

Pre-Communion

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Date: 09 May 2009

Preacher: John Nicholls

[0 : 00] Amen. Tonight we're preparing for the Lord's Supper. Tomorrow.

That could be just a traditional ritual that we're going through. Unusual. Most churches don't have communion seasons. Sadly, most churches don't make a great deal of the Lord's Supper, it seems to me, in these days.

But we don't want it to be just a ritual. We want it to be something very special. We need it to be something very special.

What sort of week have you had? You know, where have you come from to be sitting there tonight? I won't bore you or look for your pity by saying, I've had a pretty tough week.

You know, I'm head of the city mission and we employ 200 people. And it's a tough time to be responsible for people's jobs.

[1 : 10] We've already this year had to make a few people redundant. And that's painful. And then there are difficult choices to make.

And then it may amaze you to know that some of the people who are involved in Christian work are somewhat lower than the angels still. And they cause headaches and problems to those that would lead them.

And then all the time we're conscious of our own shortcomings. The way that we failed this week.

Do you remember, when you think back, to the way you've prayed each morning this week.

Lord, help me to serve you well today. Help me to do all the things that I ought to do. Lord, I ask your forgiveness that I just was a bit slow and lazy yesterday.

I didn't have the energy to do the things that I'm meant to do. But somehow I never... Help me to do better today. And then at the end of the week, if you look back, you say, Hmm, there's still too many things I didn't do.

[2 : 22] And maybe, maybe a Saturday night finds you feeling a bit tired and weary. A bit struggling at best.

Conscious of your failings. If you feel a bit like that tonight, as perhaps I do, Then I can't think of anything that's better for us as a remedy to that.

And anything that is more likely to prepare us and give us an appetite for the Lord's Supper tomorrow. And to look at the words that I read in the Song of Songs.

Chapter 5 and verse 2 onwards. I slept, but my heart was awake. Listen, my lover is knocking.

Open to me, he says, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. And so on. This part of the scripture, which may be fairly unfamiliar territory to many of us, speaks of a special relationship.

[3 : 39] The special relationship between our Lord Jesus Christ and his people. That's what it's pointing us to. Oh, if you want to, you can read all sorts of books and discussions on exactly how we should interpret the Song of Solomon.

By the way, there were some excellent articles in the monthly record a year or so ago by Ian D. Campbell. That if you've still got your monthly records, you might like to read again.

But I think, cutting through all the debate and confusion, the Bible uses marriage, the loving, committed relationship between a man and a woman, as we read of in Ephesians chapter 5.

The Bible uses that to point us to, to begin to explain, to help us to appreciate the relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ and his church.

And there are many glimpses of that through the Bible. In the New Testament, Jesus is the bridegroom who is coming. And, you know, he speaks about the friends of the bridegroom who can't but rejoice when the bridegroom is with them.

[4 : 55] He talks about the attendant girls who are waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. The New Testament looks to heaven as the great marriage supper of the Lamb.

And in the Old Testament, the Lord is seen as the husband of his people. And Israel's sins are presented as terrible acts of adultery by a wayward wife. And here in this Song of Solomon, we have a love song. Again, giving it as simply as possible. We have here the bride telling us how she slept but her heart was awake. Maybe she'd had a bad week. Maybe she was weary and struggling. And the bridegroom, her lover, came to her. Came and cried out, open to me, my sister, my darling. By the way, I can't but believe that there are echoes of this verse in Revelation chapter 3 verse 20 where our Lord Jesus Christ says, Behold, I stand at the door and knock. [6 : 12] If anyone will open to me, I will come in and sup with him and he with me. Put those two together. And the teaching that I want to put to you tonight, the great truth that I want to remind you of and to turn over with you is this.

Our Lord Jesus is always looking to develop and to enjoy a real delightful relationship of love with us, with his people as a church and as individual. Jesus wants a loving relationship. Jesus wants to love us and to show us his love and he wants us to love him and to enjoy that loving relationship with him. And in this book of amazing stories and poems, there's a little story wrapped up in this fifth chapter. The woman's husband, her bridegroom, is at the door. He's come to her, though it seems to be it's late at night. She's tired and weary. [7 : 25] But he's there knocking at the door. It's pouring with rain. Well, in Aberdeen terms, it was perhaps in the Holy Land. They didn't have rain like we have. My head is drenched with dew.

