

The Desk Drawer

Most of us have a desk drawer filled with a clutter of objects. We might find pens with no ink; postage stamps which used to be first class; old business cards, some wallet size pictures and other odd clutter. But amidst all this there are the items that we mean to keep, for they are precious to us. They are keepsakes – items which we keep for the sake of another person. It might be Dad’s old pocket watch – a reminder of his constant promptness. It causes us to remember him – and pass that memory on to our children too.

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you” (1st Corinthians 11:23). That’s how Paul phrased it. The Lord’s Supper is precious first because it was given by our Lord. We do this to remember him. But like those precious items in our desk drawer, we pass this on to the next generation. In so doing we accomplish three things:

- We connect with our past – the saints who have gone before us – and proclaim our unity with all the church.
- By being faithful in this we stay steadily on course in our lives, being repentant each time.
- Keeping it as we found it, we pass it on, unblemished, to the next generation.

We do this only with things we consider important. To you, my dad’s watch has only antique value, but I value it more highly. The Lord’s Supper, however, is prized by all of us. Done with honest devotion, it is our proclamation of the faith. In doing this we proclaim his death, and thus his atonement. By this we show our belief in the resurrection – and his soon return.

As you partake, remember who gave you this – and at what price. Your desk drawer contains no keepsake so precious as this.

January 11

The Ferrari Incident

There are any number of ways to get yourself fired from even the simplest of jobs. Somewhere in Southern California there is a former valet parking attendant who experienced a most interesting method.

He was working at a very exclusive restaurant, parking cars for their elite customers. One such customer drove up in a Ferrari. Not just any Ferrari; a custom built automobile with a unique gearbox and capable of speeds in excess of two hundred miles per hour. The owner quite naturally asked if the young man could handle such a car. With more confidence than sense he told him that it would be no problem. Touching the gas, the attendant flew up the first ramp in the parking structure – and directly into a wall. The management yanked him out of the wreckage and fired him on the spot.

We might ask a question: did the Ferrari turn this young man into a poor driver, or did the Ferrari simply reveal his incompetence? Of course, we know the answer to that question.

The same thing applies to Communion. It reveals our unworthiness; it does not cause it. If we claim a relationship with Christ, then his presence will show us for the sinners we are. If we do nothing about this, Paul tells us that weakness, sickness and even death result.

What shall we do, then, to come before the Lord in a worthy manner? Repent. Repent before you walk into the building; repent before you take Communion. Then follow through on your repentance. Approach the Lord with clean hands and clean heart.

Beware: God is not mocked. A mumbled prayer of pseudo-repentance does not deceive him. He knows your heart. To take his Communion unworthily is no light matter to him – and will soon be no light matter to you.

Optical Instruments

It is hard to conceive today, but most of the history of mankind was without any form of optical instrument. Today we have telescopes which cost billions of dollars – and can see to great distances, producing pictures which inspire awe at God’s creation. We have microscopes which can scan down to the level of individual atoms, revealing order in even the smallest of things. More mundane, but more common, are the glasses on your nose – which reveal the chaos that is rush hour traffic.

But none of these instruments is suitable for the greatest of vision: to see God. For that, our Lord tells us, you need a very different instrument: the pure heart. Blessed are the pure in heart, Christ tells us, for they shall see God. How do you obtain such an instrument? Repent and be baptized. More importantly, how do you keep it working? Only by repentance; for this reason we are taught that we should examine ourselves before taking the Lord’s Supper.

Therefore, let us come to Communion with pure hearts, and see what can be seen in purity:

- We shall see God, and know both his righteousness and his love. Righteousness, for the Cross paid the penalty for your sins and mine. Love, for it was God’s Son who paid that price.
- We shall see the sacrifice of God. The ancient Hebrews were taught to sacrifice to God. This is in imitation of Christ himself, the God who sacrifices for us.
- We shall see his salvation, for this meal commemorates the gift that gives us eternal life.

The telescope and the microscope show us the glory of God’s creation; the pure heart shows us God Himself.

January 25

Let Me Draw You a Picture

How many times have you said it: “Let me draw you a picture.” We use the technique to explain things we think are simple – which sometimes are also profound.

The Cross is just such a picture, if you know how to explain it correctly:

- The vertical beam is anchored in earth, but it points toward heaven. Do you see that the route to heaven goes through the Cross?
- The horizontal beam has its story too. Some might see it as stretching from past to future; others will see it holding the arms of Jesus, stretched open wide,
- At the center of the Cross is Jesus, the central figure of mankind. Without his sacrifice, the Cross would picture nothing. Vertically, He is the bridge between man and God.

As if to explain the Cross, Jesus has drawn us a picture of His sacrifice – that picture is the Lord’s Supper.

- The bread, which represents his body, is a common thing to us. That body was a common body, one just like our own. He shares our humanity; he sacrificed that human life for us.
- The wine, which represents his blood, tells us that his blood was shed for us. Life is in the blood, the Jews were taught. In a sense, when we take the cup we are drinking life to ourselves.
- It is called Communion – for in it we commune with our Lord, who created this memorial. We also participate in common with each other, linking Christian to Christian in Christ’s eternal embrace.

See the picture before you and know the Truth.

The Supreme Miracle

C. S. Lewis called it “the supreme miracle” – the incarnation of Christ. The fact that God came in the flesh of a human being is the root of our salvation – and a constant target for those who wish to undermine the faith.

Why did God do this? What would cause him to humble the Son to the point of taking on human form – a humbling greater than any that we could accomplish?

