

# Saturday Communion Service

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[ 0 : 01 ] If you could please keep your Bible open in the chapters that we read, the Gospel of Luke, chapters 16 and 17, and we're focusing in particular on the beginning of chapter 17.

That's on pages 1050 and 1051 of the church Bibles. When we take part in communion, in the Lord's Supper, when we sit together and when we take the bread and break it and we eat it, and then when we take the wine and we drink it, it is, for many of us, a time of self-examination. We do that because Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11, everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat the bread and drink from the cup.

And Paul then tells us we have to be discerning about ourselves in order to take part. So, when we prepare for communion, it's a time where we take a good look at ourselves and we ask, what does this mean to me? Jesus' body was broken and His blood was shed because of my sins against God, and because of His sacrifice, I have been forgiven and I've been given a new life. And we examine ourselves and we ask ourselves questions. Does that impact me? Am I grateful? Is gratitude to God my motivation in all of life and also in what I'm doing now in taking part in communion, in breaking this bread, in drinking this wine? And when you're doing that kind of self-examination, generally, maybe one of the questions you ask yourself when you're examining yourself is, what about my faith? Do I have enough faith? Is my faith strong enough to do this? If you've been a

Christian for a long time, maybe communion is when you ask yourself, is my faith now stronger than it was the last time I took communion or the first time I took communion? Or is it weaker? Or if this is your first time at the Lord's Supper, maybe you're asking yourself, do I have enough faith to do this? Is my faith strong enough in the first place? Tonight, we're looking at the first few verses of Luke 17, where Jesus speaks to His disciples about faith and the question of whether or not you have enough of it.

And we're doing that as part of this process then of self-examination, because Paul tells us we're going to take part, we should examine ourselves. And what I'd like to see is that at the very beginning, in context, the disciples have just been shown the absolute necessity of personal saving faith in Jesus Christ, not just for the Lord's Supper, but the absolute necessity of it because of how high the stakes are, because of what is at stake. So, in Luke 16, which we read, it begins with this story of a man who's about to lose his job. So, he works as the manager for a rich man, and he's being told, you are about to be fired. And he realizes he has no other prospects, because he's not physical enough to be fired, and he's too ashamed to beg, because he's kind of professional class. So, he acts shrewdly. He knows he's about to lose everything anyway, so he uses the position that, while he still has it, to do a favor for his boss's debtors, maybe to create some other opportunities for himself somewhere else. So, did you owe him 800? Let's just make it 400.

[ 3 : 36 ] Jesus uses that story to teach us that our time on earth is limited, and at some point we'll have to leave everything behind. So, while we're still on earth, he says, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you may be welcomed into eternal dwellings. It's a strange story.

It's one of the harder stories that Jesus tells to understand, but it's a stark reminder that we won't be here forever on this earth, and that that should have an impact then on how we use our possessions. And then he goes and tells the story of another story of another rich man who lives a luxurious life. So, fine wine, beautiful clothes, a huge house, and every day this rich man passes a beggar at the gate of his house. The beggar is called Lazarus, and medically Lazarus is a mess.

His skin is covered in sores, and dogs come and lick them. And as it transpires, both of these men, the rich man and Lazarus, die. And at this point their fortunes change completely, with the rich man going to hell and Lazarus going to heaven. In heaven, Lazarus is beside Abraham, the Old Testament hero of the faith. And in hell, the rich man suffers and thirsts, and he wants Lazarus to come and give him a drink of water. But Abraham tells him that that's impossible. There's a great chasm that has been fixed between you and us. Where you are now, you will... It's a terrifying story. And the dark reality of that, sin and its consequences, is immediately brought to the disciples' own world, to their own lives, when Jesus then, straight after this, tells them about sin's inevitability, that sin will come, and woe to the person who brings it. He says it would be better if that person had never been born.

