**The Lord’s Supper**

At the end of the message today, we’re going to be taking Communion—or what’s been commonly called, “The Lord’s Supper”—together. For people who have done it for years, it has a tendency to be a bit commonplace. But when you take the time to think about what you’re doing, it’s a strange ritual for the modern mind. Why do I say that?

First, it’s a ritual where we eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus. Not literally, of course, but the fact is that this sounds barbaric to our modern, sanitized society. So, it’s sounds strange to people outside. In fact, the early Christians were even accused of being cannibals by Roman critics who had only heard about the practice.

The second reason it’s strange is because we live in a society that is individualistic and communion is, at its core, a *community* ritual. Even when we take communion to a shut-in, we don’t do it just to connect them to Jesus, we do it so they can identify with the church family.

The third reason it’s strange is because our society is largely doing away with ritual or any kind of formality. We have few rites of passage—if any. We value fun and energy over reverence. We believe freedom is always better than structure because it’s a sin to stifle individual expression. And we’re so practical that it’s hard for us to see why eating little bits of bread and drinking juice out of tiny cups can do anything for our souls.

So, today, I want to go back to Jesus and look at this ritual that he instituted 2000 years ago. But before I do that, we need to start by talking about rituals themselves. *What is the point of rituals?* Most people if they think about rituals at all, think rituals are just symbolic actions that show your devotion to a person, organization or to God.

Take a wedding for instance. A wedding is a one-time ritual. In our day, more and more people are asking, “Why do I need a wedding and a piece of paper to show someone I love them?” The answer is, of course, you don’t. There are a lot of better ways to show someone you love them. But that’s not what a wedding is for. The point of a wedding isn’t to prove your love to someone else, it’s to teach you—to help you view the world differently by showing the couple and reminding everyone in attendance of the good of marriage and the seriousness of what they’re about to undertake.

Think about the ritual. First, the giving of the bride or some other ritual physically and figuratively separates the couple from their parents to form a new family. Rather than being dependent on your parents, you’re now dependent on each other first and parents only secondarily.

Then you take vows before God. The gravity of this should remind you that your marriage isn’t just a human contract or economic arrangement, but a promise you’re making to God, and when you make a promise to God, you better well keep it.

Also, you don’t do it privately, you do it before a community of people—family, friends, and the church which teaches you that what you’re doing isn’t just for your personal happiness, but it’s a *community* good.

Pastor and Professor Dru Johnson says that *rituals are everyday actions that are designed to help us see what we couldn’t see before*. Rituals help us *know* in a way, simple facts and information don’t because you are formed more by your habits than by the information put in your head. What we *do* shapes us more than what we *know*.

For instance, a trip to the mall will shape how you handle money more than a sermon on the godly use of finances. The job of marketers is to create habits to get you to see the world from the perspective of a consumer. If they can get you clicking through the internet or walking through the mall habitually, you begin to act like a consumer because that becomes the filter through which you see the world. A consumer is someone who views life through the lens of what this will do for my personal happiness or comfort.

The power of habit is such an all-consuming force that coming to church and hearing a message on what the Bible says about money, won’t change anything. Even if you say you’re committed to following Jesus, nothing will change anything unless you do one thing—*ritualize* it. That really takes two things—this is how we learn everything. Religious people and scientists learn the exact same way. Two things.

*First, you trust an authority and second, you do what the authority says.* Take money, for instance. If your authority is Scripture and you trust Scripture, you know that it says basically three things about money. First is that everything belongs to God and we’re only given temporary care of it. Second, it says the love of money is the source of all kinds of evil. Money isn’t a blessing, it’s a trap. Third, it tells us not to worry about our lives, but to believe that God cares about us and will take care of us.

Now, I don’t think any honest Christian would deny this is the Bible’s basic teaching about money. But I would say that most Christians don’t *know* it’s true. We know the fact that this is what the Bible says, but most don’t *know* it. How do I know this? It’s because most Christians don’t live as if it’s true. I said a couple of weeks ago that the most generous group of people in the world give only about 2.43% of their income away.

That’s why in order to *know* it, you have to trust the authority, but that’s not enough. You have to do what it says. The Bible’s ritual (or practice) of giving 10% isn’t just a way to show how dedicated you are, it’s a way to learn that what the Bible says about money is actually true. That’s God says to the Israelites in Malachi 3, *“Test me in this…and see if I will not throw open the floodgates.”* You can regurgitate what the Bible says about money, but you won’t KNOW it until you practice the ritual.

