

January 7

Lordship

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

(Ephesians 5:23)

It may seem unusual to begin a communion meditation by posting this verse. There is a great deal of controversy in the modern church about the relationship of husband and wife. But we may also recognize that this verse contains some information about the relationship of Christ and his church:

- Christ is the head of the church. This is parallel to the role the husband played in marriage in the time of the early church. His authority over the church is unquestioned — or should be.
- The church is the body of Christ. We say that a married couple are “one flesh”; the same applies to the body of Christ. We are the visible, physical representation of Jesus Christ on earth.
- He is the Savior. It is a fact that modern Christianity does not very much like the idea of having a Lord, but we are quite content to have a Savior.

The Lordship of Christ is an undisputed fact; if you do not accept it, you are not really a Christian. We might then ask how Christ achieved this.

- Primarily, Christ achieved this by his sacrifice on the cross. Without the atonement, Christianity makes little sense. It is by his sacrifice that the church proclaims the love of God for all mankind.
- His Lordship is also by right of creation. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the church was first brought into being on Pentecost. In short, he created the church and it belongs to him.

If you will glance down to verse 26 you will see the reason he did this: his purpose was to make the church holy. We are to be holy as God is holy. This is accomplished by our repentance and his forgiveness.

So it is that we come to the memorial of that sacrifice. In the cup we find the blood of Christ; in the bread we find his body. But would you please remember the purpose of that sacrifice: to make the church holy. Thus it is that he asks us to examine ourselves, so that we might properly repent and reestablish love where it has been broken. We are to be holy, in imitation of our Lord.

Be holy, for He is holy.

January 14

Fault

One of the common failings of human character is that we are prone to say, “it’s not my fault.” When everyone is searching for a solution, or should be, we hear all of the excuses why it’s not my fault. See if any of these sound familiar to you:

- It is not my fault — my parents didn’t raise me right, I grew up in the wrong environment, the directions were printed in Japanese, I can resist anything but temptation, or my wife forgot to tell me not to do that.
- Well, I may be a miserable human being of the worst possible type, but at least I’m better than... somebody. And if I’m not better than he is, I can at least point the finger at him.
- I think I have a loophole here. The Scripture clearly states, in Second Hezekiah 3:16,...
- You just don’t understand. Each of us creates his own morality in his perception of the universe. It may look wrong to you, but not to me.

This is connected closely with a lack of repentance. The first step in repentance is that the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin — that is to say, it is your fault. But that’s just the first step. The second step is the Holy Spirit convicts you of judgment to come — whether now, or at the Day of Judgment. For those of us who are veteran procrastinators, this is most inconvenient. It means we must do something now, instead of “someday.”

Once convicted, there are two types of repentance. There is repentance before your fellow man — do what you can to make amends, tell them it’s your fault and ask their forgiveness. There is also repentance before God. There is nothing we, as mortal human beings, can do to make amends before God. God is perfect and we are not. So it is that we were provided with a way to repent before God and have it be effective.

Communion reminds us of that method. Making amends often means making a sacrifice of some sort or another, and communion reminds us of the atonement sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This was not just a permission slip; the sacrifice of Christ was very costly. The only perfect human being ever to walk this planet voluntarily gave his life so that you and I might be forgiven.

The sacrifice on the Cross gave to us the symbols we take in communion. The bread represents his body, broken for us. The cup represents his blood, shed for us. We commemorate the sacrifices of those who preserve our freedom, defend our country or reach out and rescue those in peril. How much more then, should we commemorate the sacrifice which makes us holy before God? So it is that we are commanded to take communion in a “worthy manner.” Remember, this represents your repentance. Perhaps you should now contemplate what you should repent yourself, and plan the action to do just that.

January 21

Crosses in the Desert

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

(1 Corinthians 10:1-6)

The locals call it Dead Man's Curve. It's out in the Mojave desert. It doesn't look much like a dangerous railroad crossing. The road runs along the south side of the railroad track for many miles and then quickly crosses the tracks and runs along the north side for many miles. The authorities have recently installed modern railroad crossing lights — and in the process removed the plain white crosses that used to grace the intersection. Each cross had a name on it of someone who was loved, and was killed at this crossing. It was not uncommon to see fresh flowers at the foot of a cross.

Every one of those crosses was a painful reminder of the death of someone who was loved. Was it someone who was trying to race the train to the intersection? Was it someone who just wasn't paying attention? The toll eventually grew so high that official warning signs and lights have been installed. Until they were installed, the crosses served as an unofficial warning: this place is deceptive — beware.

Paul gives us a similar warning in First Corinthians. He makes an interesting pair of parallels. The ancient Israelites were "baptized into Moses" and they also consumed spiritual food and drink. These two are parallels to the Christian faith in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the ceremonial celebration of Passover is a forerunner of communion. So we see here some parallels between them and us. So what happened? They started well, but soon went astray after foreign gods. One such God was a fertility goddess — which of course involves sex. There were other gods you went to for prosperity. Sex and prosperity, does that sound familiar today? That's why Paul tells us this is an example to us. Most of them didn't make it to the promised land because they went astray in the desert.

We bring this up because communion is a ritual of remembrance. It is spiritual food and drink to us. Its main purpose is to remind just of the love that Christ gave us on the cross. We are sinners; we are forgiven because of the blood of Christ. In that sense, communion is meant to be a positive, uplifting experience. But note that we are taught to examine ourselves before taking communion. That's not an afterthought; it's designed into communion. You don't want to wind up with your bones bleaching in the desert of sin. Therefore, examine yourself. Do you worship at the altar of sex? The altar of money? Or worse yet, the altar of pride?

But be of good cheer — even the bones bleaching in the desert can be raised to life. Ezekiel was sent to the dry bones to call them back to life. Christ was sent to you that you might have eternal life. Heed the warning signs, but remember that your Lord has conquered both sin and death.

January 28

Revealed

At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. "Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.
(Matthew 11:25-26)

Just to provide you with a little context, Jesus is commenting on the revelation he has just given the disciples of the day of judgment, concerning how various cities will be treated. It is curious that this type of knowledge is described as something hidden from the wise and revealed to infants. The fact is, however, you cannot truly know God by analysis — only by revelation. If he does not choose to reveal himself to you, no matter how much you search you cannot know him. So then: how does the Christian prepare himself to have God revealed?

- It helps if you're listening.
- As we learned in the Sermon on the Mount, it is the pure in heart who see God.
- Note that Christ begins his prayer with praise. It is the proper attitude of the human being towards God.

All these things add up to that virtue which we know as humility.

It is a paradox. We would expect the wise and knowledgeable to be the fountains of knowledge about God; he tells us that he explicitly withholds that from them. This is so that they will know that He is searching them out and found them, not the other way around. Instead, he makes his wisdom known to little children and the infants — in spirit. This conforms nicely with the title he most cherishes: Father. What father would not share with his children? In so doing this glorifies God; it points us to our heavenly Father. By doing this, he reveals himself to the largest possible number of people. Not many of us have a PhD; most of us have ears to hear and eyes to see.

A primary example of this is communion, as it is rooted in the Cross. Paul tells us that the cross is foolishness to the wise. So it is that communion is indeed a very simple thing. The elements that we partake in are representative of his body and blood. It is a simple picture. It carries a simple message: "for God so loved the world..." His atonement is our salvation. And in all of this he makes one simple request: that when you do this, you do it in remembrance of Him. It is not the stuff of brilliant worldly wisdom; it is the essence of divine love.

February 4

Ouija board (naval version)

The title of this communion meditation may disturb you. But please be assured we are not talking about the type of Ouija board used in séances, with its air of black magic. No, this Ouija board is found only on aircraft carriers. If you were to look at one you would see a scale model of the flight deck and hanger deck of the aircraft carrier. It's about 6 feet long and 2 ½ feet wide, and covered with color-coded templates of aircraft, also to scale. The handlers of the aircraft carrier use this device to plan where they're going to put the next airplane coming aboard, how things are to be moved about and where is there room in the hangar to stick the next one. The system has been around since World War II and has changed very little in that time except to reflect the introduction of the angled flight deck. It takes several people to operate the system, as things happen fast on aircraft carrier. But even so, the device is a model of simplicity which does what it is supposed to do quite well.

The urge to fix that which is not broken is a very strong one in human beings. This is particularly true among human beings who program computers; they are always of the opinion that they could do a better job than any other system. And so it is that for the last 17 years at least there have been several attempts to replace the Ouija board with a computerized system. Each of them has reached the fleet and been rejected as not being of sufficient advantage to replace the Ouija board. But we keep on trying.

Why is it that these attempts to replace the Ouija board have failed? Consider the characteristics of this system:

- The Ouija board is a very cheap system. You can make one out of cardboard, though most of them now are clear plastic.
- The thing works. It does everything it is expected to do in a manner so simple that even a beginner can understand it.
- It's also very resistant to battle damage. One of the first things that happens in combat is that electrical systems fail; the power goes out, in other words. With this system you pick up a flashlight and continue.

The same kind of reasoning explains why we have Communion in much the same form that the early church did. Consider:

- It is a cheap system. There is no requirement to have gold communion cups or silver serving trays. Bread and wine are commonly available throughout the world. It is a rare church that hasn't the money to have communion.
- It is resistant to "battle damage." By this we mean changes in theology. For example, many churches shifted from the use of wine to the use of grape juice — with apparently little effect.

- The system works. Each and every time we participate, communion reminds us of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The bread is his body; the cup is his blood — and we are reminded of his great love for his church, shown on the Cross.

February 11

School Yard

Matthew 27:35-44

It is a common experience among children of military personnel: another year, another cross-country (or around the world) move. You get to go to a new school. (Your author went to seven different schools in five years for his elementary grades.) In that new school, within the first week, you will get beaten up by a number of the boys. The administration condones this as being the best way of putting the new kid in his place. But if you could watch such a beating, you would see that the other children crowd around and yell insults at the kid being beaten up. It's a vicious form of entertainment — just like wrestling on television.

This custom mimics, in a small way, the sufferings of our Lord on the cross. Crucifixion was considered an ordinary way to deal with a dangerous political opponent — and assure the rest of the population just who is in charge here. It is a deliberate public spectacle where insults and mockery are expected from anyone and everyone. The religious leaders showed no mercy, nor did the general public. It is an interesting thought that most of the mockery was done by common, ordinary people. That is a mirror in which we can see our own reflections. If you look inside your heart of hearts, can you honestly say you wouldn't have gone along with the crowd?

But of more importance is Christ's reaction to this. First, he gives us an example of suffering without complaining. He does not scream back that this is unfair, which it is. He suffered in silence, a virtue which is often unappreciated except in its absence. We do not often preach this, but his example is a very powerful one for those who are suffering unfairly, in pain, or for reasons unknown to them.

Beyond that, it is the great example of forgiveness. How much he loves us! Some of those people who were mocking him on that day would become members of the first Christian Church on Pentecost. The shame of that mockery was wiped away by the power of the Holy Spirit in the formation of the church. When we remember that the church is the bride of Christ, and the example for our marriages, we can see quite easily that when your spouse yells at you, the right response is forgiveness.

Communion reminds us of how suffering is to be borne. We see in Christ's suffering the way in which he would like to have us suffer also, whether we are suffering for his sake or because of disease, injury or other misfortune. He showed us that we should stand up to suffering confident in the love of God. It is also an example of forgiveness, especially useful in marriage. Perhaps most important, it is a mirror in which we can see our own sins. Therefore, we are required to examine ourselves before taking communion — so that we might see our sinful nature, and repent.

February 18

Hard Teaching

John 6:48-60

The teaching of Jesus Christ in John chapter 6 is among the most difficult in the entire Bible. Perhaps this is one reason it is not frequently cited in communion meditations; it's hard to understand and is the subject of controversy. But I believe there is one way we can look at it which will help us understand why Christ use these words. Consider the problem, no doubt known to Jesus Christ, of translating the Scriptures into many different languages. There are certain things you cannot say in some languages, simply because there are not methods or grammar to say them. So in this passage Christ proclaims himself to be the bread of life — and we can understand that in three different ways.

- The first is the one of physical reality. He is the sacrificial lamb, sacrificed at the time prescribed in the Old Testament law, who takes away the sins of the world. Many Christians understand this to mean that the elements of communion are transubstantiated into the physical body and blood of Christ. It's one way of looking at it, but in any event he is the sacrificial lamb, physically, in reality.
- Others say communion as worship and symbolic communication – but please, it is not “just a metaphor.” He intended to attach to communion the significance of sacrifice in the Old Testament sense. It is certain that no other meal has nearly such influence over who you become.
- On the deepest level, you are what you eat. By the taking of communion you feed the Holy Spirit within you, changing you gradually to become more and more a mature Christian. Just like natural growth, there is spiritual growth and you have to feed it. The Holy Spirit grows within you when fed the bread of heaven.