So, Jesus has left his disciples in no doubt. They have to have personal faith in him. They need to have saving faith in him. The stakes could not be higher. The stakes are life and death, heaven and hell, and it all depends on their faith. So, it's not surprising, I think, when we see their immediate response. The apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith. At one level, it's a completely understandable, logical response. If our faith makes the difference between an eternity in heaven with Abraham or an eternity in hell with the rich man, and if we really do live in the world that Jesus describes, a world where temptations and sin are sure to come, where that's definite, we surely want to have as much faith as we possibly can, don't we? Isn't, don't we sympathize with the disciples when they hear all of this and they say, increase our faith, give us more of it. That's what we need. Let me try and illustrate their mentality, okay? So, imagine that you're a student, or for a lot of you, you don't have to imagine because this is your world, and you have a really big final exam coming up, and your future depends on it, whether you pass or fail. It's the key to the job offer that you have, which is conditional, which is the key to the whole future and career that you want to have, and the kind of person that you want to become. So, months in advance, hopefully, for those of you who are students, you throw yourselves into your work, you spend every waking hour that you can in the library, you bury yourself in your books, and your goal in all of this is to do as well as possible by putting in as many hours as possible, by having done as much as you can beforehand. Take a mentality like that, apply it to Jesus' disciples. They've just been told about the enormous eternal consequences of their response to Jesus, and their first reaction to that is, okay, we need more faith. It has to increase. It's all about quantity. So, they say to Him, increase our faith. Help us have every chance to be welcomed into eternal dwellings. But there's a big problem with this, a massive problem, and Jesus picks up on it immediately, which we'll see in a moment when we look at His response. And the problem is that an enormous amount of faith in the wrong thing is still useless. Imagine this. You're going skydiving, and you've done the pre-flight safety course. You've been told exactly what you have to do in order to land safely. You know, just when you've got to pull the cord, and then when the parachute will be released, and you know where you're aiming to land, and you're basically completely confident that this will go well. Otherwise, you would never be about to jump out of a plane. So, the plane takes off and ascends. It eventually reaches the right altitude for the jump, and you're told, okay, get ready. Put your gear on. And you can't really believe what's about to happen. You're about to skydive. You're about to jump out into the open air, into the blue sky. But here's the problem. Instead of putting on your parachute backpack, someone has left a normal backpack lying there, and you put it on. You have complete faith in what's on your back to save you. You think, okay, I'm going to descend a bit. I'm going to pull the cord.

The parachute will come out. And you believe absolutely in this. Your faith in this could not be stronger. It could not be increased. Otherwise, you would never be doing this in the first place.

[ 9 : 27 ] But the problem is, you've just got a backpack on, and it might have some sandwiches in it, or someone's phone or keys, but it's not the parachute. And the amount of faith you have makes no difference, because it's faith in the wrong thing. Or if you're a student, have you ever used past papers as the focus of your revision for an exam? It's not a very wise strategy, but it happens all the time, where students notice, okay, the same question seems to come up every single year. So, all of my preparation is in how to answer that question. And you're completely confident that it will be in the exam again this year. And you make that the thing you revise thoroughly, and you have really strong faith in this, huge amounts of it. And you get into the exam, and they say, okay, you can begin, and you turn over the paper, and it's not there. See, again, this massive amount of faith that you have doesn't make a difference. It doesn't help, because faith in the wrong thing, no matter how much of it you have, is useless. Jesus sees his disciples, and he knows the predicament that they're in. He's just told them this parable of the shrewd manager, and then of the rich man and

Lazarus. And he understands their thinking. He knows that they live in a world full of sin. He knows that they are scared as to how they'll survive that and enter the next life well. And because he understands how all of this works, he goes on to tell them that they're not going to be saved by how much faith they have. He tells them they're going to be saved rather by the one in whom they have their faith. Okay, so it's not a question of how much faith you have. That's not the big issue. The big issue is, what do you do with whatever faith you have? Where do you invest that faith? What do you have faith in? Or more specifically, in whom do you have faith? So we move on into what Jesus then goes to say. So he demonstrates this point, this idea that the thing that makes faith effective, the thing that makes it work and succeed isn't its quantity, but rather what it's placed in. So he's effectively telling them the most important thing isn't how much faith you have, it's where you place that faith.