Are you with me so far? Good. Now you’re probably asking what this has to do with the Lord’s Supper and maybe even moreso, about the Old Testament since this is a series about Jesus’ Bible. Well, here it is…Read Luke 22:7-20

Until recently, I believed that Jesus did away with ritual—that in light of Jesus, ritual is no longer necessary. I changed my mind. Now Jesus *did* tell us there is a danger in ritual—that it can become rote and meaningless and it can lull us into the belief that we are righteous because we faithfully do the ritual. But I no long believe that ritual isn’t important. Ritual is a necessary part of learning. Case in point, the Lord’s Supper.

There aren’t very many rituals prescribed by Jesus. As far as I can think of, there are two—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That doesn’t mean they weren’t around before Jesus. The Jews, including John the Baptist, were baptizing people before Jesus told us to “baptize [people] in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” With baptism, Jesus took a ritual that was already practiced and reappropriated it for his Church. With the Lord’s Supper, he’s also not creating a new ritual, but he’s changing an old ritual and infusing it with new meaning. So let’s talk about the Lord’s Supper.

If you’ve taken the Lord’s Supper, these words are familiar to you. **“Jesus took break, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’”**

Now, here’s how we typically understand the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. *We take it to remind ourselves of the price Jesus paid so that our sins can be forgiven and we can be with God in heaven someday.* And yes, most of the individual elements of this are true. Jesus did pay for our sins with his broken body. And yes, that forgiveness restores our relationship with God. But when you understand the background of what Jesus did, the Lord’s Supper becomes far richer.

The question is, “What was the old ritual that Jesus was infusing with new meaning? The answer is, Passover. Notice in Luke 22, verse 15 Jesus says, **“I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”**

Scholars agree that it wasn’t an accident that Jesus chose Passover as the time to go to Jerusalem to die. When he instituted the Lord’s Supper during Passover, he implied that what he was instituting a *new* Passover.

Passover itself was a seven-day celebration that culminated in the Passover meal or Seder or “feast of unleavened bread.” It was one of the main feasts commanded by God for the Jewish people. Exodus 12:14 says, **“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.”** It’s a command. Not a suggestion. If you are part of the Jewish community, this is something you do. Why? Because Passover is a ritual that forms you.

Every year now, for around 3500 years, this ritual re-enacts the Exodus of the Israelites from oppressive hand of the Egyptians. Israel had been slaves in Egypt for 430 years. But God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh to let his people go. Of course, Pharaoh didn’t want to lose an entire nation that provided him with cheap slave labor.

So, God sent ten plagues to show Pharaoh who he was dealing with. The first nine weren’t enough to convince him. But the tenth, the angel of death, was. On the assigned night, an angel would pass through Egypt and kill the first-born son of each household unless the family killed a lamb without blemish and spread its blood on the doorway of their house. When the angel saw the blood, it would pass over that house and spare the son. This was the plague that finally convinced Pharaoh to let them go.

Now, we tend to focus only on the blood on the doorpost, but God actually gave them more instructions than that. You see, after spreading the blood on the doorpost, they were to roast the goat and bake unleavened bread—bread without yeast. Roasting instead of boiling didn’t require pots that would need to be cleaned up and unleavened bread didn’t need time to raise. They were in a hurry, so they were also told to eat the meal with their cloak tucked into their belt and with their shoes on. When Pharaoh gave the word, they were ready to go.

Every year, on the first day of the first month they were to commemorate that night by reenacting that meal. The whole celebration was to last seven days with the meal on the last day. During that week, they couldn’t work, except to prepare food. During the final meal, they killed a one-year-old sheep or goat without blemish. They couldn’t break any of its bones, they couldn’t eat outside, they couldn’t eat alone, they couldn’t save leftovers and they would eat the meal with their cloak tucked into their belt and their shoes on.

This was the ritual that shaped them. But in what ways did it shape them. The first way was that *it was a regular reminder that they were once slaves in Egypt*. You might think this wouldn’t be an issue when you’ve been slaves for 430 years. But when the Israelites were wandering in the desert and things got tough, they suggested to God that they would be better off if they were still in Egypt. If it’s that easy for the people who were in Egypt to forget, imagine if you were the next generation, who had never experienced slavery or the Exodus. It’s harder to be grateful to a God who brings people out of slavery if you don’t remember being a slave.