What was the reaction to this? “This is a hard teaching.” It's a common reaction to blame the teacher for the difficulty of the subject. The reason I flunked the test is that the questions were too hard. But that's not why this is a hard teaching. In this instance, it's because the teaching forces a decision: is this man of miracles and obvious sense really who he says he is? He never said he was a great teacher; he said he was God in the flesh. It's the kind of statement that eliminates the fence you were hoping to sit on. There is no fence. There is no place to sit. There is only room to take a stand.

There is a caution that comes with this. Many churches regulate who is permitted to take communion, but one thing is clear: if you are not a real follower of Jesus the Christ, you should not participate. To do so is to lie to the people around you and more importantly to lie to God. You can deceive the people around you, but it's not that easy with God.

But if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, don't worry that the teaching is hard. Rather, be obedient to his commands. Examine yourself before taking communion, making such plans of repentance as might be necessary. Then with all honesty and sincerity, take and eat the bread of life — and grow.

February 25

Treasure

(Note to the reader: your author has for many years worn an eye patch over his right eye. Every five-year-old in America knows that makes me a pirate. Pardon me if the motif seems strange to you, but I live with it every day. Let's see what kind of story we might be able to tell)

Stories need a beginning. Let's suppose your great uncle has died, and you, being his only living relative, have the task of cleaning out his little house. Up in the attic you find a chest. Not just any chest, a pirate chest — with the treasure map inside. There's also a small bag of gold and the notation that there's lots more at the point where X marks the spot. Your action plan is very simple: use the treasure that is in that chest to obtain the rest of the treasure as marked on the map. You use what you have to get what you can. Naturally, you're going to be paying a great deal of attention to that map.

Communion is very much like that map. Stories need a middle as well as a beginning, and communion introduces you to some very central things.

- It introduces you to the central act of Christianity: the atonement. The death of Christ upon the cross is the price paid for your salvation. There is no greater demonstration of God's love for mankind.
- It introduces you to the central person of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth. The story of the church is the story of Christ; it is his teaching we follow.
- It introduces you to the central community of Christianity, the church. Communion is taken only within the church; it is almost the definition of a Christian that he is one who takes communion.

Stories need an end too. The map starts your story, but the story ends with you obtaining the treasure. If you write your book well enough, there's a lot of action in that. Communion points us to the end of the Christian story as well. Indeed, we could say there are two endings.

- The first is the story of Christ that ends at the resurrection of our Lord. When he leaves the tomb he shows us his mastery over death. He is the greatest conqueror who ever walked the earth.
- More than that, the story of Christ will end again at his return, to judge the living and the dead.

We are taught to examine ourselves at communion. Is there anything in your life that is not in the power of the resurrection? Is there anything in your life that you don't want to tell him when he returns to judge the living and the dead? Think on these things, then partake.

March 4

Father of Lights

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.
(James 1:17)

The phrase, "Father of lights," occurs only in this verse. It is an exquisite description of God the Father. As one writer put it,

God is the Father of all lights: the light of the natural world, the sun, the moon and stars, shining in the heavens; the light of reason and conscience; the light of His law; the light of prophecy, shining in a dark place; the light of the Gospel, shining throughout the world; the light of apostles, martyrs, and evangelists, preaching the Gospel to all nations; the light of the Holy Ghost, shining in our hearts; the light of the heavenly city: God is the Father of them all. He is the everlasting Father of the everlasting Son, who is the Light of the world.

Perhaps you haven't considered it this way, but communion is one of those "good and perfect gifts."

- It is good first because there is no evil in it. More than that it serves the purposes of Almighty God in bringing those of us who are Christians to become more and more like Christ. Metaphorically, we feed on Christ and become more like him.
- It is perfect. The meaning in this case is, of course, that it is perfect for a particular task. It is exactly suited to the purpose of causing us to remember the sacrifice of Christ. In the bread we see the body of Christ; in the cup we see the blood. Simple in design, it is powerful in effect.
- The ancient church would have seen this as being a good thing, and good things come "from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit." It starts with the grace of God the Father, it was instituted by Christ the Son and its effect in our hearts is moved by the Spirit.

Given this, what should we do? May I suggest these things?

- Accept the light that God has given you. If the Spirit is prompting you to repent, listen and learn and do as you are prompted.
- Know that He won't change his mind. He doesn't shift his opinion; he doesn't shift his law and he doesn't shift his love.

Then, with all the reverence of a man handling a sacred thing, take communion in a worthy manner.

March 11

Worth What?

The treasurer of the largest Russian Orthodox church in Los Angeles had a puzzle on his hands. About once a month there would appear in the offering plates a solid gold coin. The coin was minted during the reign of the Czars, a government which no longer exists. It was a minor inconvenience to collect these coins and take them to a dealer to exchange them for dollars.

One day he found out from whom those coins were coming. One of the elderly gentleman in the congregation, a man who lived in a very poor section of town in a shabby apartment, died. As treasurer for the church, he received the phone call from the apartment manager asking if the church would be so kind as to clear out the apartment. The clothes would be given to charity and if any sign of relatives could be found then memorabilia would be distributed.

Imagine the shock on his face when someone looked under the bed — and saw the gold coins. Lots of gold coins. Bags and bags and bags of gold coins. Had the man realized what they were worth, he would've been quite a wealthy man.

Sometimes that's how we see things. Things which are familiar, we take for granted. No doubt the old man reasoned that since no one else was passing out gold coins to pay for things, the coins must be worthless — just souvenirs of the old times in Russia. If you think about it, we're pretty good at spotting things that won't work. It's a matter of experience. But spotting something that nobody else thinks will work but you can see it working, that's a matter of imagination. We go through our lives with our assumptions being blithely unchallenged. Sometimes that's a rather pricey attitude.

Some of us look at communion something like that. It's something we do on Sunday morning; it fills a little time around the sermon; it always looks the same. But picture it as Christ wanted you to see it: "this is my body." Remember what they did to his body. They flogged them with a whip, then they nailed him to a cross and stuck his side with a spear. "This is my blood." The blood dripped from where the whips struck and from where the nails pierced. It was gruesome, and it was unjust.

But — it is by his stripes we are healed; it is by his blood that we are saved. Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest atonement sacrifice of all time. He died a horrible death that you and I might live. Our entrance to heaven is not based on what good guys we are, but what a sacrifice he is.

Communion is not "just a ritual." It's not something we put in just to fill a little time; it is the core of worship. It reminds us every time we partake that he is worthy of our praise and all the glory we can give him. Look with the eyes of imagination; challenge your assumptions of what this is really about. See what Christ told you to remember. Examine your heart, and partake in a worthy manner.

March 18

Cup of Demons

First Corinthians 10:21

The problem that Paul is addressing here is one which Christians have not had directly for the last 1500 years. Most of the people in his time were pagans, and it was a common practice that they would sacrifice meat on the altar of one of their pagan gods or goddesses. It was considered perfectly ordinary for the priest or priestess then to take the meat, after a small amount had been burnt, and sell it in the marketplace. When you went down to buy meat, you couldn't tell the difference between meat that was sacrificed to an idol and meat which was procured in the ordinary butcher shop way. In another passage Paul gives the advised that you should go ahead and eat whatever is put in front of you, without asking whether or not it was sacrificed. But if somebody tells you it was, don't eat it.

That's not what he's talking about here. He's talking about people who participate in the Lord's Supper and then go out and partake of the benefits of sacrifices to idols. The problem, if you can't see it, is simply one of hypocrisy. A Christian's liberty is often curtailed because it presents the wrong impression to a non-Christian nearby. Yes, that means we care what "they" think. It may seem inconvenient, but it might also be an action which would bring someone to Christ.

There is a modern equivalent of this; in fact, there are many. They are rather more specific to your personal situation. There is, for example, a place that a good Christian should not go — let's suppose it's a strip club — and joining "the boys" tells them that you don't take your Christianity very seriously. Whether or not you could go there I leave to you; whether or not you should go there with your buddies is another question entirely. It may not be a place; it may be something you do. It's something that shows that you have made a choice in favor of the world's way of doing things. But you have already made that choice. Only Christians should take communion.

The Christian is to be "not of this world." There is no sitting on the fence; you're either a Christian or you aren't. Communion is the meal that proclaims you are a Christian. If you proclaim you are a Christian on Sunday and then on Monday through Saturday do with the world's way, you are a hypocrite. Your fellow Christians might not see it, but your coworkers and friends will. You can't do both.

Therefore, consider well what you do during the week before you take communion. Jesus, during his earthly ministry, reserved his physical anger for those who were hypocrites. He is no more fond of them today than then. Taking the cup of his blood and the bread of his body says that you proclaim yourself a Christian — and not just on Sunday morning. There may even be those among us who should let this communion pass by until they have reconciled with the Lord. For the rest of us, it is always good to examine ourselves and take in a worthy manner.

March 25

Meal of the Wayfaring Stranger

Matthew 8:20

Jesus *said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."
(Matthew 8:20 NASB)

It is his favorite title: "the Son of Man." This is the first instance in which it appears in the New Testament. It is a title loaded with significance.

- Although he often uses it as a substitute for the word Messiah, he does so in his representation of man — "the second Adam," as Paul called him. He uses it to emphasize his humanity, so that we would know he is perfectly God and perfectly man.
- In Daniel 7:13 we see the use in the Old Testament — as the Messiah is brought in before the "Ancient of Days" and given the kingdom that will never fall.
- It's also interesting to note that this incident happened just before Jesus calmed the sea. He proclaims his poverty and then shows his power.

We see here the material side of Jesus. If he wants to know the time, he looks at the sun — not at his Rolex. If he gets tired, there is no motorhome or five star hotel available. The creator of the universe comes to us in a voluntary lifestyle of poverty. Perhaps he was setting an example that would make sure that no one among the poor would be turned away from the church's door. God himself was not ashamed to be one of the poor, and therefore the poor are always welcome in his house.

We see this in communion as well. The meal is a model of simplicity. The passages which describe it to us are only a few verses long. This comes from its roots in Passover. The bread was to be unleavened because there was so little time to make it; no time for the yeast to rise. It was to be eaten by people who were dressed for a journey; don't kick your sandals off. It is also simple in that its message is blunt and to the point: it symbolizes the atoning death of Jesus on the cross. Even in this he reminds us of his poverty:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.
(2 Corinthians 8:9 NASB)

Therefore, we should reflect on these things. He came in poverty that even the poor might be saved. He died on the cross for all of us, atoning for our sins. Remember these things.

April 1 (Easter)

Faithful Steward

Luke 12:42-48

It eventually happens to most of us. We meet someone who is sure he has a perfect proof that God cannot possibly exist. It goes something like this:

- You tell me that God is good. He is 100% good; there is no “dark side” to him.
- You tell me that God is omnipotent — he can do anything he wants.
- Then this God of yours could erase evil from the planet if he really wanted to. And being good, he would really want to. So therefore your God doesn’t exist.

There is a simple answer to this. The people who study apologetics in detail don’t use this very much; but it has the virtue of being short as well as simple. Either:

- God is not good, OR
- God is not omnipotent, OR
- God isn’t finished with us yet.

God the Merciful is waiting so that a few more of us might be saved. His patience will run out one day, we do not know when. But when it does, we will see the Day of Judgment. God will judge the living and the dead. He will do so on the basis of what people knew. Those who are experienced Christians who really foul things up are in for a nasty surprise. Those who are completely ignorant and did the best they could will be punished appropriately. We will all be judged on what we knew.

But how do God’s judgment and salvation relate to each other? Judgment reflects his righteousness. His salvation reflects his mercy. These two things touch at the Cross.

- The horrible price that was paid for our sins—the life of Jesus, the sinless man, the Christ.
- The unfailing grace of God, who sent his Son to that Cross.

This is what Christ commands you to remember as you partake of communion. It is not to be done lightly. As you take communion this morning, remember that horrible price — and the unfailing grace that price brought to us. There is no greater love.

April 8

Parade

Basic Training in the United States Army is not, in general, a pleasant experience. It is a memorable one, but not particularly pleasant. One aspect of this training happens on a bleary-eyed, “Zero Dark Thirty,” type of morning. Somewhere in the vast pyramid of command someone has called for a parade. As it usually does not matter which particular group of soldiers is on parade, the task falls to those lowest in the food chain — basic trainees.

Everything in the uniform that can be polished must be polished. The shoes should be absolute mirrors; the brass buttons and insignia should glisten blindingly. To make sure that this happens a sergeant will be assigned to inspect each of the trainees. The slightest deficiency will be pointed out (in a loud and demeaning voice, of course) and all these deficiencies will need to be remedied immediately. Once this is accomplished, you will be lined up to prove that you can march together like robots — altogether in step, leading off with the same left foot.

