

Communion

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to the second of our readings, Galatians chapter 3 and verse 13.

Verse 13, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. Amen. Today, we're going to do something that has been done for 2,000 years.

The entire history of the church has been composed of people like you and me today, sitting as we are and remembering the death of Jesus in a particular way by drinking wine and by eating bread.

It is done in hundreds of languages as we speak in many countries and continents all over the world. It's one of the most universal and oldest practices known to humankind.

[1 : 27] The way we do it might vary slightly from the way that other people do it, but it's amazing how similar it is with the way that other Christians take communion all over the world.

If anything, in a sense, brings humanity together, it is what we are doing today as a church in remembering the death of the Lord Jesus.

It's the simplest ritual in the world. In some ways, it's the most ridiculous ritual in the world. I often wonder what somebody would think if they came in with no knowledge of the Bible or Christianity and they sat in the balcony and just watched all the people down here taking little sips of wine and taking little bits of bread without knowing anything about it, what they would think.

It is ridiculous, isn't it, from one level, from one point of view. It just doesn't make sense until you understand what it means.

And that's why, in the tradition to which we belong, we insist that every time there is communion, it's explained by the word.

[2 : 44] So, word and sacrament always go together in our tradition. It has to happen that way. And that makes sense because otherwise there's confusion. People are left not knowing what they're doing.

And worse still, people can be left making what they want out of communion, deciding to interpret it the way that they want according to our own imaginations.

And I'm sure that there's no limit to our imagination and how it can interpret things that we're doing. So, what we're doing today is governed by the Bible, as everything is or everything ought to be.

And that includes the explanation of drinking wine and taking bread to remember the death of the Lord on the cross.

And that's because the cross stands at the heart of the Christian faith. Without the cross, you don't have a Christian faith.

[3 : 46] Everything we are and everything we do hangs on the death of Jesus. Now, some people have a problem with that.

Some people would object to that. They would say to me, no, no, you've got that wrong. You've turned it upside down. Surely it's the person and the life of Jesus that matters.

I mean, after all, we've just had Christmas. Christmas is all about the birth of Jesus. There's good news, joy to the world. Surely that's what the gospel is all about. It's the birth of Jesus, the new life and the hope and the anticipation that that brings.

But what I would say is this, and what the Apostle Paul would say is, of course the birth is important, but the birth's not going to save you from sin.

Of course the person of Jesus is important, but the person alone is not going to save you from sin.

[4 : 52] What saves us from sin is the death of Jesus. So it would have been completely meaningless for him, even the Son of God, to come into this world if he didn't die.

In fact, it would have made the thing a whole lot worse, because his life was always living proof.

And I'll say this in a minute, again. His life was always living proof of what we should be before God. And it was an example to the rest of the world of how bad they were.

I guarantee you, if Jesus came to live amongst us today, his life would show us up as no one else's would. And it would prove to us just how bad and how far short we come of what God expects of us.

So the life of Jesus, although it's glorious, it's awesome to read through the Gospels and to listen to his teaching, to watch him doing the miracles, and to watch his character and the kinds of words and the kinds of expressions that he used.

[6 : 07] This is God in the flesh, and yet it is of no use to us without the death of Jesus. That's how important his death is.

And that importance goes all the way through the New Testament. What I'm saying is nothing new. The Apostle Paul said it on many, many occasions. He says in 1 Corinthians 15, he says, I deliver to you as of first importance, he says.

First thing I deliver to you was that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. And then he says to Timothy, he says, Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom.

And there are all kinds of different ways in which the New Testament describes the death of Jesus and reminds us of how central and how foundational it is. Hebrews chapter 2, He partook of flesh and blood, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death.

And then 1 Peter chapter 2, I'm not going to go any further than this. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. You see how central it is?

[7 : 26] Time and again. Whether it's Peter or John or Paul, they're saying exactly the same thing. You can't have the Christian faith without the death of Jesus.

The life of Jesus led to the death. Let me put it this way. He's the only person in the world who was born in order to die.

He was born with the express purpose of dying. Now, you can't say that about anyone else. Nobody is born to die. We're all going to die.

But we're not born with that as the purpose. We're born with the purpose of living. Except Jesus. He was born with the purpose of dying.

Because in his death and through his death and by his death, we have everlasting life. You can't escape it.

[8 : 23] The death of Jesus is the moment of our salvation. I'm not saying the rest isn't important. Of course it is. The whole thing is important.