My hair with the dampness of the night. I'm getting soaked out here. Open to me. So that we can be together. But she's gone to bed. She's washed and changed. And she's kind of asleep, or at least in that sort of half sleep. I slept but my heart was awake. She's drifting off into sleep. And, you know, she's gone through all the business of washing her feet and she's changed. If she gets up now, she'll have to wash again. She'll have to find her dressing gown and all the rest of it. And, oh, she's reluctant to do it. He shakes the door. He rattles the handle. And the anointment, the sweet-smelling perfume that's on his hands drips off onto the door handles. [8 : 29] At last, she wakes up fully. And she wants to be with him. But when she gets to the door and opens it and feels the ointment, the myrrh on the door handles of his hand, when she opens the door, he's been there so close, but he's gone.

And she's devastated. And now she's desperate for him. Now she longs to be with him. She doesn't care about getting her feet dirty. She doesn't care when the rough watchmen in the city sort of push her around and grab her coat from her. She's determined to find him. She finds the daughters of Jerusalem. She says, come and help me find him. And they say, what's so special about him? Who are we looking for? And she launches into this wonderful song from verse 10. My beloved is radiant and ruddy.

He is altogether lovely. And so on. It's a wonderful story of the love that Jesus is looking for and the experience of his love.

[9 : 35] Let's turn it over a little bit in our moments together this evening. The first thing is that I really want to press upon you is this.

That Jesus wants you to love him. Jesus wants you to love him. Jesus is looking for our love. In the story, it is the bridegroom who takes the initiative. The bride, for one reason or another, is drowsily on her bed. But the bridegroom comes, open to me. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. He is the one who comes to her. It's not a case that our Lord Jesus Christ is indifferent to us. That he's shut away in heaven and he's not interested in us. And we are desperate for him to love us. We're desperate to know him.

[10 : 42] And we are banging, we are knocking on heaven's door and he's reluctant to answer. No, no, no, no. It's exactly the other way around. It is Jesus who has taken the initiative.

If there is a relationship between Jesus and us, it's all of grace. Grace, one of those familiar little words that can become vague in our minds, simply means that it all starts with the loving heart of Jesus.

It's amazing, amazing grace that Jesus, the pure and spotless one, that the Son of God should love us and give himself for us.

In the story, he has come through the dampness and unpleasantness of the night, through the dangers and darkness, to come to this beloved one.

And our Lord Jesus Christ, as we will be remembering tomorrow at the Lord's table, he took the initiative. When we were dead in our trespasses and sins, he came from heaven.

[11 : 55] He left the glory and the peacefulness, the radiance of his Father's presence. He did not abhor the virgin's womb.

He was born, he experienced the pains and sufferings of life, the contradiction of sinners, the hostility of enemies, the letdowns of his disciples, the agony of Gethsemane and the horrors of Calvary, death itself.

All the darkness and all the showers of the darkest of nights. And he did it because he wanted to bring his love to our door.

Jesus took the initiative. That's, you know, really what the Lord's Supper shows us tomorrow. When we come to church tomorrow, the table's laid out before us.

And what's on the table? Well, it's not one of those sort of bring and share meals where you bring your bit and I bring my bit and we just share. Jesus didn't say, well, look, you bring your bit and I'll contribute a bit too and we'll have a nice feast together.

[13 : 15] No, the only food on the table is the food provided by Jesus. And it is the most costliest meal in all the world.

For it is nothing less than the sacrificed body and blood of the Son of God. And why is it there? It's there. It's there because Jesus loved us.

Has anybody ever given you something which you know was really precious to them? Maybe, you know, you had somebody who, you know that perhaps it was your granny and your granny had one heirloom that she'd had and treasured all her life.

And then at some point in your life when you were growing up, she said, I want you to have this.

And she said, no, no, no, granny, that's special to you.

You've always talked about it. I know what it means to you. And she said, no, that's why I want you to have it. And it's deeply moving.

[14 : 24] It's not just because of the value of the thing in itself. It's because you realise that it's so precious that your granny's love to you is so great.

And my friends, tomorrow, Jesus puts himself on the table and he says, I want you to have this.

And we say, no, no, Lord, you shouldn't, no, I want you to have it. And we realise, or we ought to realise, just how much he loves us that he would take that initiative.

Jesus is looking for our love. He's giving us this overwhelming gift of himself. Let's press that home. Jesus wants, not just that we should know about him.

He wants not just our knowledge of him. He wants not just our allegiance. He wants our love. He doesn't say, I want you to understand that I really am the Lord and I want you to serve me.

[15 : 42] I want you to realise that it's your duty to serve me as your Lord and Master. He could say that. That would be true.

I want you to become my servant. But Jesus comes to us and says, I want you to know me. I want you to surrender to me, to yield yourself to be my servant.

But I want you to love me too. I want you to be my bride. I want you to be mine and to take me as yours forever.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment.