The original intention of such marching was to move a unit on the battlefield as one unit, not a gaggle of men. The process is supposed to help develop the morale, unity and team spirit of the organization. If suffering together does that, this is quite a successful technique.

Of course, this is part of Basic Training. One of the expected results of such training is that the soldier will learn to do his own self-inspection. Once you get past Basic Training, you are expected to be able to do this without too much fuss. Notice, however, the standards of performance and uniform are not slackened; you still have to meet them. It’s just that you do it without a sergeant screaming at you. They call it self-discipline. The best way to do this seems to be to have your uniform always ready for parade, with only the slightest actions required to get it exactly right. That way, you are always ready to go on parade. The idea is that this should rub off and you should also be always ready to fight.

Communion bears some resemblance to this. It is a form of self-inspection; we are told that a “man should examine himself” before taking communion. No one stands over you while you do this, but you should be doing it. Should you happen to be looking for the things you should examine, might we suggest these three:

- What is your view of God the Father? Do you see him as the awesome, holy and sovereign God or do you think of him as your buddy? If you want your prayers answered, it’s best to know to whom you are talking.
- Do you display gratitude (and wonder) when you contemplate the Cross on which Christ died? Even though you do this every week, it should not become ho-hum.
- How well do you display hospitality towards the Holy Spirit? Are you open to his leadings to improve your spiritual life, or is your care for him something that is “Sunday only?”

Examine yourself; take and eat the body and blood of Christ — and grow in the faith.

April 15

Fear the Lord

Have you ever considered what it is that we say we *are* when we partake of Communion? The act of taking communion tells other people what kind of people we claim to be. Specifically,

- We proclaim the unity of the church — and our own personal unity with the church.¹
- Similarly, we proclaim that we are not in union with the world, or its ways. We are “in the world but not of the world.”²
- We proclaim the death of Christ — and by implication we proclaim the atonement of Christ, his gracious gift of salvation. This logically includes the resurrection of Christ.

We do this in the spirit of self judgment. We are attempting to avoid the judgment of the Lord at the last day, as well as accepting his judgment which results in his discipline.³ We are not claiming perfection; to accept his discipline is to acknowledge that we needed it. It is this point, that we are attempting to escape Judgment Day unharmed, that also implies that we are not hypocrites but penitents.

But Judgment for what? Malachi 3:5 gives us a pretty good list:

- His first item is adultery. If you want a sin that clearly points out the separation of the Christian from the world, this would probably be the best one today. Our society tells us that it’s not wrong; it’s just simply “an affair.” Since we have no control over our own sexuality, romance happens. The world asks, “What’s the problem?” We reply that Christians keep their promises, even those made to their spouse.
- He next brings up the question of being an oppressor. There are two simple examples here which we can bring up to date very easily. The first is the wage earner. Perhaps you don’t know this, but immigrants are often defrauded of their wages by the simple use of the threat of calling immigration. The other example is the widow and orphan – defrauding those who can’t afford a lawyer to fight back.
- Finally, he brings up those who “turn aside the alien.” There are many aliens in our country; some of them are illegal aliens. Do we turn our noses up at them, or do we treat them like human beings?

All these things have one common thread: they show that the one who commits the sins has no fear of the Lord. For if you fear the Lord you know that he will hold you accountable for what you did to your wife; he is the defender of the immigrant, the alien and the widow and the orphan. If you fear the Lord then you fear what he will do to correct you.

¹ First Corinthians 10:17

² First Corinthians 10:21

³ First Corinthians 11:28-32

So what should we do about it?

- The prescription in communion is self-examination which must obviously be followed by repentance. That's the first thing we should do about it.
- Note please, that we are to take communion "in memory of Christ." In so doing we recognize the atonement sacrifice and the resurrection. Do this deliberately; point your mind at the sacrifice he made.
- As you are able, proclaim the Lord's death, atonement and resurrection not just in communion but in your ordinary daily conversation. Evangelism is personal.

You have this morning the privilege of participating in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a sacred privilege; granted freely to those who are in obedience, following his commands. But if you take this and still continue to be one who does not fear the Lord, then you should fear the Judgment Day to come.

April 22

Heaven Laughs

Psalm 2

One of the reasons that the Bible continues to give us good advice and moral guidance is that the starting point of our problems is not our technology, but the human heart. Reading through Psalm two you cannot help but be struck as to how familiar the phrasings of those who wish to throw off the Lord sound to us today. “We are liberated,” we proclaim, “and we have thrown off the chains of God because of our great and superior wisdom today.”

- For example: marriage. In many churches today it is a rare thing to hear a sermon on the subject of adultery. We’ve had it hammered into our heads that it’s not adultery, it’s a “romantic affair.” You can’t avoid them so you might as well enjoy them. The pain of marriage breaking up is somehow not mentioned. You feel guilty? See your psychiatrist.
- For example: confession. Christians were taught at one time that they were to confess their sins, one to another. Confession preceded repentance, which preceded forgiveness. Now we hold to “plausible deniability.” If we can come up with an excuse which just might be true we’re off the hook.
- For example: abortions — they make money which somehow finds its way into the pockets of needy politicians. Those politicians then mandate that you must pay for abortions.

We, the church, go quietly into that black night where our moral teachings no longer differ from the moral teachings of the world. But have you ever considered what God thinks of this?

He laughs. He is not worried about it; no more than the elephant is worried when the flea tells him, “watch out! I’m a karate expert.”

So what is God going to do about this? He has already stated what he’s going to do and taken the first step. On the hill of Calvary he has installed his king, and by his body and blood we are forgiven. That King will someday take his rightful rule about which we are warned. Ultimately this provides us with the choice: those who want to object to God’s laws and those who accept and obey God’s laws. It doesn’t matter what most people think. I personally think gravity is excessive and that’s the reason I’m overweight. Somehow, God is not impressed with that thought.

In communion, you recognize that first step as having been made. By his body, by his blood you are forgiven and you have accepted that forgiveness. Taking those elements in communion tells the world as well as God that you believe and that you will obey. Most people know that communion proclaims forgiveness, but don’t you see that forgiveness must be followed by obedience?

The psalmist adds one thought here which is most encouraging — that all who take refuge in him are going to be most blessed. Therefore do not throw off the chains of obedience only to find that those chains were keeping you out of hell.

April 29

Your Son Lives

John 4:45-53

Many Christians will tell you that communion is a personal encounter with Jesus. They see it as a time and place where Jesus can talk to them. It is also a time and place in which we proclaim to the world what we believe.

- We proclaim that we believe in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- We proclaim that we believe that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried in the tomb.
- We believe that by the power of God he rose from the dead in bodily form.
- We believe that Christianity is not a solo flight; we are in communion with the other saints around us.
- We believe that Christ is coming to judge the living and the dead, with forgiveness for those who believe.
- We believe in the resurrection of all mankind, some to eternal life and others to eternal condemnation.

But it is not sufficient for you to acknowledge all these things (and more; but these will do.) There are actions that you are obliged to take because you believe.

- Actions such as obedience to his commands.
- Actions such as forgiveness of others, so that we might be forgiven.

In short, it is not sufficient to believe alone. You have to act on it. Let us take a look at an example of this principle:

Therefore He came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and was imploring Him to come down and heal his son; for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe." The royal official *said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus *said to him, "Go; your son lives." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off. As he was now going down, his slaves met him, saying that his son was living. So he inquired of them the hour when he began to get better. Then they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." So the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said to him, "Your son lives"; and he himself believed and his whole household. (John 4:46-53 NASB)

The royal official is an example of how this should be done. He showed faith in the fact that he went to Jesus — a two day trip. Jesus challenges him; after all, what does this official have to lose. But when Jesus complains the man returns to his original point; he wants Jesus to come with him to heal his son. Jesus replies in a rather unexpected way: he tells him to go, for his son lives.

The man passes the test. He is obedient to the command of Christ, and he goes. On the way back home he finds out that his son has been cured. He now has a belief that is confirmed by the facts. It is an example for us; our faith should be sufficiently strong that we will act and await the reply of God.

One of the best mentors C. S. Lewis ever had was George MacDonald. He expressed it this way:

"Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said 'Do it' or abstained because he said 'Do not do it'. It is simply absurd to say you believe . . . if you do not do anything he tells you." The extent to which we are willing to obey is a useful barometer for measuring the depth of our relationship with Christ.

Let's look at some of the "DO's":

- Do you tell others about Christ?
- Do you pray, consistently, for others?
- Do you visit those who are sick, or in prison?

And we have some "DON'Ts":

- What about adultery? Is it forbidden, or just a casual affair do you?
- Do envy and greed drive your life?
- What about pride? Does everyone around you know why your nose is in the air?

Mean what you say in communion; take action. Run your life the way Jesus would have you run it.

May 6

Walk in the Light

1 John 1:7

but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

(1 John 1:7 NASB)

the

Communion expresses many things about God. But it also expresses something about us. We are in fellowship with one another. The Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, is used in another area of the Scriptures (First Corinthians 10:16) to describe the communion ceremony itself. Notice the use of the word “we.” Communion is not a solo expression, but it is something that is proclaimed in agreement with your Christian brothers and sisters. And what do we agree on?

- The death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ.
- The power of the atoning blood of Christ, effective for us. We are forgiven.
- The imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ to the earth.

There is, however, a condition for this — an “IF.” We must walk in the light given to us by the Light of the World. Throughout most of the history of the church, this duty of every Christian has been described as, “the imitation of Christ.” More recently it has been described as, “What Would Jesus Do?” We are to do this, of course, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

This has an interesting effect. It’s not something you can do in the dark, but only in the light. Therefore, the world is going to see it. So it is said that they will know we are disciples by the way we love one another. The world tests the truth of our Christianity by the way they see us behave.

Beyond that, there is another aspect to this: God rewards those who earnestly seek him. As the psalmist put it:

How blessed are the people who know the joyful sound! O LORD, they walk in the light of Your countenance.

(Psalms 89:15 NASB)

The core of this matter is in forgiveness. In communion we acknowledge the presence of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we acknowledge the blood we therefore acknowledge that we needed that blood for our forgiveness; it cleanses us from all sin. (There is only one qualification you have to meet before you can become a Christian: you have to be a sinner first. Some of us — blows on fingernails, polishes them on shirt — are exceedingly well-qualified.) Therefore, in communion, let us proclaim together:

- We are sinners, in need of salvation.
- We are saved by the blood of Christ, and by nothing else. Grace alone prevails.
- As a result, we walk in the light given to us by the Light of the World.

May 13

Wedding

One of the most pleasant times that the church experiences occurs when two of its members are married at the church. It is a time of joy as well as a time of transition. As a part of the ceremony, many churches include serving communion to the wedded couple. Some churches even serve communion to the entire congregation during the ceremony. As one of the very few rituals in the church, communion is well-suited to be used in the marriage ceremony.

Communion reminds us of our past. As communion came from Passover, both of them are a sign of God's protection. Passover reminded the ancient Jew of his rescue from Egypt; communion reminds you of your protection from sin in the forgiveness given at the cross. More than that, communion is in a unique way a sign of God's righteousness. It reminds us of the atonement sacrifice. If there is no sin, there need be no atonement. If there is no righteousness, there is no sin. Therefore Communion tells us that God is righteous and takes action to see that righteousness prevails. But most of all communion is evidence of God's love for us. Righteousness says that atonement must happen; love says that God provides the sacrifice.

Communion also works in the present. The husband promises to love his bride as Christ loved his church. That is a tremendous promise; Christ loved his church to the point of death. We see also in this the picture of the church is the bride of Christ, always described as radiant and beautiful. The roles of husband and wife are different but inextricably entwined. Communion reminds us of this union; the union of marriage between a man and woman is to be as strong as the union of Christ and his church.

Communion tells us of our future. We are reminded by the picture of the cross that in this world we will have trouble. The question is not "if" but "what kind?" By partaking of communion you remind yourself of the suffering that Christ had, and remember that as his imitators we shall likewise suffer in some ways. But communion is a reminder also of the unity of our church; those gathered at the wedding ceremony are mostly members of the local church. By their attendance, cheerful faces, and shared communion they are pleased to support this new family in the church.

As always, to partake of communion is to tell the world that you do so until Christ returns. By partaking of communion you proclaim to one and all that you believe in the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ. So at the very least, communion sets before the newly wedded couple the truth that the troubles of this life ultimately will be wiped away, with every tear dried. Such a thought is great joy. As you partake this morning, do so in great joy, anticipating your Lord's soon return.

May 27

Great Communion

Take a short flight of fancy with me, will you? Let us suppose that you have been tasked with providing the greatest communion service ever known. No effort, no expense is too great; you have all the time you need to get it ready. Think about the materials:

- Would gold be sufficient for your communion trays and communion cups? Perhaps you would prefer platinum or some other precious metal.
- What about the wine (or, as you prefer, grape juice). What type of wine? How rare is it? What vintage is it? What is the ideal taste for it?
- And the bread? What type should it be? Made of what flour? Where was it grown?