But the death is where Jesus pays the price. Where he becomes the sacrifice for our sin and takes our guilt upon himself.

Now, here in Galatians chapter 3, Paul puts it another way. We have a slightly different perspective. Let me read the verse again. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

Now, on one level, Paul is saying exactly the same as what he says in other places. He's once again reiterating the centrality, the inescapable foundational centrality of the death of Jesus.

But he's putting it in a slightly different way. He's explaining it from the point of view of what he describes as the curse of the law, from which he says we have been redeemed by the death of Jesus.

[9 : 37] So, there's three things there I'd like us to think about. Three things in that verse. Number one, there's the law. This verse is all about the law.

I want us to be absolutely clear what we mean by the law. What law is Paul talking about? And then I want us, secondly, to think about the curse of the law.

I want to ask, what is the curse of the law? It sounds pretty frightening. The curse of the law. I want us to be clear on what that means.

And then thirdly, I want us to see how Jesus died. That's what it says. He says he died as a curse.

Because his death was a curse. In what sense is his death a curse? How would you understand this?

[10 : 32] And how does this help us to understand the meaning, the purpose, the accomplishment of the death of Jesus at Calvary?

Three things, then, that I hope will help us to understand what Paul is talking about. Well, first of all, when Paul talks about the law, he's going all the way back to the Old Testament and to when Moses led the people of Israel into the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

And on their way, God met with them, and he gave them what is called his law. Now, the law is a whole bunch of stuff that you'll read about in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers, and it covers many areas of life.

But to simplify things, you can divide it into two sections. First of all, there is the moral law, which is summed up for us in the Ten Commandments.

And then secondly, there is what some people call the ceremonial law, which is all about the sacrifices and the rituals and the feasts and the festivals that the children of Israel had at that time.

[11 : 46] I want us to concentrate on the moral law, which is summed up for us in the Ten Commandments. Which begins, You shall have no other gods before me.

And then it goes on to talk about a relationship with God and our recognition of who God is and what our response ought to be to the being and the truth and the reality of God.

That's what God requires of us in the first instance. Do we worship Him and love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength? That's the first question that God asks us as a human race.

What is our response to Him? How do we relate to Him? Do we even recognize Him? Do we know that He's there?

Do we give Him the praise and the honor and the glory and the submission that He requires from us? Then secondly, the Ten Commandments go on to describe what a relationship with other people should be.

[12 : 52] And so therefore you have commandments like honor your father and your mother. Do not steal. Don't commit adultery. Don't covet. And these cover our societal duties towards one another.

Again, required by God. Because He is made us a part of the human race. And this, of course, was given primarily to the children of Israel as His covenant people.

These are the demands and the requirements of the law. Now here's the point. When you and I come to measure our own life against these requirements, how do we do?

How well do we do? When God says, you shall not have any other gods before me, that doesn't just begin and end with, do you come to church on a Sunday?

Remember what he said?

[14 : 02] Remember what he said? Remember, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. That's what God requires from us. And if we lived in a perfect world, if it wasn't for sin in the world, then we would be happy to do so as a human race.

We would long for God. We would love God with a perfect love and with total 100% devotion. And we would enjoy every moment of it. Sin has spoiled everything.

And so when you and I come to measure our own lives against the requirement of God, we fail. We come short. And we're condemned.

Because there is a penalty. Like with every law, there is a penalty when that law is broken. It's the same with even the laws that you and I are under today.

If you drive your car beyond the speed limit and the camera gets you or whatever, there is a penalty. But when it comes to God's law, the penalty is death.

[15 : 10] That's what he says. The Bible tells us. The soul that sins shall die. The wages of sin is death. And God is rightly wrathful, if I can put it that way.

Angry. See, again, people object to this. They say that, well, you know, you're presenting a very negative God here. You're supposed to be in that pulpit.

You're supposed to be encouraging us. You're supposed to be giving us a nice, good feeling so that we can go out and we can sort of be, feel a lot better about ourselves. No, I'm not. My job in the pulpit is to explain what the Bible says.

And if the Bible gives a different picture of God, then so be it. I'm afraid I have to tell the truth. So if you want to know what God is like, then you have to come to terms with him in the Bible. Now, I ask you this.

Why is anger such a bad thing? And the reason we say it's such a bad thing is because we know that when we get angry, we get angry for the wrong reasons. And our anger is always expressed severely and disproportionately and we end up saying the wrong thing and doing the wrong thing and losing our time.