So he gives them an illustration. He says, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you. Now in our culture, we might not get this point immediately because it's really far removed from the culture that Jesus lived in. People would have got this right, understood this right away. A mustard seed is tiny, it's insignificant, and a mulberry tree is huge and it's important. Mustard seeds, well, the mustard plant was noted in Jesus' culture for its tiny seeds. In Mark 4, Jesus says, this is the smallest of seeds.

And a mulberry tree, on the other hand, is really huge. Fully grown, it's about 50 feet tall. It has really famously strong wood, so it was valuable in their culture. They used its branches to make baskets. They would make farming tools with it because the wood was really strong and reliable.

So it was useful also for its fruits. People would use it to make jam and tarts. So the image here is of a strong contrast between something that is tiny, the smallest thing that you could imagine in that culture, and also something that's regarded by people as pretty insignificant. If you lose a mustard seed, well, who cares? They're so small and there are loads of them. But if you lose a mulberry tree, if your mulberry tree is wasted, then that's a big deal because of the wood, because of the fruit, its sheer size. But Jesus is saying, when He contrasts these things, that even the tiniest amount of faith, faith the size of a mustard seed used properly, carries enormous effect.

[ 13 : 29 ] In the modern day, in our time, uprooting a tree is really hard work. Until a couple of years ago, there was a pretty big tree just outside our flat in Edinburgh. And we live in a first floor flat, so it was in the garden downstairs and going up past our living room window. But this tree had to be removed because trees right next to the tenements can be really bad for the roots sucking out moisture.

So they had to remove this tree. So it was removed, and the roots also had to go because of their effect on the foundations. It wasn't enough just to cut it down to a stump. By getting the roots out was extremely difficult. And in fact, to do it, they had to bring along the special machine that kind of sucks them out of the ground. It was awesome to watch, really pretty incredible.

But watching these people struggle with specialist machinery to uproot a big tree, an old tree, made me think about why generally when you see, well, you see lots of tree stumps left over from the era, from the time before they had these machines that could take out the roots. Because uprooting trees is so hard, people often just couldn't do it. They didn't have the manpower or the machinery, so you just cut it at a stump and left it there. You had to leave the stump there. You couldn't really uproot the tree. And it was like that in Jesus' day. If you wanted to get rid of a big old tree, unless you had an army of workers, you just had to leave the stump. And you can see that in Scripture, in the Old Testament, in Job chapter 14, which references this. Trees cut down usually had to leave the roots untouched because the roots were too difficult to remove. So, this is part of the whole biblical world. So, when Jesus chooses the example of a really huge task and He picks tree removal, but doesn't stop at just leaving a stump, when He says, you could command this massive tree to be uprooted. He's making a really bold claim. It couldn't really be any bolder.

Something that is very, very hard to do. There's another example in Matthew 17, where Jesus is making a very similar point to the disciples, and He speaks about ordering a mountain to move, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed. So, when you look at the words and the pictures that Jesus uses, they are specific and they're deliberate. Not only can a mustard seed-sized faith command this useful tree to be uprooted, faith that is that small, so seemingly insignificant to the rest of the world, can also command this mulberry tree to then go and plant itself, replant itself in the sea.

Now, this word for plant is a specific word in the Bible used for deliberately putting a plant into the ground. So, you put its roots down there, and it's not a kind of random thing at all. It's deliberate gardening vocabulary. It's the word that the Bible uses for planting vineyards, for example. So, it's not random. It's a really intentional thing. It's when a gardener deliberately does this. He roots a plant in the ground. So, Jesus isn't saying, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can command this mulberry tree to randomly throw itself in the sea in a kind of chaotic way. He's saying, you can command it to plant itself in the sea, which is very different. Trees are, well, they're living creatures, but they obviously don't speak, and they don't tell us what they think. But if we allow ourselves a moment of Tolkien-esque imagination, think of what this mulberry tree would say, this subtropical inland fruit-bearing tree.