Of course, you will need the right people to carry these trays with the bread and the wine. They certainly will have to have a pair of white gloves. Do you want weightlifters or waiters? Perhaps it would be your preference to engage a military drill team with their precise movements. This, obviously, might involve a large band or orchestra. Of course one primary concern would be who would deliver the communion meditation. He or she would have to be a speaker beyond compare.

There is a reason that no one has ever done this. Communion is a humble meal. The ingredients are very plain and very affordable even to the least.

- Its purpose is to remember Christ, not to celebrate our own wealth and reputation.
- In partaking of communion, we proclaim the Lord's death. It is a somber and serious occasion.
- One feature of communion is self-examination; looking for our own sins and causing our repentance. This is a very serious moment indeed.

In communion we tell the world that we are one body; each of us different yet each of us related to Christ. We are not a random collection of super saints. The value of communion does not come from those who organize the ceremony, nor those who partake. Its value comes from Christ, not us. We are not to be the proud who offer communion, but the humble will gather together to eat his body and drink his blood so that we may stay united in Him.

May 27

Good Sam

It's not often that you hear this topic preached, but it is still the fact that the Good Samaritan is for us, in a way, a model of Christ. Look at some of the things he did:

- He took a risk in going down the Jericho Road, much as the victim did. He was not afraid to go where trouble might lie — which means, with the rest of us sinners.
- He was not only willing to sacrifice his money to help this man; he came prepared to do it. He brought his own first aid kit, even knowing he might have to use it on a Jew.
- He followed through. He enlisted the innkeeper's assistance at his own expense. He promised to return and see to it that the man was well.

All these things are examples of "What Would Jesus Do?" Indeed, they are representative of the things that Jesus did.

- He walked where we walk — literally. He came in the flesh, taking on human form so as to reach humanity for the sake of God.
- He did not come just to preach, but to do his Father's will. He came prepared to die on the cross; indeed, it was his purpose in coming. He came willing to sacrifice.
- He followed through — and we are that follow-through. He established the church, his body on earth, to do what he was told by the father to do. We are Christ to the millions.

Communion reinforces these ideas for us. We share in the body and blood of Jesus Christ when we take communion. This could not be possible if that body were not presented to mankind, physically in the flesh. Jesus was not a ghost, hovering around. In communion, we proclaim his incarnation. Also, we proclaim that we are the body of Christ — each of us in communion with all of our brothers and sisters around the world. We care for each other, and we are told that this is how the world will know that we are his disciples — by our love for one another.

We say we are the church — Christ reaching out to the world. Sometimes that's done as an evangelist, but more often it is done as a Good Samaritan. If we are indeed the body of Christ, then we are indeed the Good Samaritans to the world. Let us do these things despising the risks, knowing that they will cost us in sacrifice. Then let us follow through so that all the world will know that we are those who love one another in the cause of Christ — and therefore love the world as well.

June 3

Blind Man

It may sound curious today, with our emphasis on treating everyone equally. But in the days of Moses and following, the priest who presented offerings on the altar of the Lord had to be someone with no bodily defects. The verses following list quite a few more; these restrictions are in addition to the fact that he must be a descendent of Aaron. But just being a descendent of Aaron was not good enough; you had to be bodily perfect. Which means that if you were blind, among other things, you could not present sacrificial offerings. You couldn't even go beyond the veil to get to the altar. Interestingly, such a person was entitled to eat the offerings which were given to the priests as a share — but they could not perform the ceremony of sacrifice. What must it be like to have God call you defective! Your author know something about this, because he wears an eye patch over his right eye. It is not an enhancement; it is not a fashion statement; defect is a good name for it. This prohibition is designed to let the people of Israel know that the real atonement for sins has to be made by somebody who is perfect. That person is Jesus Christ.

But consider the blind man at Communion:

- It's obvious that he is a sinner — just like the rest of us. We are all “defective” in that regard.
- It may be that the blind man needs a little help, physically, to participate in communion.
- But it's also obvious that the rest of us need a little help, spiritually.

You might think of taking communion as being something you do by yourself. This is not really the case. We are told that we are to confess our sins one to another, and forgive each other. That is not a solo activity; indeed, it may need some help from those around us in the form of encouragement. Sometimes, some of us need some help with a besetting sin. We need it both in overcoming that sin, and encouragement take the Lord's communion in repentance. We also need to take communion and fellowship with all the other believers present. If you have something against your brother you are commanded to reconcile so that you may take communion with a clean heart.

So take communion this morning in a worthy manner. Be at peace with your brothers and sisters in Christ; forgive those who have offended you and ask forgiveness for those you have offended. Then partake with the solemnity fitting the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

June 10

The Real Jesus

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

(Revelation 1:12-18 NASB)

Jesus, it seems, is really a nice guy. We proclaim and teach the gentle Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and lightly glance past such scenes as his cleansing of the Temple. To do this, I submit, misses an essential part of who Jesus really is.

The scene here gives us an idea of what we're missing. The scene is obviously one of power, as we can tell by the fact that John falls at his feet as a man who is dead. We can also see several other attributes of this Jesus:

- He is the first and last, therefore the eternal one. He is self-existent; meaning he depends upon no one or no thing for his existence. You and I borrow the concept of existence from the one who has it intrinsically.
- He is the living one. He is the source of all life itself. He was crucified and he died, was laid in the tomb — and walked out of it three days later. He is the conqueror of death. That resurrection brought about the forgiveness of our sins, if we will accept his atonement.
- He told us to fear not the one who could kill the body, but the one who could kill the body and then send the soul to hell. He is the one who holds the keys of death and hell.

You might think for someone so powerful it would be sufficient for him to send us a memo telling us what we should be doing. But it seems that power is so much his style that his glory comes through every time that he tries to do that — remember Moses on the mountain? So what did he do to bring the word to us?

- He went through the ultimate condescension of becoming an incarnate man. CS Lewis once compared it to one of us becoming a barnacle, so we could save the other barnacles. He didn't just show up as a man; he went through the birth process that we go through emerging as a baby, growing up to be a man.
- In his ministry he ate with sinners. Think about that. He did not come as some pious guru, learnedly associating with only the religious experts of the day. He ate and drank with sinners —

and frankly was the life of the party. The religious experts felt he was getting his hands dirty. But he was the Light of the World — and how do you make light dirty?

- He became the ultimate in sacrificial atonement. He died that we might have forgiveness and therefore a path to God the Father.

This, then is the man Jesus. In communion we meet him, for in communion we partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. How does that work? That's one of those great mysteries about which even the learned and intelligent disagree. We obtain eternal life from the ever-living One. There is one certain step that we must take in communion: we must examine ourselves. In self-examination we have the cleansing of the soul — by the power of the one who holds the keys to Death and Hell. Therefore, as you partake this morning bring your sins to him for cleansing. Then leave as one who has been forgiven.

June 17

Photography

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.
(Hebrews 10:1 NASB)

Before the invention of photography, it was much more difficult for people to visually show you what they meant. Paul, in this passage, uses the concept of a shadow where we might use a photograph. Think about it from World War II. Some of the photos that came out of that conflict are highly memorable. For those who served in that war, these pictures bring up memories. For others they tell a story — a story of hope, a story of struggle and finally a story of triumph. Look at these examples:

- In 1940 Winston Churchill had his picture taken. The photographer had just gone over and snatched away his cigar, and Churchill had quite a glower on his face. It became the picture of the English Bulldog; sheer determination, the will to victory. It is so iconic that the British government is about to issue some new currency with that picture.
- In the South Pacific, on the island of Iwo Jima, some of the Marines raised a flag when they reached the top of Mount Suribachi. It is such a symbol of defiant sacrifice leading to victory that the firefighters who responded to the World Trade Center in 2001 staged their own picture in a very similar manner. It told us that Marines don't quit; neither do firemen.
- Finally, as the war's end was announced, we have the memorable photo of a sailor grabbing the nearest nurse and kissing her deeply. It is a picture of joy bursting forth from the human spirit. (I'm told he had never met the nurse before.) It is a picture of hope, revealed.

These three photographs, among others, keep alive the memory of World War II. But have you ever asked yourself how people kept memories alive before there were photographs? One of the most common ways was to turn the memory into a ritual. In this way people could share memories; a newcomer to the community could be enlightened as to its history and traditions by participating in such rituals. Such rituals also tell a story — which is extremely important when you're trying to get that story into your children or your grandchildren. Finally such rituals often point not just to the past but also to the future, telling one and all the hope that we share.

Old Testament rituals are like that. They are shadows — like photographs — other things that were to come. When Christ arrived, the shadows were replaced with the real thing.

Communion is one of those things that replaced the older rituals. In communion we see our shared memory of Christ on the Cross: the bread, his body; the cup, his blood. Most of us are accustomed to this and recognize it as such. But you might recall the first time your children took communion with you. You had some explaining to do. But they learned and now it's part of their memory. Likewise your grandchildren will do the same thing. Communion is a way to share the faith with your children and grandchildren. But it also points forward: Christ told us he would not drink from his cup until he came

again. In communion we remember that promise, and say, "Even so Lord, come soon." Communion is the clear picture of our memory of the cross. It is the illustration we use with our children and he gives us hope of his soon return.

June 24

Elements

It is sometimes difficult for the modern Christian to feel the same impact of Christ's words that his original hearers did. Occasionally this depends upon what people believed were the scientific facts of life at the time. For example, water, fire, wind and earth were considered the four "elements." The first three of those are also used as metaphors for the Holy Spirit. Those three have something in common:

- As anyone in Southern California can tell you, a brushfire can spread very quickly. People in the Midwest know that water will do the same thing, once it overflows the levees. And if you've ever been through a tornado or a hurricane you see something of the same effect.
- All of them involve the destruction of things. Christians usually don't think this is a good idea — but remember how often Christ told his followers that the things they had could get between Him and them. Remember the rich young ruler?
- But all of them can also be harnessed to useful purpose. In particular, in our day, they can be used to generate electricity.

That makes them pretty good metaphors for the Holy Spirit. We cannot take the time here in such a short communion meditation to completely explain the Holy Spirit. We can, however, mention three things that are functions of the Holy Spirit working in power.

- The primary function of the Holy Spirit in the world is to convict the world of sin and judgment to come. This also applies to Christians; it is a rare Christian who is never in need of repentance.
- For Christians, one of the major impacts the Holy Spirit has is to produce the "fruit of the Spirit." These things are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.
- Finally, it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christians will be resurrected from the dead.

The Holy Spirit is within every Christian, but most particularly when two or more gather in the name of Christ. That means that, right now, the Holy Spirit is present in this room to do his work. So if you feel the Spirit encouraging you to examine your self in self judgment, do so and render judgment upon yourself. Follow that with repentance so that the spirit may bring you grace, the forgiveness of God. May you then accept the grace of God, knowing that you have been redeemed and forgiven.

In communion we see portrayed the grace of God. We are to see within communion the Cross, with Christ's body and blood given for us. When we partake, we do so together as is fitting for a people who are in communion with each other. We are unified in communion. Therefore, as you take communion today, do so as one who is filled with the Holy Spirit, being repentant and seeking forgiveness so that we will be one, just as the Father and the Son are one.

July 1

Exam

A normal feature of a communion meditation is the encouragement for those who partake to examine themselves. Let's take a little bit closer look at it this morning.

But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.

(1 Corinthians 11:28-29 NASB)

This is the "proof text" cited for this examination. We might back up just a bit and remember what we're doing: in communion, we are proclaiming the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever else might be going on, this is a most serious matter. His body and blood are our atonement; his crucifixion the most important event in human history. This is serious stuff. We ought to act like it. But so often we treat this as a formality — it's "just a ritual." Let me give you a parallel: when my father died he was entitled to a flag on his coffin because of his 20 years service in the Army. The flag came with a small detachment of soldiers who most impressively folded the flag in the absolutely correct manner. They were dressed in formal uniforms and did their job quite well. They handed the flag to one of my brother's stepsons who is in the Navy, who handed it to my mother. I now have that flag in my house. The thought of that flag brings me to the edge of tears. If I react that way to a flag being folded and presented, how much more seriously should I take communion? Indeed, Paul tells us here that we eat and drink judgment to ourselves if we do not judge the body rightly. This is important!

Failure to examine yourself has even more serious consequences. As the apostle John put it,

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

(1 John 1:8-10 NASB)

Failure to examine yourself is equivalent to saying that there is no need for you to examine yourself. This is very foolish. If we say we have no sin:

- We are deceiving ourselves. Man who is deceiving himself is fooling himself, and therefore making himself a complete fool.
- More than that, you're saying that your Savior is a liar. That is hardly a zero risk proposition.
- It is also evidence that God's word is not in you — in short, you're a hypocrite.