[16 : 22] God's not like that. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't get angry. Do you really expect God not to be angry? Do you expect him to shrug his shoulders when there's child abuse?

When children are murdered? When we read, when we hear on the news about some incredibly awful case where a child has been murdered by the people that were supposed to be looking after him or her?

How does that make you feel? Well, I'll tell you how it makes me feel. It makes me feel so angry that anyone would do that. Well, I think that's natural. Do you think that God's, do you think he's just going to shrug his shoulder and say, well, you know, this kind of thing happens?

No. If that's what God is like, if that's what God is like, then I don't really think much of him. When there's the injustice and when there's the cruelty that goes on around us that we hear about so often.

We know we live in a dark world, a deceitful world, a world where one person takes advantage of the other and ruins their lives. Where one person takes the life of another.

[17 : 38] Do you think God is indifferent to that? Because if he is, then I don't want to worship him. I worship a God who is righteously angry.

But I don't get to make the rules and I don't get to set the limits. He does. And he's given us these limits in his law. Which means that when it comes to asking the right question, I have to start with myself.

And I have to ask, how do I measure up? Before I point the finger at someone else, I have to ask, how do I measure up? To what God is demanding in his law.

And so, his law is what God requires of me. How he wants me to live. Where he is the very starting point. And yet, I have to say with everyone, can you say that you keep God's law?

And you say, well, okay, but we're living in the New Testament now. You're talking about the Old Testament. Surely, Jesus came to change all that. Surely, you remember that, you know, God is a retributive God in the Old Testament.

[18 : 47] But then, if you listen to the words of Jesus, Jesus talks about turning the other cheek. And going the extra mile. And loving your neighbor as yourself. And surely, that's the kind of life that the Bible calls us to live.

Do you know that Jesus made things worse by him coming? And to the world. He didn't lessen.

He didn't dilute God's demands in the Old Testament. He actually accentuated them. Because there was all these people when Jesus came into the world.

And they thought they had got it all worked out. They thought they were the most religious people in the world. And they were what they call the scribes and the Pharisees. And they had got it sorted out, right?

So, they knew the Ten Commandments. They knew the laws. So, they had kind of worked out their own lifestyle. So that they'd worked out their own limits. So that they could.

[19 : 46] They actually believed that they could stand before God and said, Hey, nobody can blame me. But when Jesus came into the world, he showed them that what God demands cannot be limited by our little restrictions.

That it extends to our thoughts. So what he said was, you've heard that it was said, do not murder. But I'm telling you that murder begins in your heart when you hate someone.

And when you hate someone, you've broken the sixth commandment. Now, there are all these people saying, that's outrageous. Jesus is saying, no, it's not.

Because God sees into your heart. And he knows the extent to which you have broken his demands in your heart. It's the same with adultery. He says, all these people saying, well, I've never slept with another woman.

Jesus is saying, yeah. But what do you think about? How many women have you looked at lustfully in your heart? That's where you break God's law.

[20 : 51] And so Jesus actually made the whole situation for them. He made it worse for anyone who thought that they were okay. He made it worse because he showed that they were not okay. None of us is okay.

That's why we need to be saved. That's why we need to be rescued. And that's what the curse of the law is.

What is a curse? And we're coming on to the second point now. I'm watching the time. What's a curse? Well, when we read about a curse in the Bible, don't take the definition here from childhood stories and stories about pirates and witches and all that.

Please forget all that. And let's concentrate on what the Bible talks about when it talks about a curse. A curse is when you draw a line around something and everything within that circle is destroyed.

All right? That's what the Bible means when it talks about a curse. Curses, when you draw a line around something, you imagine drawing a line around something and saying everything within that circle is destroyed.

[22 : 05] A number of years ago in Dundee, there were these high flats called the Hilltown Multis. I'm sure some of you will remember them.

And time came for the Hilltown Multis to be demolished. And, of course, the demolition of high flats, and these were enormous things. The demolition of high flats is not an easy thing.

It has to be planned very carefully. And so they did this by planning to explode them. But you can't just stick some bits of dynamite into buildings and just explode the dynamite and hope that everything's going to be okay.

You have to put a lot of engineering into it. And so they did that for weeks beforehand. All these engineers are getting together. One of the things they did was they had to put a fence around the area.