Jesus wants your love not your obedience alone, not your service alone, not your knowledge alone. And he wants total love.

[16 : 44] You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind.

We're much easier dealing merely in the realms of knowledge with us in our reformed tradition with such an emphasis on teaching and the catechism and good solid preaching and good books and thank God for all of those and don't neglect them.

Use them to the full but always remember that mere knowledge is not what Jesus is looking for. He who thinks he knows anything knows nothing as he should.

Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. rather in the words of the old song we need that sort of knowledge which is expressed like this to know him to know, know, know him is to love, love, love him and I do.

Or to put it in the words of Jonathan Edwards and the Puritans true religion is a matter of the affections and affections was an old fashioned term to describe the emotions the feelings all those things which together sometimes we describe as our heart.

In other words it's saying man is more than a knowledge machine he's not just a computer with a database man is a person who embraces and enjoys and feels and delights in and looks for satisfaction and fulfilment the affections.

[18 : 44] Jesus Christ wants more than our knowledge and allegiance he wants total commitment I want you to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind that means that God must be first in our lives that Jesus must be our all in all he is everything to me Jesus wants to delight us Jesus wants us to enjoy him delight yourself in God and he'll give you the desires of your heart seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all the other things will be added to you says the sermon on the mount but you need to read that with Psalm 37 seeking God's kingdom is not simply a matter of obedience and knowledge again it's a matter of delighting in God the bride and the groom delight in each other's love our prayers should be a matter of delighting in

God too often you know our prayers sound more like our phone calls to the bank that we bank with rather than our phone calls to our wives or our loved ones you know why do you phone your bank manager hello this is Barclays Bank speaking it usually takes about 10 minutes to get to that point in my experience how can I help you sir oh well I don't want you to do anything for you I just wanted to chat and tell you what I've been doing the man from Barclays Bank would sound very puzzled I'm sorry sir can I help you with your account are you overdrawn have you got a problem with a payment you know your bank too often our prayers though are more like Lord we need to talk to you we've got a problem here please help us we're feeling a bit ill please help us we've got an exam tomorrow and we need a bit more help from you to see us through that or Lord please deal with the sins that I've got because they're making me feel guilty and we have a list of things that we want God to attend to but I don't know about you and I'm by no means the best of husbands but sometimes when we phone our wives especially when we're away from home it isn't we want them to do anything for us we want to hear their voice and we want to be able to talk to them there are things that we can say to our wives or our husbands that we can't say to anyone else and just to be in touch with them makes us feel so much better I was convicted when I heard somebody make that contrast have my prayers ever been more than prayers to my bank man than calls to my bank manager have I ever talked to God just because it's good to talk and where do we meditate how often do we think about the Lord

Jesus Christ Richard Sibbes one of the Puritans said this the soul is more where it loves than where it lives the soul spends more time where it loves than where it lives what does he mean well he spells out the illustration you know again think of a young man and a young woman who are in love and they're soon to be married and he has to go away on business and he's off in another country but most of the time every spare moment his mind is with his fiance with his love what's she doing now oh I wish I was with her I know what she'll be doing just now or I know this time last week we were together and we were in the restaurant and you know the lover the soul of the lover is more where it loves than where it lives my body may be in

I don't know you know somewhere some other city some other country where I'm doing business but my heart and my thoughts are constantly pulled back to where the one I love is Jesus wants us to be thinking of him to meditate on him to remember him he wants us to be fulfilled with love he wants us to enjoy love you know the shorter catechism that first question the chief end the chief reason why god made us is that we should glorify and enjoy him forever and there's the deepest part of god's love to us all together you see the son and the father and the holy spirit the three persons of our one triune god lived from all eternity in a loving relationship of complete delight our god is love and that love flows and flowed constantly between the three persons of the trinity they didn't need anybody else they delighted in each other within the godhead forever and yet in the amazing grace of god they kind of said to each other let's make a being who is in some ways like us so that we can bring them into in some way into this wonderful circle this wonderful dance of love that we find so completely satisfying and fulfilling and so god said let us make man in our image and

after our likeness and so peter could write when all of god's plan was fulfilled though you have not seen jesus you love him and even though you do not see him now you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy that's what jesus is looking for and one 20th century writer drawing on all this summed it up like this christianity is not so much a religion it's more a love affair jesus wants us to love him jesus is looking for our love that's why among other things he's given us the lord's supper so that we should realize yet again how much he loved and loves us and that when we see his love to us we should love him in this story we see how jesus draws us to love him well how does he do that well in a way i've already said it he comes to us in his love he said open to me my love my dove my flawless one tells her how much he loves her and then he really says how much he's suffered to come to her my head is drenched with dew my hair with the dampness of the light and our lord jesus constantly puts before us not in a self-centered way but in a way of perfect love because he puts to us in a way of perfect love the remembrance of what he's done for us he shows us in the lord's supper and in his word what it's cost him