But if you do examine yourself and confess your sins to God, he has promised to forgive them. More than that he has promised to clean up your act. Forgiveness and cleansing are the result of self-examination.

Communion is a high holy thing, not to be taken lightly. It has about it that which some call “the sense of the sacred.” It is reserved strictly for God’s use with us. It’s as if he’s saying this is so high and holy that you cannot understand it completely. But that’s no surprise, his ways are far above our ways and understanding. However, in this world, that’s as common as mud. How many things do you really understand thoroughly? It’s a rare medical doctor that can repair race engines. But most medical doctors do know when to change the oil in the car. It is by obedience that we get through this. We don’t have to understand it; we have to obey it.

Therefore, with all due humility, examine your self. Do not seek your own self justification — that’s just too easy to find. Rather, seek out that which is sin in your life, confess it and give it to God. Then, partake.

July 8

Heroics

One of the more enduring tales to be told in books and movies is the romantic vision of a band of heroes struggling against an overwhelming evil. We have seen several movies featuring the “Jedi Knights” struggling against the “dark side.” Those knights are patterned after the knights of medieval romance. It seems improbable that the Jedi would need a laser powered sword. But the image of the medieval knight requires a sword, and therefore so does the Jedi. Some of us of an older generation may even remember the name Davy Crockett. Dig back further and you’ll find Robin Hood and William Tell. It is a common theme in our fantasies. There are common elements in all of these:

- There is always a variety of roles: Robin Hood had Little John, Luke Skywalker had Han Solo. There is often in there someone who is of great wisdom, like Yoda.
- A variety of roles comes with a monotony of courage. All of these heroic souls are courageous.
- It also seems that they require some sort of regular conclave. They get organized.

But — did you know that this vision of heroic souls is based on reality? It is true — and you’re part of the story. The apostle John tells us this:

We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.
(1 John 5:19 NASB)

The subject of Satan is not much preached these days. We don’t believe in the guy with the red tights and funny looking tail. But that’s not the real Satan, and we should know that. You recall that in the temptation of Christ Satan offered to give him all the kingdoms of the world if he would but fall down and worship him. That’s the first thing to know about Satan: he is the ruler of this world. We are the one opposed to him. We know little about Satan’s origin; we do know, however, that he is an angel in rebellion against God. More important to us is the fact that he is the enemy of our souls. God loves us; Satan wants to prevent that from getting through. He does this by temptation and sometimes by demon possession. But you can count on it: if God loves you, Satan hates you.

Satan has a clear set of intentions. One scholar put it this way, that Satan “wants to break the bonds of communion between God and man.” He wants to separate you from God.

If that’s what Satan is trying to do, those of us who are opposed to him should rather strengthen the bonds of communion between God and man. Combat is with the Sword of the Spirit, but the ritual of Communion has a very important part to play. The Lord’s Supper is the persistent reminder of God’s great love for us. That great love is the basis of our bond of communion with the Lord. We need to remember that it is important. That’s why we do it solemnly. It is our conclave with the Almighty God.

So let me encourage you: with all solemnity and all pure intention, receive the body and blood of Christ this morning. Take, eat — and be one with God.

July 15

Sour View

It is a fact that Christianity puts forth what is most likely the most sour view of the human race of all major religions. We hold that all human beings are sinners; they are fallen — which means they are capable of great goodness and also of terrible things. But holding this view does make life more acceptable for the Christian:

- When somebody let you down, personally, it lessens the blow to know that that person — like you — is a sinner. You're not perfect either.
- If someone you admire, particularly in the church, is found out to be stumbling in his walk with the Lord, you explain it in much the same way. We are all sinners; none of us are perfect — his problem is that he was found out.
- Often enough the problem is impersonal. You see the accused in the courtroom handcuffed and shackled. Perhaps you can even sympathize with why he did it. So you say, "There but for the grace of God go I."

It is a fact: we are all fallen — including the guy in your bathroom mirror. But have you ever asked yourself what God should do about this? Think about this for a while:

- What do you do with spoiled milk? You throw it out. God has a bunch of spoiled sinners on his hands; should he just chuck us into outer space and start all over again?
- If you find a new car and discover a defect in it, you take it back to the dealer to get it fixed. Okay; where does God take his defective humans?
- If you can't take it back, you at least take the precaution of never buying one of those again. And yet God lets us have children who turn out to be sinners just as well. Should he take away our breeding rights?

These questions reflect the righteousness of God. But God is not only righteousness — God is love. See then what God has done in his mercy for his spoiled, defective and indeed hopeless humans.

- He paid the price of our sin. He is our atonement sacrifice — and that's what we celebrate when we take Communion.
- More than that, he promises that he will take us home to himself at the resurrection of the dead. He's not going to treat us like some sort of stinking pariah, he's going to treat us like we are his children.

Therefore, take this Communion in a worthy manner. Be a penitent sinner and examine yourself, confessing your sins and seeking his forgiveness. It is a grand and serious matter; do it with all solemnity.

July 22

Risk of Faith

John 6:46-53

An interesting scene presents itself in this passage of Scripture. Jesus evidently feels it necessary to challenge the man to see if he is looking for a “WOW” experience, something he could tell his friends about or if he is an honest man seeking his son’s healing. Picture it today as if the man had driven up in a limousine. Someone jumps out of the front seat goes around to the back and opens the door for him. Out steps a man in a \$1000 suit who walks right up to this prophet and asks for his son’s healing. Perhaps he himself doesn’t know what he’s asking for, but there is one thing he does know: his son is dying.

His answer reflects that. He gets right to the point and in so doing abandons all pretense of being a big shot. The problem isn’t his rank; the problem is his son is dying. So Jesus issues his second challenge to this man. Do you trust me, or don’t you? If you do, then do as I tell you. Get back in the limousine and go home; your son lives.

The man’s answer is in his action. Having known this Jesus of Nazareth for all of 30 seconds, and given a command that he might use to dismiss some peon from his presence, his action is a stunning statement of faith. He believed; he got back into the limousine and left. He started off immediately; no hesitation, no asking for other instructions — just do what you’re told, when you’re told, how you’re told.

The man was challenged where it would hurt. But to his credit he rung true, and acted as the prophet had instructed. He met the test.

Communion is a challenge to our faith as well. In communion, Christ makes certain promises:

- He promises that his death on the cross is sufficient atonement for our sins, and effective for our salvation. He died for us.
- He promises his imminent return to judge the living and the dead. That is reward for those who served him and justice for those who did not.
- He also promises us that the dead in Christ will rise as he rose from the tomb.

In doing this he challenges you to be single-minded — not someone who’s just hedging his bets in church. He asks you to take action on it; publicly partake. Therefore, examine yourself; be single-minded, take action — eat and drink.

July 29

Academy Award

One of the more stunning desert landscapes in America lies along the border of Arizona and Utah. It is Monument Valley, home to some magnificent red sandstone buttes. Movie directors, especially John Ford, have been drawn to the location because of its masculine character. One of his movies was the classic John Wayne western, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. Considered by many to be John Wayne's best movie, it features a sequence in which the cavalry troop plods through a rainstorm.

The contrast is striking. Amidst a scene of lightning and rain which whispers of the power of God, the cavalry troop plods onward, dealing with the trivia that soldiers always have. Interestingly, the cinematographer who photographed the scene told John Ford that he was not at all certain he could get any pictures which would be any good. He felt that the storm made the lighting too dark. The cinematographer, one Winton Hoch, told Ford that he would do what he could with the camera but promised no results at all. The scene went through the rainstorm, and Winton Hoch won an Academy award for cinematography that year, largely on the strength of that one scene.

If you've seen the movie, you know the power that that scene has. It resonates even more deeply with those who have been soldiers. It's almost a picture-perfect portrayal of military life. Here's why that scene is so powerful:

- Suffering. The soldiers have to get off their horses and lead them through the rainstorm. What's the sense of being in the cavalry if you have to walk in front of the horse? It is the kind of petty suffering that soldiers become accustomed to.
- Perseverance. You can see in their eyes and in their smiles the grim sense of perseverance — it's inevitable were going to walk through this rainstorm so we might as well start walking.
- Finality. There is no sense walking halfway through the rainstorm. The key to success is in completing the mission. And that is what they do.

Soldiers know that the right road always leads uphill.

Communion, in a sense, is a picture that is very similar to this scene. We see in communion the suffering of Christ represented in the cup and the bread. It is a horrible form of torture leading to death, but Christ evidently made no complaint. The suffering was required, and suffer He did. The perseverance that he exhibited is characterized by one statement: "not my will, but your will be done." That determination to carry it all the way through led to the utter finality of the crucifixion: "it is finished."

It is a simple depiction. If you will, Christ is at the head of the column — but we are soldiers marching behind. Every time we take communion we portray his death to the world, until he returns. May this symbolic meal strengthen you to face the march ahead. Examine yourself; take and eat. Then march on; your Lord leads the way.

August 5

Zaccheus

Luke 19:1-10

One of the accusations the enemies of Christ made repeatedly was that he partied heartily with all the wrong sorts of people. Zacchaeus is a good example; we see here how willingly Christ calls to this man. In fact, he invites himself to lunch with Zacchaeus. The crowd has a rather negative reaction to this; they have the feeling that Christ should associate only with “worthy” sinners — not the kind of traitorous scum like a tax collector for the invading Romans. But the distinction between “worthy” and “unworthy” sinners is rather a difficult one — so difficult that as far as we can tell Christ never attempted it.

We sometimes find a parallel to this attitude in communion. Some churches restrict communion only to their members; others restrict communion from those whom they consider unworthy to have it. We seem to feel that communion is for “good guys” only. But the Scripture gives us a little different guidance; we don’t have to be worthy to take communion — but we have to take it in a worthy manner.

You can see something of that here in the story of Zacchaeus. Look at his reaction: he is immediately glad, highly grateful and welcomes Christ into his home. His response to the call of Christ is one of obedience. He knows what the Old Testament law says he must do to make amends for his sins — and he does it. He provides restitution in accord with the law. In return, he receives forgiveness.

Making the distinction is a little easier when you remember the purposes of communion:

- The first purpose is to remember Christ and his sacrifice. For the unworthy, this is the opening for the Holy Spirit to come forward and convict them of sin and judgment to come.
- The second purpose is to provoke us to self-examination. If we are to take communion in a worthy manner, that must include such repentance as we need.

So if one of the unworthy sinners is sitting next to you, do not judge them. Rather, pray that they will repent as they consider the sacrifice of Christ. Pray that they will make such corrections and amendments as are within their power. Then pray that Christ will forgive them — and that you will too.

August 12

Separation

Ezra 6:19-22

This is the last mention of Passover in the Old Testament. The ceremony itself has changed little over the hundreds of years; most of the changes had to do with the practical aspects of hurting so many animals into be sacrificed. But we might note something here: the priests have a prescribed ritual for purification which they must undergo before they can supervise the Passover. The ordinary citizen of Israel does not. There are two requirements which are placed upon that ordinary citizen:

- First, he must be one of those who has returned from exile. He has left Babylon (often used as a marker for “sin city.”) Symbolically, he has made the trip from sin to sanctity.
- Next, he must have separated himself from the impurity around him. Note please that this is not particularly specific; it’s acknowledged that the nations around Israel are wicked. Our citizen preparing for the Passover must reject this.

Indeed, the essence of the matter for the common citizen is separation. As we can see from the New Testament, separation is the basis of holiness. Permit me a simple example. In my household we have two sets of dishes. There is the ordinary, daily use, almost indestructible dishware; we also have a set of “good china” which is used for special occasions — think of Thanksgiving dinner. It is set aside for those special purposes where we are dining a little more formally and usually celebrating some sort of occasion. That “set aside”, that separation is a small example of holiness.

Separation is for a purpose. Our good china is set aside for those special occasions. In this instance, as verse 21 shows us, the purpose of this separation is so that the people might seek the Lord. You get rid of the distractions and it’s easier to hear what the Lord might have to say to you. But separation is also *from* something — impurity. If you set that good china before your guests, it should be clean. In our time impurity is so common that it scarcely is worth mentioning.

We must remember that the Lord’s Supper was instituted by our Lord using Passover, as he was our Passover lamb. It is no great stretch to conclude that as the ancient Israelite was to separate himself from the sin which surrounded him, the modern Christian must do likewise before partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, may I ask you to separate your self from the impurity of this world before you take communion? Examine yourself; see if there is any wicked way within you. Be honest; nothing else works. Then, repent of whatever wickedness you have found, promising the Lord that you will make amends and remedy what you can. Finally, with a clean heart, partake in the supper that unites all Christians in their Lord.