The second way was to *remind them and future generations that God freed them from slavery.* You can see this during the plagues in Exodus 10:2, look at what God says to Moses, **“…tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord.”** This wasn’t just a feast the people who had been through it were commanded to celebrate. It wasn’t just to be written in history books. It’s to be retold and re-enacted by all future generations so their knowing would be more than intellectual, they would experience it. Because what we *do* shapes us more than what we *know*.

The third way it shaped them was that it *solidified their identity as God’s people.* The Exodus wasn’t a universal experience. It was only for the people of Israel. That kind of experience creates bonds that last a long time—it’s how we’re wired. Guys who play something as silly as a game of pickup basketball together, form a bond during that 20 minutes battling side-by-side. World War II veterans who were buddies who fought together 80 years ago would still die for each other even if they spent the rest of their lives thousands of miles apart. But the next general doesn’t have that same bond. Successive generations need to be reminded of their common identity.

It’s not just our history, but our traditions that give us a common identity. If a group doesn’t maintain those traditions, they forget and fracture. For instance, the rituals of American identity are things like Thanksgiving, Christmas, fireworks on the Fourth of July, and the National Anthem at large events. Before two football teams beat each other’s brains in, they stand together with hands over their hearts signifying, that for all their differences they hold a common identity. And I’m not making a statement on the rightness or wrongness of it, but this is why people get so upset when someone chooses to draw attention to an issue by refusing to stand for the national anthem. People interpret this as, “you’re not one of us.” That shows you the power of ritual.

That’s why no one was allowed to celebrate Passover alone. That’s why parents are to pass this custom on to their children. In Exodus 12:14, it says this is to be a “lasting ordinance.”

The fourth purpose for the Passover is not just to look to the past, *but to know and trust the God who saves and to look forward to the day of ultimate salvation.* What good is remembering how God saved in the past if it doesn’t teach you to trust that this same God will save in the future? What good is remembering if it doesn’t impact the present or the future? What good is remembering if it doesn’t give us confidence to believe that even if things are hard now, God cares and will bring about the best in the end? Passover isn’t just backward looking, it’s forward looking.

This is how Passover shaped the Jews. So, what was Jesus saying when he tied the Lord’s Supper to Passover? Well, let’s take a look.

First, it means that in Lord’s Supper *we are reminded that we were once slaves to sin.* This is crystal clear in the New Testament, especially in Romans, chapter 6. This is why it should be impossible for any Christian to lack humility or be self-righteous. This is why confession is part of our ritual as Christians. It’s not that God doesn’t know. It’s because we need to be reminded of what we once were.

Second, the Lord’s Supper cause us and future generations to remember that *Christ brought us out of slavery.* Here, the parallel to Passover is rich. It was because of the blood of a lamb without blemish spread on a piece of wood that death passed over us. Here’s the point of Romans 6, **“For we know that our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.”** As we take communion today, experience the freedom of forgiveness you now have in Christ.

Third, as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, let us *remember our identity as the body of Christ*. We are not solitary Christians. Breaking communion with the body of Christ should break our hearts. This act acknowledges that while we have political differences, cultural differences, different opinions, preferences, sports teams, spiritual gifts or all the ways we divide ourselves, we have one thing that’s the most important thing in common—our common trust in Jesus Christ. This is our primary identity.

But not just those of us who are in this room right now. Our identity extends all the way back to the Exodus and the first Passover, through the first Lord’s Supper and the Apostles and Church Fathers. We participate in a ritual with all Christians throughout all of history. Their story is your story. Their freedom is your freedom. When you do this, you embrace that history.

Finally, we take communion to remember that we don’t just remember an event in history, but to *remember the character of the God we serve* that provided the feast of Passover for Israel, the Lord’s Supper for us, and will one day return to share in the great feast in the Kingdom of God. At the Apostle Paul in his great passage talking about the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:26, “**For whenever you eat this break and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”**

As we partake in the Lord’s Supper today, I invite you to look at it through that lens. *You were once a slave to sin, Christ set you free and now we celebrate our common identity and look forward to the day when we eat this feast with Jesus himself in the Kingdom of God.*