[27 : 02] i've already reminded you of that in this sermon this evening and what's he doing well he's really building on what john says in his epistle we love him because he first loved us that's why jesus sends preachers to tell you how much he loves you that's why he's given us the lord's supper and all sorts of means so that we should constantly be shown his love love because the display of the love of jesus kindles a flame of sacred love in our hearts you know it's it's a bit like that that blazing sun that when you use a lens and focus it on some dry unlikely straw or paper it will set it ablaze and it too will burn in some pale imitation of that burning sun and jesus draws us to love him by focusing his love upon our minds and our hearts i love the lord because of the way he's loved me think of the love of jesus christ but then also jesus jesus draws us to love him by challenging and overcoming the barriers that hinder our love i i won't or i try to resist the temptation to draw out this wonderful story in full but here you see not just the loved one who comes to his lover to his bride but you see the problem that she has she's drowsy she's sleepy she's so slow getting up to open the door that by the time she gets there he's gone and so first of all we see firstly we see here that there's a problem with the bride why doesn't she leap up the minute she hears his voice why doesn't she open the door before the echo of his call has finished by the way that's how our lord answers our prayers do you know that wonderful prayer of daniel in chapter 9 where he prays this great long passionate most desperate prayer for the lord to have mercy and as he finishes his prayer the angel of the lord is there beside him and the angel says something very wonderful it says daniel as you began to pray the lord sent me to you the lord answered daniel's prayer before he'd even even finished praying it that's how god's love operates but this woman's love to him this bride's love to her husband is dampened down in various ways and it's not what it ought to be and it's slow and it's sluggish there is in other words spiritual weakness and failure on the part of the believer the good that I would

I do not says Paul in the great seventh chapter of Romans and remember the context of behold I stand at the door and knock in revelation you think you are rich and have need of nothing and you don't realize that you're lukewarm and you're poor and you're wretched and he says to the church in Ephesus I have this against you that you've lost your first love the edge has gone off you and so our Lord Jesus Christ not only comes to tell us of his love but he comes to deal with our failing love with our spiritual failures and this woman well what are her spiritual failures is there any clue here I don't know how far we're meant to press the details but we could say for one thing she's forgetful if you read the earlier chapters of the song there are some wonderful passages where she describes the delight she has with her beloved he's more than all the world to her he's a delight to be with but tonight as she lies drowsy in her bed that the sharpness has gone off that memory my friends were there times in your life when you were on fire for the lord jesus perhaps some of you can remember the first time you came to communion or perhaps you can remember times months ago or years ago when you know you just couldn't get enough of praying to the lord and you were amazed when your prayer times ended to realize how long you'd been praying and there was kind of a glow in your hearts but actually you realize that as i remind you of that that you hadn't remembered that for ages and the edge has gone off it we are so forgetful the gloss so soon wears off we're all too often like our wretched cars that we clean and no sooner do we clean them than the next day it seems to pour with rain and they're covered with dust and dirt again and there's a self-centeredness and there's a there's a false sense of perspective in this woman i've gone to bed i've washed my feet if i get up i'll have to wash them again and i've taken i'll have to film my dressing gown and it's chilly