August 19

Dog and Ice Cream

John 1:1-4

The tale as my father told it: he pulled up to the ice cream shop just in time to notice a man coming out with a tray full of ice cream cones. The man walked over to a station wagon and began to walk around to each window. As he arrived, the window would go down and eager hands inside would grab the cones. Finally, he had one ice cream cone left. He walked around the back of the station wagon. The window went down to reveal a huge St. Bernard. The man took the remaining ice cream cone and stuffed it down the animals throat.

Pure joy just has to be shared.

The apostle John expresses something like that here. He tells us what he knows about Jesus and how he knows it:

- He knows Christ to be the eternal God, in the flesh. The God who spoke and the worlds began became a human being and walked on this planet with the rest of us.
- He didn't come to be an inspector; he came to seek those who were lost. He brought with him the Word of Life so that we might live eternally.
- This is not just a rumor that John heard. He walked with the man, he touched him, and listen to his voice.
- Pure joy indeed; he now proclaims it to his fellow Christians.

John does not do this out of a sour sense of duty, or because somebody is pressuring him to do the right thing. Here are his reasons:

- He wants to have fellowship with the rest of us. The Christian fellowship is a grand and glorious thing and by its very nature it expands.
- More than that, pure joy must be shared. It is out of this drive to share the joy that John writes this letter. The water of life is flowing in him, bubbling up and bubbling out.

Interestingly, communion is a type of this fellowship. Fellowship is often expressed in a community meal — did you ever go to a potluck dinner? It is Christ that unites us in this fellowship; He is the one thing which pulls us together. There is no concept in the Scriptures that would tell you that Christianity is a solo flight. It requires the body of the believers to unite and support each other. By taking communion we declare our willingness to be that “band of brothers” that support each other.

Communion is a meal which is a memorial to Him — and more importantly to what He did. Jesus Christ was born a human being for the express purpose of becoming our sacrificial lamb. By so doing, our sins are forgiven. He was crucified, died, placed in the tomb — and rose again. By taking communion we reaffirm that this is what we believe most deeply. So as you partake this morning, remember that you are not alone — you are part of the fellowship of Christ.

August 26

String of Pearls

Philippians 3:7-9

A goodly part of the study of economics concerns itself with the difference between the price of something and the value of that same thing. We are generally familiar with two cases:

- There are items of great value, which carry a great price. One might think of a sports car that can take you from 70 years old to 18 in 2.4 seconds.
- There are things which are of great value to someone, but very low price. Think of a child receiving a balloon animal. The latex balloon is very inexpensive, but the glow on the child's face is priceless.

Oscar Wilde once said the cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. An honest man knows both price and value.

One of the marvelous examples of this is given by St. Paul in this passage:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,
(Philippians 3:7-9)

To understand this, consider the value of the Law of Moses. In particular, think of the Ten Commandments. The Mosaic law greatly surpassed the other ancient codes of law and order, and much of it is still found in our legal system today. It is a superb example to us. Paul had increased the value of the Law to himself by becoming a Pharisee. He studied the law all of his life; it was his life's work. It is as if you studied to become a brain surgeon and were suddenly told you need to be an auto mechanic. That's how much Paul gave up for Christ. It might be said that he exchanged a string of pearls (the Law) for the Pearl of Great Price.

But that is not how you received the Lord. Consider the price you paid for the privilege of taking communion this morning. You received salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ at no cost to you. You didn't make a down payment; nothing was required of you financially. It was given to you by grace. You got it free. But that is not the value of salvation; just the price.

The value of salvation can easily be seen by what it cost God to do it — the life of his son. Christ became a human being like us, lived and taught, and then died a horrible death so that we might have that free grace. It is the great example of God's character:

- It shows his goodness, his desire to increase righteousness by justifying us.

- It shows his mercy, the product of his love for the work of his hands.

So as you partake this morning, stopped to remember the value you have received and the price you did not have to pay.

September 2

Divine Dilemma

God has a problem — and we are it.

Let's begin by considering the nature of God, and the nature of man.

- God is righteousness. As such, he can have nothing to do with sin, or sinners. If this were the only thing he had to consider he would have nothing to do with us — at best. He would have to quarantine the planet or perhaps just simply solve the problem by toasting us all. It is a logical reaction to sin by a holy, awesome, sovereign God. Obviously, he hasn't done that.
- God is love. As such, he deeply desires to forgive those sinners and return them to complete fellowship with himself. A faint illustration may be found in your grandchildren. No matter what they do you have the desire to take them back into the family and love them. Please note it's not anything the little stinkers have done that causes this, but your great love for them.
- Man — without exception — is a sinner. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much we prepare, and no matter what we cover up, we are all still sinners. Without that fact God has no divine dilemma. With that fact the conflict between love and righteousness is the center of his interaction with us.

So what did God do about it? He created the concept of atonement. The word "atonement" is centered around the phrase, "at one." Atonement is someone taking action to bring about the reconciliation of two warring parties. In Christian thought this means that somebody makes a sacrifice to resolve such a conflict.

God not only invented the concept, he gave us the Old Testament laws which govern atonement. Atonement sacrifices have to be perfect, having no blemishes. He has modeled for us in the Mosaic law what kind of atonement sacrifice would be needed to resolve his righteousness and his love with regard to us. In short, he told us how to do it. Our problem is finding a sacrifice without any blemishes because, as we've mentioned, we are all sinners. We are all blemished.

God solved that problem — he sent his son to be born among us, a human being just like the rest of us but without sin. That son was sacrificed in accordance with the Mosaic law to be our atonement. He is our Passover lamb. This is the center of Christianity: that God in his infinite mercy and wisdom sent his own son to be our atonement sacrifice so that he might welcome us back home, into his arms where we belong.

Obviously, it's important that we remember this. If we keep it in mind we find ourselves much more likely to continue repentance. Therefore, Christ instituted communion so that we might have a constant reminder of the sacrifice of atonement that he made. The bread represents his body, given for us; the cup, his blood. As you partake, remember the problem God had with us — and the solution he so generously and lovingly provided.

September 9

Accusation

Romans 8:34-39

The reality of Satan is somewhat of a challenge to the modern Christian. But if you understand his chief function — the accuser of mankind — you will see that he is quite well and alive in your life. He is the one who brings up all those things you've done wrong and tells you you can never recover from them. Please remember that Satan is the father of lies; this is just another one.

- The most common accusation is over your past sins. Many Christians make a mistake at this point; they try to justify themselves. Don't do it. Christ died for your sins; point out to Satan that you are not self justified but forgiven by God.
- Satan also threatens with worldly consequences, as he is the ruler of this world. But remember: Christ is greater, and he sits at the right hand of the Father interceding for us. As the old hymn put it, "greater is he who is in me, than he who is in the world."
- Satan wants to use your past sins to keep you in bondage. Remember that forgiveness brings freedom.

Sometimes it comes down to a push and shove match. In your own strength you are not the equal of Satan. But you are encouraged to pick up the weapons of God, for they are greater than the weapons of Satan. Satan's power over you ends at death. God's power over you extends to all eternity. That includes the power to send you to hell. As long as you're making the point, you might want to remind Satan that hell is his destination. After all, if he reminds you of your past, you can always remind him of his future.

The temptation when threatened with worldly consequences is to become like Satan, using force and power to get your way. If you are threatened with mean people, be meaner. Rather, you should react in God's love, for evil has no power over love. It sounds counterintuitive — but it works.

The Scriptures tell us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is his love we are dependent upon — that perfect, powerful love of God. It does not depend on our love, but his. This love was shown at the cross in the sacrifice of Christ. The power of that love was shown at the resurrection. Christ is the one who conquered the greatest enemy of mankind — death. This is what we remember when we take communion. The bread is his body, the cup his blood — and ours the memory.

As you partake, remember this: you do not get what you deserve for your sins. Christ got what you deserve.

September 16

Blood Donor

Those of you who are regular blood donors at the Red Cross are familiar with the questionnaire that must be filled out every time you give blood. It has grown in length over the years, as new threats to the purity of the blood supply in America have arrived. It starts off with a number of questions about your general health, followed by some questions about medications that you might be taking. Some of those medications can bar you from giving blood. You wouldn't want a blood transfusion full of blood thinners.

Then there comes the strange series of questions that all begin the same way: "Have you ever, even once, had sex...". That's sex with various people, in various ways. Sometimes reading that questionnaire can give you the impression that your sex life is obviously somehow defective if you haven't done at least some of these things. You wonder sometimes whether or not they're going to ask you if you have ever had sex with a giraffe. Then you wonder how you would do such a thing.

If you look at it from the other end of the process, however, it becomes quite a bit clearer. Imagine that you, or one of your children, needed to receive a blood transfusion. There are all sorts of diseases and medical conditions that can result from a blood transfusion if the blood has not been properly screened. You would want that blood transfusion to be pure. You would not at all be happy with being told you had a one in 100 chance of contracting some disease because of the transfusion. Purity is the only real solution.

In a very real sense, Christ is our "blood donor." Through his blood we are changed. For example:

- His blood cleanses us from all sin (1st John 1:7).
- By his blood we have redemption (Ephesians 1:7).
- By his blood we have justification (Romans 5:9).
- By his blood we have reconciliation, peace with God (Colossians 1:20).

All these things we received through Christ by his shedding blood on the Cross. But this was only possible because he was our sacrificial lamb, a sacrifice "without spot or blemish" (1st Peter 1:9). It is that purity that was necessary for our salvation.

As you partake today, remember that the elements of communion, bread and the fruit of the vine, seem to be ordinary things. But there is a difference between what a thing is, and what it is made of.

Communion is made of these elements — but it is the body and blood of Christ. That blood was pure beyond the measure of man, for Christ was the sinless man. Therefore, as you partake today, examine yourself. See if you are living the life he has commanded you to live. In remembrance of him you are taking into yourself a high and holy thing. Do not do this lightly; do not do this mechanically. Rather, after introspection, do this in a worthy manner, knowing that you are taking in the body and blood of Christ — pure, for your purification.

September 23

Sleeping Beauty

Hebrews 2:14-15

We are told that by his death Christ has destroyed the devil, Satan. It's a little bit hard to see how that works for the scientific mind. But there's a parallel that we can draw from an old fairytale which might explain it.

The fairytale in question is Sleeping Beauty. You will recall how the evil fairy cursed the lovely princess with death. Take your mind back to the Garden of Eden; does this sound familiar? Indeed, the response of the humans involved is very similar to what we do about sin ourselves. We're going to round up all the spinning wheels and make sure there is no occasion for this death to enter. This is a good idea — except for the fact that it doesn't work. Despite our very best efforts, sin keeps coming back and death with it. But there's a good fairy in this story also. She transmutes the sentence of death to one of sleep for 100 years.

The evil fairy could've let the whole thing go at this point. Because she didn't she was defeated at the point where the good fairy transmuted death to sleep. It meant that the evil fairy could not keep her prey forever. That's just like Satan; he can't keep us forever either. She held on to the bitter end; surrounding the princess with thorns and eventually going into combat as a dragon against the prince who came to rescue her. The parallel is complete: Christ has taken on death for us and transmuted it to sleep. The sleep ends when he comes again — just like Sleeping Beauty's prince.

As you partake this morning, please remember what Christ has done for us:

- Remember the sacrifice he has made for us. He came from heaven and was found to be man like us, so that he might die like us to save us from our sins.
- Remember the power that God showed when he raised Christ from the dead. No one else is able to do this.
- Remember the promise of resurrection. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so will those be who believe in him.

The body and blood of Christ are before you in communion. Someday we shall see him face-to-face.

September 30

Tight Rope

One of the more entertaining acts that can be found in a circus is that of the tight rope walker. To climb a fatal distance above the ground and venture out on a single strand seems to be an act of daring, bordering on the foolhardy. If you were to poll the crowd looking for volunteers to follow the tight rope walker, they would be very, very few. How does that tight rope walker do it?

- First, he keeps his eye on the prize. If you will look at his head and eyes you will see that he is focused on the other end of the rope; the platform he's going to arrive at eventually. This technique keeps his body correctly aligned to stay on the rope.
- Obviously, you need some sense of balance. Depending on the circumstances, he may carry a large pole which assists in balancing things. Generally, this pole is evenly split between left side and right side to assist in keeping his balance.
- Third, he must train himself to ignore all distractions. In a public performance, there may be somebody who's yelling at him. In a circus, there is someone going, "Popcorn! Peanuts!" There may be a band playing. There may be other acts in the other two rings in the circus. All of this must be completely dismissed from his mind.
- Finally, his attitude is greatly formed by the consequences of failure. It's much more impressive to walk a tight rope with no net below you. That's because of the consequence of failure — death. All his preparations must take this into account.