[17:19] If you told it, go and plant yourself intentionally, deliberately, put your roots down in the sea, what would it say if it could speak? What are you talking about? That's madness. I can't live in the sea.

I don't take salt water. And what will happen to my fruit and all my usefulness? What will happen to my beautiful wood? There's no way I'll do it. I'm staying here, inland, where my roots are, where I belong. And yet, Jesus says that even this tiniest morsel of faith imaginable, so small, so insignificant, can command this huge tree to do something crazy, something unexpected, something counter, that goes counter to every intuition this tree would have. And Jesus says, if you do this, it will obey you. That is the power of even the tiniest amount of faith. So, do you see how Jesus is redirecting the disciples' focus when they hear about the world they live in and the importance of their faith in Christ, and they're panicking, saying, give us more of this faith, increase our faith. Jesus is redirecting all of this. They want their faith to increase in quantity, but Jesus is emphasizing it's not really about quantity, fundamentally. Even the tiniest amount of faith, a mustard seed-sized amount of faith, is already enough to accomplish the otherwise impossible. The smallest amount of faith, properly used, invested in the right way, can command a tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea. It can command a mountain to move. Now, why does Jesus make this point? Does he not want them to have lots and lots of faith? Does he only want them to have a tiny amount of faith? Is faith like hair gel? The packet says, just use the pea-sized blob, otherwise it will look like a mess. Don't put the whole packet on at once.

Should we only ever aim to have a mustard seed-sized amount of faith? The thing is, Jesus' point here is that it's not faith itself that saves us. Although we're saved by faith alone, it's not the faith itself that saves us, that helps us through this world where sin is inevitable and will come, and where we want to be welcomed into an eternal home in the next life. We are saved by Jesus, in whom alone we have faith.

Faith is like the needle through which you get life-saving medicine. We need the needle to get the medicine from the packet into our bodies, but it's the medicine that saves us. The needle alone, if it's empty, it doesn't do anything, right? If it's just an empty injection into you, but if it has the right medicine inside it, it will save your life. Once you've had the medicine, well, you know that you have this health thanks to the medicine, and you don't go and say, wonderful needle, this is the thing that saved me. It's this amazing medicine that has given you your health back, and you're really glad for the needle because it got the medicine into your body, but you became healthy because of the medicine itself. And that's what Jesus wants us to see about faith. If we want to navigate our way through this world where sin is all around, and make sure that we're welcomed into eternal dwellings, the thing that we need is Jesus.

And we need to put whatever faith we have in Him, even if it is the tiniest amount, if it's placed in Him, it's enough to make the impossible happen. It's enough to make a spiritually dead person become a new person, a spiritually alive person. It's enough for you to become a new creation in Christ. It can make miracles happen. And I want to finish by making one application of this as part of our preparation for sitting at the Lord's table tomorrow, which is simply to focus on what Jesus is teaching us here, that when we're asking ourselves questions and examining ourselves, we shouldn't make our primary focus how much faith we have. We should focus on what we do with what faith, whatever faith we have, and whether that faith is rooted and grounded in Christ. The Bible encourages us to grow in our faith.

[ 21 : 58 ] If a mustard seed-sized faith can move mountains, can you imagine what mountain or mulberry tree-sized faith can do? So, this, the chapter here and what Jesus says isn't about resting on our laurels as long as we have the tiniest amount of faith possible in Jesus. Jesus knows that His disciples need strong faith because of everything that He tells them in chapter 16, because of the fact that sin will come and that we have to flee it and avoid it. He knows what lies ahead for them. If they're going to carry on as His followers, they will have a hard time in life. For some of them, it will cost them their lives.