getting up what's that compared to the value of being with her lord with her lover and yet so often we allow our immediate pleasure oh i'm too tired to pray too tired to talk to jesus and there are other things that we have to do be it said to the shame of all of us that squeeze out our reading and meditating on the word that squeeze out the effort to think about jesus to preach the gospel to ourselves every day other things seem more important to us and so jesus gets neglected how does jesus overcome these weaknesses well in the story he does it by disappearing she gets to the door and he's gone and suddenly this woman who was unwilling to get dust on her feet precious washed and unwilling to put on her robe again because of the trouble it involves she's now ready to go running around the streets of jerusalem to endure what looks like a beating up to have her precious clothes torn from her back she's willing to do all of that in the middle of the night and the wetness because she's desperate to find her beloved what's made the change the beloved is gone he's not there her love is roused to a desperate passion she won't be satisfied with anything but having his presence and his company and how has he aroused this this love in her how has he transformed the lazy sleepy forgetful bedridden lover into this passionate seeker after him he's aroused it he's changed her by withdrawing his presence by what the old divines would have caused called spiritual desertion samuel rutherford wrote something which was put into a hymn like this you may recognize it but flowers need the darkness the moonlight and the dew so christ from one who loved it his presence oft withdrew and then for cause of absence my troubled soul i scanned but glory shageless shineth in emmanuel's land we need to be shaken up we need sometimes for the privileges and the feelings and the peace of our walk with god to be disturbed god traveled israel often in the old testament in ways like that do you remember after what happened after jericho israel went up to attack a very little town called ai and they were defeated and they were desperate they were totally shattered joshua was distraught lord all the nations that were scared of us when they heard about jericho now they get all their courage back when they hear how we've been defeated by ai and and they'll come and defeat us and lord help and god says it's no accident that i've left you because there's sin in israel the park has stolen the forbidden forbidden goods god that's why let's put it simply like this that's the reason why god leaves us often to fall into sin that's one of the reasons why god sometimes allows unexpected and unwanted suffering to come into our lives because he needs to shake us awake he needs to make us realize our real priorities that we can't live without him that was a little bit what happened to paul the thorn in the flesh lord take away this suffering and the lord said no i won't do it and paul came to realize that actually that suffering was the most precious gift that jesus could give him because it was so bad he knew he couldn't cope on his own so every day whatever that suffering was it drove him desperately to cling to jesus it made him pray like he'd never prayed before it made him read his bible again and again especially the book of job and he learned and he tells us that it's when i'm weak that i'm strong it's when i'm desperate that i run to jesus and i'm never safer and i'm never stronger than when i'm clinging to him and the story goes on to tell us how we should work at that love how energetically she pursues she searches for this lord how she draws in all the help she can find you know and what a lesson that is for us if we feel that our love to jesus is so weak let's talk about it in your house groups in your fellowship in your marriages do you ever talk to each other look can you help me i find it so difficult to love jesus or i feel that i don't have the love of jesus as i would wish or as i used to have and the daughters of jerusalem say what do you mean you say well let me tell you how great jesus is let you tell let me tell you what jesus is really like let me tell you about what it's like to be close to jesus and then please help me please pray for me please encourage me let's go looking for jesus together my friends does our christian fellowship do our prayer meetings do our times of just being with each other are they ever like this conversation between the bride and the daughters of jerusalem and she talks about jesus she thinks of what jesus is she thinks of what she's missing and that drives her on to look for him but she says it with wonderful confidence i love the way it all leads to chapter six verse three she's not desperate she doesn't lose her faith he's abandoned me i'll never find him he must hate me she says he's gone to his garden he's doing it for my good i am my beloved's and my beloved is mine my friends if you're in a spiritual wilderness tonight if you look back with painful loss on the good days that you once had as a christian where is the blessedness i knew when first i saw the lord where is the soul refreshing view of jesus and his word if you can echo those words of william cooper then don't despair once loved always loved and jesus says keep searching me spurn your sins come to me cry out to me tonight and i'm still in my garden i'm walking among the lilies i am yours and you are mine those that seek for me will find me when they

seek me with their whole heart let me just finish with applications to communion there's a huge application by the way to our godless world which is desperately looking for meaningful relationship and which is seeking to find it through the idolization of sexuality and which is desperately going from one failed relationship to another and we need to say to them what augustine long ago said lord you have made us for yourself to love you and be loved by you and our hearts are restless until they rest in you but what about us and communion here's a test of your status today my friend should you be at the lord's table tomorrow jesus does not say how much do you know about me if you

know enough you can come jesus does not say are you perfect if you are perfect you can be in my church and my family jesus says to us what he says to simon peter long ago simon peter i know you've denied me i know you've failed me terribly simon son of jonas do you love me and if you feel that love to jesus even if it makes you cry to think how little you love him and how much you long to love him more if there's something in your heart that echoes to that question of jesus then you should be at the lord's table tomorrow if you say no i can't come to the lord's table because i don't love jesus enough and i'm out of that sort of loving intimacy with him then my friends maybe coming to the lord's table is one of the steps that you need to take love because it's there that jesus shows his love and if you're in that hovering position then it's not too late to talk to david after the service and even to come to the session jesus says do you love me that's the test and here's a prayer for you tonight here's another hymn i can quote from it lord it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint yet i love thee and adore oh for grace to love thee more what difference would it make in your life and in your home and in our church if every one of us before we went to bed tonight and first thing tomorrow prayed lord jesus through this communion service tomorrow morning help me to love you more and here's a promise that our lord jesus christ stands at the door and knocks open to me my love my fair one my sister open to me and i will come in and sup with you and you with me let's pray about too let's pray and we love to