The Christian life is like that, in some ways. We may not recognize it, but walking a tight rope can be a good analogy to the Christian life. For example:

- Your eyes must be fixed on the prize — Jesus. You must focus on him in prayer. You should regularly read the Scripture and memorize portions of it. Other Christian authors may be of help also. You should listen to those who were appointed to teach and preach to you. And in the quiet of your life you should meditate on the things you have learned and experienced.
- You must also maintain a sense of balance. The Christian life is not one simply of prayer and meditation; it includes an active life. Faith without works is dead. Prayer is important; so is charity. Balance these things in your life.
- Distractions. Have you ever felt the annoyance of somebody who answers his cell phone in the middle of a church service? It's a little less annoying during the rock 'n' roll music session than it is during the quiet of communion — but it's still a distraction. Focus on the most important thing; as much as possible, remove the distractions in your life.
- Remember the consequences of failure — Hell. This is not just an exercise which determines which country club you will join. Life leads to Heaven or Hell; in a very real sense you get to choose which.

Communion as devised by our Lord follows this pattern.

- Our eyes are focused on the one event most important in Christian life: the Crucifixion. In communion we remember the sacrifice that he made which made our salvation possible.
- Communion balances our Christian life. It increases our faith and inspires our works.
- Did you ever wonder why communion is done so solemnly? Distractions!
- As Judas would know, there is a Heaven to gain and a Hell to shun. Communion tells you who has paid the price of your entrance to Heaven.

As you partake this morning, examine your life. Is it focused on Jesus Christ? Is it well balanced between faith and works? Have you shut out the distractions from the Christian life? Self-examination is good for the soul as it tends to lead you to heaven and eternity with your Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, examine yourself and partake in a worthy manner.

October 7

More Blessed

Acts 20:35

This verse contains one of the historical oddities of the New Testament. Most of us have heard the saying, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” This is the only place in the New Testament where that statement is found; the Gospels do not record it. Evidently Paul obtained it from some source, probably one of the other apostles. Luke thought it sufficiently important that it was written down here in the Book of Acts. The phrase is so striking that sometimes we miss the point of what Paul is saying here. The key to this message is the phrase, “I have shown you...” We learn best by example; and Paul is pointing out his example to these Christians. He reminds them of the example that he has set before them which illustrates the saying of Christ given here.

He gives us three examples here that would have been obvious to his listeners.

- The first is that he had worked hard to support himself and indeed those who had come with him as missionaries. In short, he was not a burden on anyone there but provided for the entire mission through the work of his own hands. Paul was a tent maker, and this gave us the phrase “tent maker missionary.”
- This, however, was not sufficient. He tells us also that we must be about the Christians business of helping the weak. It is a constant of the church that the poor are always with us; so are those with physical infirmities and those suffering from various diseases. His care for the church included helping these people.
- In all this, he asks them to remember the words of Jesus. The guide to the Christian life is the imitation of Christ. To understand how to do that, we must read and meditate upon the Scriptures which tell us of what Christ did and why.

Indeed, we may look at Jesus in the same light. He did not come to us as a conquering king. He came to us as a poor child born in a manger. In his adult ministry he was an itinerant preacher, living in poverty. When you consider that this is the very Son of God, and that he chose this way to live on earth, you can see that he was telling us by example how much pomp, ceremony and wealth really don't matter. We know also that he was constantly concerned for the weak, the outcast — the “nobodies” of his time. Good people would not associate with tax collectors and prostitutes; Jesus partied with them.

At his command we remember his supreme example. Jesus, the Messiah, came with the purpose of dying on the cross so that we might have salvation. It is his body, it is his blood that are presented to us in communion. We “do this in remembrance” of him. This is the supreme example of caring for the weak, for not one of us can produce his own salvation. By his sacrifice he opened the doors of heaven to all who would come. Consider, then, the example of Christ set for you as you partake.

October 14

Return

1st Thessalonians 4:14-18

Paul evidently had a problem with some amateur theologian which caused him to pen these words:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

(1 Thessalonians 4:14-18)

This passage corrects either of two mistakes concerning those who are still alive and walking the planet when Jesus returns:

- One group says that it's basically "tough luck." If you're walking around alive on the planet when Jesus returns, you missed the resurrection, you miss the rapture, you don't go to heaven.
- Another group says that before Jesus can return, the church must completely die out. (Your author has heard this one within his own lifetime.)

Paul corrects the original misimpression: the idea is that if you're still alive when Christ returns somehow or other you must be missing out, because only the dead shall rise. Paul says that's not true; the rest of us who are living on the planet will rise with the dead having seen them rise first. The issue is an important one; so much so that Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are to comfort each other with these words. We still use them today at funerals of good Christian people.

Communion is a sign of the resurrection of the dead.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:26)

Note the last three words — "until He comes." Communion is a sign:

- It is a sign of what he promised — victory over death.
- It is a sign of what he proved — that he has power over death, shown at his resurrection.
- It should also be a sign of our preparation — we don't know the day and time, but we know he is coming and we should be ready for it.

Therefore, as you partake of communion this morning, do so in a worthy manner:

- First, partake in remembrance of the sacrifice he made at Calvary.

- Next, partake and fellowship with your Christian brothers and sisters. If there is anything between you, resolved to settle it as quickly as possible and remain in the unity of the church.
- Finally, partake in hope — for Christ is your hope of the defeat of death. God's children shall live forever in His kingdom.

October 21

Volts

Perhaps you haven't noticed it, but most electrical outlets in a modern home have three openings. Two of these are blade shaped, but the third is shaped to fit the prong on the plug. It's more or less round. If you know anything about home electricity, you know that that third opening is called a "ground." You might have wondered why. There is a very good reason: the ground is connected to the ground. As in, the earth, dirt, the planet. Real estate. Really!

You might wonder why. The reason is quite simple: electricity, like pretty much everything else, needs a reference point if it is to be measured. By definition, anything connected to the planet is at zero volts. By way of example, this reference point is used to determine when a circuit breaker will trip. If you put too much voltage into a household circuit it can damage the appliances or other items that are connected to it. The circuit breaker knows what zero voltage is, and therefore can measure whatever voltage is on the line. If it's too high, the circuit breaker breaks the circuit and prevents damage to the things connected to it. Maybe you never thought of it this way, but the planet is the reference point of electricity.

Reference points: it's surprising how many things need a reference point if they are to work correctly.

- Where. Your reference point geographically might be a mountain or it might be the local McDonald's. Whichever it is, it tells you where you are and thus gives you some idea of how to get where you're going.
- When. You have to have some way of telling time if you're going to meet with someone at a particular time. It might be a watch, it might be your smart phone or maybe you carry around a sundial.
- Why. You also need a reference point to answer that question. You might be doing something because it helps your kids, or because it makes money, or maybe it's just fun. But prioritizing what you do often depends on that reference point.

Communion is the reference point of faith.

- Communion tells you **Who** to place your faith in — Jesus Christ.
- Communion tells you **what** Christ has done for you — for it is by his sacrifice that we commemorate that he has given you salvation.
- Communion tells you **why** God did this — it was because of his great love for you, the measure of which is the sacrifice at Calvary.
- Communion tells you **how** God did this — by his atonement, presenting his son as an acceptable sacrifice for our sins.

As you partake this morning, remember that you are "touching base" — going back to the reference point of Christianity. The bread his body, the cup his blood, serve to ground you in the faith.

October 28

Covenant

Hebrews 13:20-21

It sometimes comes as a surprise to Christians that God does not conduct his dealings with humankind in the same way that we conduct our dealings with each other. God deals by covenant, which is often mistaken for a contract. Those who understand the legal nature of the contract and the covenant would tell you these are not at all the same thing. The biggest difference is that God offers a covenant, with rewards for accepting it and punishment for rejecting it. Contracts are negotiated between equals. Some of us think that God likes to bargain; he doesn't. Others think that we deal with God by hasty prayer in crisis only. God's method is that of the covenant.

Paul, in this passage, lays out briefly the covenant that God has with the Christian church. God is a God of peace, and his covenant is a sign of our peace with God. That peace was bought with the blood of Jesus Christ, which we remember in the cup of communion. It is an eternal covenant. It existed with God before there was mankind to sin, or before there was a planet on which to commit that sin. As long as time has existed, that covenant was waiting for us. The cross was in fact God's original plan for redeeming mankind. And as it has always been, so it will always be.

Paul points out to us the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps we might pick one aspect of this; the body with which Christ rose. The Scriptures make it clear that it is a different kind of body, a spiritual body. But it reminds us that we too will rise in that spiritual body at his return. He is our forerunner.

A covenant, when kept, brings the blessings of God. In particular this covenant is to equip us with every good thing for doing God's will. These are the tools by which we aid him in the coming of perfection. He works in us so that we will do what is pleasing to him. Interestingly, when this is successful, he rewards us for those good works. The covenant works to bring us closer and closer to God, as his children should be.

Communion is a sign of this covenant. In communion we remember the sacrifice of Christ made at Calvary, the event which put this covenant into effect. The cup reminds us of his blood, shed for our sins. The body is represented by the bread, and represents Christ's body which was broken for us. But remember: that body was also raised as a new body. We too will be raised in that new body when He comes again. The church will continue to partake of communion until his return. Therefore it is a sign for us that we shall rise from the dead and greet him at his return — to be with him forever.

November 4

Grafting

In the middle of the 19th century, the European wine industry was faced with a crisis. A strange disease was destroying all of the vines which produced wine grapes. The culprit was a small aphid which poisoned the roots of the vines. The solution was rather unorthodox. There was no pesticide available which could kill this aphid, but grapevine roots from North America were naturally resistant. By grafting the European grape vines on the American roots, the epidemic was stopped. Many European growers felt that the American roots were inferior, but ultimately they had no choice. They either grafted onto the American roots, or the grapes died.

One of the problems the early church faced was something similar. As the church spread from its Jewish roots into the Gentile world, an explanation was needed for how God would allow this to happen. After all, the Jews were the chosen people. The Jewish Christians were confronted with the fact that God wanted this to happen, but they needed an explanation that would satisfy their understanding. The solution was in this image of grafting onto an existing root. The Gentile Christian was grafted onto the Jewish roots. This, incidentally, is a picture of how it is that a non-Jewish Christian can claim the Old Testament as part of his faith. He's been grafted into the family of God.

Communion is a classic example of this; the root of communion is Passover. From Passover we inherit a number of aspects of communion:

- Passover required a blameless sacrifice, just as Christ was our perfect sacrifice on the cross.
- The sacrifice produced blood. In Passover this was used to save the Jews from death in the 10th plague. In Christianity we know that it is the blood of Christ that covers our sin.
- Before celebrating Passover, the Jew was required to eliminate all yeast (which symbolically represents sin) from his house. The Christian is to examine himself and repent before taking communion.
- The Jew was to eat bread which had no yeast in it for the duration of the Passover feast, just as we are to keep ourselves from sin.
- Only the circumcised could participate in Passover; only those who believe in Jesus should take communion.

We have been, in a very real sense, "grafted" into the story that God is telling his children through the years. The high point of that story so far is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are the events that we are to remember in communion. The bread his body, the cup his blood to remind us of what he has done for us. Examine yourself, therefore, and partake in a worthy manner.

The vine does not grow unless it is properly tended. The remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ, the regular act of self-examination and repentance, and finally the reminder that Christ is coming again will serve to help your own vine grow.

November 11

Glasses

If you wear glasses, you know that you will carry around some method of keeping them clean. It may be your handkerchief, the corner of your shirt or a special cleaning cloth. You don't have to wear glasses very long to discover that they are dirt magnets. A little oil from your face gets on the glass and attracts dirt. Some airborne dirt (and dandruff) lands on the glasses and soon joins with your fingerprints to make your glasses an unreliable method of vision. A curious thing happens then. If you can't see clearly out of your glasses, but think you can, your brain takes over. It creates images of things that aren't really there, but fit with the signals it's getting from the eyes. Your author can remember a time when he mistook his wife's plaid robe for a pile of little bags of Halloween candy.

There is a cure for this; you need to clean your glasses. You can purchase packets which contain a piece of paper soaked in alcohol which will remove the dirt and oil. It's a simple thing. It's easily understood.

Have you ever considered that a similar process might improve your view of God? Permit me to explain. There is a proper instrument for seeing God. As Christ put it,

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
(Matthew 5:8)

The heart is the instrument with which you see God. If you want to see God clearly, you must keep that instrument clean. Like your glasses, the cleaning must be done frequently because the dirt of the world will soon cloud your vision. But Christ has provided you such a tool to clean your vision.

That tool is Communion. You have to do things in the right sequence to make this work, but it's not really very complicated. Let's look at the steps:

- First, there is confession. Acknowledge your sins before the Lord. He already knows what they are; he wants you to admit that they are sins and they are yours. In short, you are telling Him you know you have a problem.
- Next, there is repentance. There is no sense admitting the problem unless you're willing to do something about it. That "something" is repentance. It means a change of direction; instead of doing it your way, you're going to do it God's way.
- Finally, there is the renewal of fellowship. A "welcome home." You renew your fellowship with God and your fellowship with your local Christian community by taking communion.

