore, to cling to him in every area of our lives.

Help us to live in light of what he's done for us, so that we might respond and live sacrificially for one another in proclaiming his good news.

[26 : 12] For his glory, and in Jesus' wonderful name, we pray. Amen.