Everything within that fence was going to get destroyed, and so everyone had to keep out. There was warning signs all over the place. Keep out. Danger. Keep out.

[23 : 13] And sure enough, when the time came, the Hilltown Multis were all destroyed. And nobody was hurt because they all stayed outside the limit. Because everything within the limit was destroyed.

That's what a curse is. And God is saying that the breaking of His law means that we are inside that circle.

You remember what happened to Jericho in the Old Testament, the book of Joshua? God said to the army of Israel, He said, I want you to circle the city seven times.

And you get this routine where the people of Jericho looked out and they saw God's army circling the city, surrounding the city.

And there was this ritual where they all had to march around the city. And that was God's way of saying the same as what I'm saying, that this city is cursed. It will be destroyed. And sure enough, it was destroyed apart from those who had the faith to ask God for forgiveness and for mercy.

[24 : 32] So it wasn't that every single person was destroyed in that city. Not everyone was destroyed. Some had the insight to say to God, will you please have mercy on us?

And he did. But so that's what a curse is. Now here we come on to the third thing, which is that Jesus became a curse for us in order to rescue us from being inside that circle.

He had to come into that circle himself. Here is the most amazing thing. It's no surprise to me that God believes in justice.

And justice means that the guilty are punished. And God is the God of justice, the God of perfect justice. That's not a surprise. That's perfectly logical.

What amazes me this morning is that God should do something about it in order to save us from being inside that circle, in order to rescue us.

[25 : 40] Or, in the words of the Apostle Paul, to redeem us from being under His condemnation. And the more you read about it, the more amazing it becomes, because here's how God did it.

He Himself stepped into that circle, that circle of darkness and condemnation and destruction. He became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

And that's why Christmas is so important. That's why it's such a joyful event, because of what the baby Jesus was going to grow up to do, to die instead of us.

When He came into this world, it was like God stepping inside that area, that cursed region, knowing what was going to happen to Him, that He was going to have to suffer the wrath and the anger of God.

Not because He deserved it, but because He took our guilt on Himself. And He went all the way.

[27 : 09] He never stopped short. He did what was necessary to secure our salvation from sin and our everlasting, eternal life.

And that's what happened on the cross. On the cross, the Bible tells us that Jesus became sin for us. All our guilt was placed on Him.

Do you think of your life? Listen, I would hate for anyone to know what I'm guilty of, especially in my heart, in my thoughts.

And I'm sure you're the same. And when I think, if I was to quantify, if I was to add up all the guilt, I don't know how you measure guilt. I don't know what units you would use to measure it.

But let's say it's tons. I can tell you, I don't even know how many tons there would be in my life. And it's not just me, it's you, it's everybody, it's every Christian in the world, all of God's people in the world.

[28 : 17] When you add up the measure of guilt that there is, and all of it was placed on Jesus when He died on the cross.

God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

Which means that the only way that I can, that there is any escape from the curse, from being inside that circle, is to trust in what Jesus has done for me.

Because by His death, God has released us. He's forgiven us. He's given us newness of life.

But there's only one place where that newness of life can be found, and that is by faith in what Jesus did on the cross. Every one of us who's going to take communion in a moment, we're not saying to the rest of the world, look how good we are.

[29 : 28] Look how righteous and respectable we are. We're saying the opposite. We're saying, look how bad we are. But Jesus died for our badness.

Jesus took our guilt upon Himself when He suffered on the cross. And because He died, we live by faith in Him.

And so what we're saying when we take communion is that Jesus is everything to us. We have everlasting life because of what Jesus has done for us, not because of what we have done for ourselves or for what we have done for Him.

But because He has done everything for us. He's redeemed us. He's bought us. He's purchased us. He's reached down into this world in love, in extraordinary love, and rescued us from the condemnation that we so richly deserved.

and He's given us newness of life, everlasting life, abundant life, so we can say that we, our lives are new. We're not the same people as we once were because of what God has done for us.

[30 : 59] We'll leave it there. Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for how clear the cross is in the New Testament. We thank you that we can come to the Bible and that we can see yet again another description that makes Jesus' death so it brings it to the surface and brings its purpose to the surface in our minds and in our hearts and we thank you for clarifying what His death was.

And we pray that today that we will lay hold by faith once again upon that death that took place 2,000 years ago that you will bring it to our consciousness afresh and that you will speak to us through it and nourish us through how we remember it in your name.

Amen.