In so doing, you recognize the source of your fellowship open expression Web for open expression Web and your ability to follow God: the sacrifice that Christ made on the Cross. The cup is his blood; the bread is his body. Do this in a worthy manner. Confess your sins, repent and renew your fellowship with God and with your fellow Christians.

November 18

Three Pictures

The story is well known in the physics community, though there seems to be a lack of direct evidence to confirm it. The legend goes like this: in the 1930s, scientists at the University of Chicago were the first to split the atom and produce a confirmed, energy producing nuclear reaction. They put out a press release to this effect. One of the Chicago papers sent a journalist and a photographer over to the University to get the story in more detail. The journalist began by asking a few probing questions; this, however, left the photographer in the dark as to what was going on. He got tired of this, and took over the session by telling the scientists what they were going to do. "First, I need a picture of you guys standing around the atom. Then I need a picture of the atom being split, and after that a picture of you guys standing around next to the pieces." Anybody who's been through high school science classes knows this is not going to work. But it's worth asking how the physicists knew that they had split the atom if the atom is so small they can't see it. The answer simply is that this nuclear reaction produced energy. They had a micro process which produced macro results.

In a very similar way, communion changes people and you can see the results in the person. How does this work?

- *Repentance.* The Christian comes before his Lord in communion, and should come with clean hands. Often enough, this requires repentance.
- *Contemplation.* Communion causes the Christian to contemplate again the death, burial and resurrection of Christ — and how he should respond to it.
- *Anticipation.* Christ specifically connected communion with his return; the Christian must look forward to this.

Communion is a simple thing; the cup, the bread. But if there is to be repentance, there must be self-examination first. Therefore, Christian, examine yourself carefully and see if there is any wickedness in you which needs to be removed. Think of the sacrifice that he made for you on the Cross; know again how much he loves you that he would die for you. Know also that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead — will you be ready? If you take these things seriously, you will change. The rest of the world may wonder why, but they will notice. Prepare yourself, then, for the body and blood of Christ.

November 25

Unity

The problem is not one which is going to go away after a single communion meditation. The truth is the church has had a problem with unity for many hundreds, if not thousands of years. Our divisions are most evident.

- We have divisions of politics. There are denominations in the United States which split over the American Civil War and have yet to reunite. There are other splits in the church that are nationalistic in character. It seems we have to have one little denomination for each little division in politics, established once and maintained forever.
- We have divisions of social status. The author of this meditation does not know where your particular congregation might stand on this, but his congregation considers it disgraceful to visit those in prison, other than those imprisoned for their faith. Are Christians in prison part of the church?
- There are any number of schisms in Christendom. We may content ourselves with identifying the three largest: Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox.

It seems we have a sufficient number of things to divide us. Against these we must place Christ's prayer that we may all be one, as He and the Father are one.

How is it, then, that we can be one? The first answer comes in that we have one foundation — Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, by virtue of his atonement at Calvary. One Lord, one faith, one birth.

Beyond that, we also hold to one Scripture. The various denominations interpret it in various ways, but you will notice that anyone who considers himself a real Christian acknowledges the Bible as the source of knowledge concerning Christ. If you add to it or take away from it, you do so at your peril.

Our unity extends over all these things because God is one. One Lord, one God the Father and one Holy Spirit. This is what produces one body, the church. We have many members; each of those members has a different function. But those members are part of one body, and therefore are to unite in love for each other.

Communion is the symbol of the unity of the church. Paul tells us that we have one bread, which means therefore we have one body. We don't separate Christians into wheat, rye, and sourdough. There is one body because there is one bread. There is also only one cup, which represents the blood of Christ, our Savior and Lord. You cannot take a bottle of grape juice or wine and put the good half in one communion tray and the bad half in the other. One body, one blood.

It seems so simple — and it is. Christ made it simple so that we might understand it clearly and be united. We are to be one as he and the Father are one. Therefore, if there is anything in your life which works against the unity of the body of Christ, I urge you to repent of it and make amends as quickly as you can. Let a man examine himself before communion, and change his ways thereafter.

December 2

Tables

1st Corinthians 10:21

One of the great temptations to the modern church is to adjust our practices and doctrine to conform to those ideas that are current in our world. If you need an example, ask yourself how long ago was it that homosexuality became perfectly acceptable to the church, instead of a sin. We like the idea that the church is just like folks; accepting the same things and doing the same things. There is no sense of that in the Scripture. We are told to be “in the world, not of the world.” Permit me three examples.

- The world tells us that any form of sex is acceptable as long as it is consensual. The world sees no reason to think that there is a problem with adultery, or with sex before marriage, or with homosexuality. And they proclaim to everyone that, if you don't think like this, you are some strange, demented person burning with hatred for people who don't believe the same things you do. The rule for the Christian is no sex outside of marriage, and fulfilling love within.
- The world tells us that “whoever dies with the most toys, wins.” The church tells us that “whoever dies with the most toys, dies.” It's an interesting question for the Christian: what would you do if you had the money to buy a Mercedes? Is that the top priority for your funds?
- Then there is the sin of Satan: pride. “I will be like the Most High.” Do you go through life with the express intent of being better than anybody else? Are you one of those people who goes through life telling the rest of the world just what a genius you are? There is the essence of pride: I am better than you are. You cannot look down on others and look up to God at the same time.

Unfortunately, one common reaction to this problem is simply to do both. You behave like a citizen of the world on Saturday night and then come to church on Sunday looking as pious as can be. This goes by the name of hypocrisy — and you don't like it when you see it. Are you condemning that which you are? Perhaps more to the point, do you think God doesn't know this? Or do you think that he doesn't care? Honesty starts from within the human being.

Communion has a very important significance in this. It is not just a ritual; it is a proclamation of what you believe. If you partake in communion you are proclaiming:

- The sacrifice of the body and blood of Jesus Christ on the Cross.
- The salvation that that sacrifice is brought to you, by the atonement.
- With that salvation you proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ as well.

At communion, you proclaim which side you are on — you're either on the world's side or on the side of Jesus Christ. There is no fence to sit on. Before you take communion, honesty is required. Especially, honesty with yourself. Look within; examine yourself and partake.

December 9

Last Day

2nd Peter 3:9-14

The story is told of a Jewish rabbi, on his deathbed, being asked by his students for his final counsel. In particular, the dialogue went something like this:

“When should a man repent?”

“On the last day of his life.”

“But how is a man to know which day is the last day?”

“That is the reason you should repent every day.”

It is clear throughout the Scripture that God desires that everyone should repent. The problem is when you tell someone they must do this before his last day on earth, they begin to think that they have plenty of time to repent. They don't see death coming; life insurance salesmen make no sales with them. They just don't see themselves dying anytime soon.

But there is another possibility:

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, (2 Peter 3:9-14)

From the earliest days of Scripture, and the earliest days of the church, the followers of God have been taught that there will come a day, known as the “Day of the Lord,” which marks the end of this era and the beginning of the new heaven and the new earth. This concept is taught throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It has always been taken seriously, if not literally. In other words — this is going to happen and you should be ready for it.

God understands how difficult it is for the human being to persist in repentance. He has therefore assigned to communion the task of self examination. You are encouraged to examine yourself and repent; it is necessary for the unity of the church. You are encouraged to examine yourself and repent; it is necessary for a right relationship with God Almighty. Therefore communion has within it the command of self-examination and the obligation of repentance. It is something you want to do now, not

later. That Jewish rabbi was right; you don't know the last day of your life. You may be in perfect health, looking forward to the rest of your life only to find that Gabriel has blown his trumpet and you are now called before Almighty God to give account. Prepare yourself, this week and every week, by examining your self before communion, repenting and then partaking.

December 16

Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations is not very much studied in these days. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah, and appears to be a series of laments about the sinfulness of the Jews and the consequent destruction of Jerusalem by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. As you might guess, in the original Hebrew the book is quite clearly a series of poems. It is therefore to be interpreted poetically, like the Psalms. Its appeal is not one of intellectual theology, but the agony of the heart.

In the middle of these poems is a selection of well-known verses.

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

(Lamentations 3:21-23)

If you will look at the last phrase, you will see that it is the inspiration for the classic Christian hymn, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. In all of Jeremiah's bemoaning of the fate of the Jews, there is this ray of hope. In the middle of God's punishment there is an appeal to God's mercy. From the very beginning of time it has been God's plan to redeem mankind with his atonement on the Cross. (See Ephesians 1:4). The Lord's compassions never fail, even to the point of having his Son go to the Cross.

Communion reminds us of this. If you have come to communion this day looking for hope, you are in the right place. Communion

- *Reminds* us of the sacrifice which Christ made on the Cross. In the bread we see his body; in the cup, his blood. This is the price that God was willing to pay in his compassion for you. You are God's child and therefore God will have mercy upon you. Communion reminds you of that mercy.
- *Repentance* is required for this forgiveness. He doesn't want to see if you can hide your sin from him; you can't. But he wants you to bring it out into the open with him. He sees the wound, but wants you to open the wound so he can cleanse it.
- *Renewal* of our fellowship with him is the natural result. By joining in the fellowship around the communion table, we not only renew our ties to each other but also our fellowship with God. Adult children know this; when they go home, they feast.

As you partake this morning, examine yourself and see if there is something you need to bring forward which is now standing between you and God. Do not worry about whether or not he will forgive you. Today is a new day and his mercies are new every morning.

December 23

It's about the Cross

It is a rare thing to find a communion meditation which genuinely concerns Christmas. Christmas is so full of joy; Easter starts with the crucifixion. They don't seem to merge too well together. The truth is, however, that Christmas is the necessary preceding event to the crucifixion. If Jesus does not come in the flesh, he cannot be our atoning sacrifice. There's a song about this. It's titled, "It's about the Cross."⁴

Here are the lyrics:

It's not just about the manger Where the baby lay
It's not all about the angels Who sing for him that day
It's not just about the shepherds Or the bright and shining star
It's not all about the wisemen Who travelled from afar

It's about the cross It's about my sin
It's about how Jesus came to be born once So that we could be born again
It's about the stone That was rolled away
So that you and I could have real life someday
It's about the cross
It's about the cross

The Christmas manger is the starting point of the journey to the cross. When Mary gave birth, she gave birth to God in the flesh — the incarnation. He is both fully man and fully God, and his birth was prophesied long before. This was the plan from the beginning.

This means that God is no longer distant and beyond knowing. It means that Christ is human like us and he understands our temptations, for he went through some of the same things. It means that he understands our pains; he knows what it is to get up with a bad back on a cold morning. And perhaps most human of all, he knows our weariness.

He is the unblemished human being, the only one without sin. That makes him a perfect sacrifice for our atonement. It also makes him a perfect High Priest who intercedes for us at the throne of grace. For those who have accepted Christ, he is both Lord and Savior.

The early church had a pair of watchwords. One Christian would say, "He is Risen!" The other would reply, "He is Risen indeed!" The baby in the manger became the man who would rise from the grave. Consider what he has done for you; then partake, and remember.

⁴ A contemporary version by the Ball Brothers can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYSJi-EHAAk> as of this writing.

December 30

Influenza

"It is a nuisance to have influenza" – Franklin Roosevelt, in a message to Winston Churchill.

As winter approaches, it is not uncommon for medical organizations to offer flu shots to their members at no expense. As the medical profession is not noted for doing things which produce no money, we can assume there is a good reason that they would do this — it must save them money. And, it does. People who get flu shots tend not to get the flu — and therefore don't need to be treated for it.

There also must be some benefit in it for the patient. We get those flu shots because we believe they are going to prevent us from getting the flu. That saves us time and misery. The method is rather simple: the vaccine causes your body to create antibodies which fight the flu. The vaccine is close enough to the flu to do this, but does not actually give you the flu.

An ounce of prevention is said to be worth a pound of cure. That's what this vaccine does in a biological sense. Communion works somewhat the same way in the spiritual sense. If you are a faithful participant in communion on a regular basis you are much more likely to live a life that is in accord with the Holy Spirit. This helps prevent the problems of the spirit — namely, sin. How does this work?

But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

(1 Corinthians 11:31)

That's how. By examining ourselves at communion we correct spiritual problems at their early stages, before they can have disastrous effects.

Communion is a form of renewal. The body, represented by the bread, connects us with the atonement of Christ. Our forgiveness depends upon his atonement. The blood of Christ represents the cleansing of sin in our forgiveness. You will recall in the Old Testament that sanctification was done by blood. Together, the body and the blood as symbolized in communion reconnect us with our Lord. We not only recall his sacrifice; we accept it for the forgiveness of our sins and depend upon it for our spiritual life. It is the restoration of the relationship of fellowship.

So how should a Christian approach communion? With honesty. Examine yourself today; see if there is anything in you that needs repentance. Bring it before the Lord, asking his forgiveness. Partake, and then go forward in repentance.