So, He's not telling them, okay, as long as you have a mustard seed, that's fine, just continue with that. What He's doing, actually, is teaching them how to increase their faith. And the way to do that, the key to do that, is first to learn what makes even this tiny amount of faith effective. If you want effective faith, and if you want growing faith, take what faith you have and put it in Jesus.

And the more that you do that, the more you find yourself in wonder and love for Him, the more you rely on Him, the more you believe and trust in Him, and the more, therefore, your faith in Him will increase. But it's not a 10-step program. It's a living relationship. It's about loving Him because He first loved you. Didn't Paul also tell the Corinthians, if I have all faith enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. So, he also says in that letter, everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. As we prepare for tomorrow, we do need to examine ourselves. I said at the beginning, that means asking ourselves questions about how much Jesus' sacrifice for us impacts us. Are we astonished that the Son of God would give His life for us in our place? And when it comes to asking questions about our own faith, strong faith in Christ is a great thing. But is our most fundamental question, is my faith for my salvation, whether that faith is as tiny as a mustard seed or as huge as a mountain, is that faith invested and put in the best possible place, actually in the best possible person, is my faith in Christ? And as I go to the table, as I go to break this bread and eat it, as I go to drink this wine, do I do that? Do I go as someone who believes that my hope is that my hope is found in Christ alone, in no one else, in nothing else? Let's pray together.

Lord God, Father in heaven, we are grateful for your Son. You've given him to us to live among us, to teach us, to direct us to you, to be the good news that he proclaimed. And we thank you for what he's done for us as a sin sacrifice, as one who has made atonement. We thank you that he is worthy of our faith. We thank you that he is reliable and trustworthy and true, and that there's no one better that we could put our trust in, that we could put our faith in, than Jesus Christ.

So Lord, we pray that you would help us if we ask ourselves questions about increasing our faith, to ask first, to ask ourselves questions about whether our faith is in Christ. And Lord, we pray that you would help us to answer that question with a resounding yes, and through that we pray that you would increase our faith, that you would deepen it and strengthen it, and that you would center it more and more on Jesus Christ. Lord, we know that a huge amount of faith in the wrong thing or the wrong person is useless and vain and empty. But we thank you that even the smallest amount of faith in Jesus Christ is enough to make the otherwise impossible happen. So we pray that you would encourage us in the faith that we have, in the knowledge that if that faith is in Christ, that you can and that you have done and that you will do great things for us. So Lord, we pray this in his name. Amen.

[ 26 : 45 ] Amen. Our closing psalm is in sing psalms, Psalm 139a, which is on page 180. And we're singing from the beginning to verse 10. So we've been thinking of examining ourselves. This psalm speaks to us of how God has examined us and how thoroughly God knows us.

O Lord, you have examined me. You know me through and through. My sitting, rising, all my thoughts afar are known to you. And this is a psalm of great comfort that God, who knows everything about us, who has examined us through and through, is always with us. As we sing in verse 10, if I should take the wings of dawn and dwell beyond the sea, there also you would be my guide, your right hand holding me. And the tune is Eventide. So we'll stand and sing together.

O Lord, you have examined me. You know me through and through. My sitting, rising, all my thoughts, the tune is Eventide. So we're going to be the same. And the tune is Eventide. So we're going to be the same.

I'm going to be the same. And the tune is Eventide. So we're going to be the same. And the tune is Eventide. So we're going to be the same. I'm going to be the same. And the tune is Eventide. So we're going to be the same. And the tune is Eventide. So we're going to be the same.

Before I speak the word, O Lord, it is well known to you.

[ 28 : 55 ] You have been in the end, we hide before. You lay on me in your hand.

Such knowledge is too wonderful, too high to understand.

Where can I from your spirit flee, or from your presence go?

If to the heavens you are there, or in the depths below.

If I should take the wings of dawn, and dwell beyond the sea.

[ 30 : 22 ] There also you would be my guide, your right and holding me.

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each of you. Amen. Amen.