- It is in keeping with God’s character. God is love; therefore he is moved to help to his wayward children. God is righteous; therefore he is moved to pay the proper price for that help.
- His purpose was simple: our salvation. Not just that we would be forgiven, but that we would be given eternal life.
- His method was to share in our death so that we might share in his life.; God became a man so that we could become like God – eternal.

The physical nature of Christ’s body is clear from the Scripture. It is the same physical nature that we have in our bodies. It is common flesh, not some special version of it. Christ is fully man. The point is so powerful that John tells us (1st John 4:2) that we can know the Holy Spirit by the fact that the Spirit confesses that Christ has come in the flesh.

The memorial he gave us, the Lord’s Supper, is both physical and common as well. It is real bread; we hold it in our hands. It is a common form of bread. The cup comes from a common fruit, the grape. It is a commonplace item too. It’s a reminder that Jesus is one of us.

So when you take, remember how humbly Jesus came to us, for he came in the flesh – and all for the purpose of your salvation.

Appearances

She's at the health club every night. Most of the regulars know her story. She works out, and her body is in good shape. She knows how to keep it that way.

She wears her wedding ring – a symbol of hope and despair. While she's at the gym, her husband is with another woman. It's not that she's unattractive; it's just that the other woman is twenty-five years younger than she is. Her husband values women – all women – by their appearance. By his standards she is old, used up and worn out.

That's the story of our society. We buy cars only if they look cool; a big, roaring engine helps too. Our clothes must be the latest style. Our homes require interior decorators to obtain just the right look. We must keep up appearances. Appearance is everything.

Consider, then, the Lord's Supper. Even with all the elaboration possible, it is a simple ceremony. Its elements are simple too. Have you ever heard of "designer bread?" The cup of wine or juice is rather plain as well. If it's wine, we see no vintage marks, no cork presented by a waiter in a tuxedo. Grape juice doesn't come with vintage marks, just an expiration date on the cap. What kind of show can you make with these?

The truth is this: those elements are not for appearances. By their very simplicity they invite us to look beyond the outward appearance to discover what they really mean. "This is my body; this is my blood," said the Creator of the universe. Do not judge by appearances, but rather discern the true meaning – and its impact on you.

"Do not judge by appearances" – this is required of the Christian at Communion. It might possibly be a good rule in life, as well.

Car Care

The care of an automobile is a required lesson for daughters. As grease does not usually match the eye shadow, we teach them these three things:

- Take it in to your mechanic for regular maintenance
- Take it in immediately at the first sign of a problem.
- If you don't, your purse won't like the result.

Paul tells us much the same thing about examining ourselves for the Lord's Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:31-32 NIV (31) But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. (32) When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

It's just like caring for the car:

- The life of prayer and devotion keeps us pure hearted, and free of judgment.
- If there is sin, judge yourself first. This pleases God, starts reconciliation and serves as a warning for the future.
- If you don't do these things, God will discipline you.

Let's understand what "discipline" means. We use it with regard to our children, to train them to do what is right. We also speak of a "disciplined athlete," one who is prepared for his particular event. God disciplines his children to prepare them for the tasks they have ahead. Discipline yourself, or God must discipline you.

How do you do this? Before you come before the Lord in Communion, ask yourself some questions:

- Is my life dominated by anger, envy or lust?
- Or have I reached a lifestyle of greed, gluttony and laziness?
- Worse, is my life filled with pride?

Let a man examine *himself*. It saves so much trouble.

February 22

Cruel and Unusual

The courts of the United States are sometimes called upon to rule on the legality of some form of the death penalty. The Constitution prohibits “cruel and unusual punishment.” If our Supreme Court could be transplanted to the time of the Roman Empire, what would they make of Crucifixion?

It is certainly cruel. For example, in Christ’s case, we have:

- The constant mockery, including the crown of thorns.
- The severe flogging – often sufficient to cause death itself.
- Carrying the cross – again, public mockery combined with the exhaustion weakening the body.
- The victim was nailed to the cross.
- When the cross was stood upright, the victim was left to die an agonizing death. It was considered merciful to smash the legs of the victim to hasten death.

It would seem that the qualifications for cruelty would have been fully met. Interestingly, the qualification of being unusual would not have been satisfied – crucifixion was a common form of execution. Indeed, millions of Christians died on a cross during these times. Some of these were even soaked in tar before being crucified, then nailed to the cross. Later, after much agony, they would be set alight as night fell – to serve as street lights.

It is unlikely that you and I will die such a death. Indeed, death in our times is usually a rather sanitary procedure in a hospital, comforted by pain killers. All the more reason, then, that we are given Communion as a reminder of the horrible death Christ suffered – for us.

That’s right; he died for us. His purpose in coming was to provide the atonement for our sins. It is fitting that we should remember his death, for it gave us our life. Think on this as you partake.

Matched Set

Perhaps you have someone like Aunt Alice. She was an avid collector of collectables, one of which I inherited. It's interesting to see how the makers of these things try to create value for the collector. For example:

- These two medallions commemorate a historic event – Nixon's trip to China. They're big – the silver one is over five ounces.
- The two medallions are a matched set, one of only three hundred sets ever minted.
- The silver one is almost pure silver.
- There's an impressive display case, and several items documenting the authenticity of the set.

She paid seventy-five dollars for the set in 1972. They are now worth seventy two dollars. Sometimes things just aren't as valuable as they might seem. Sometimes value just doesn't keep.

It is not so with the atonement of Christ. Its value never diminishes or changes.

- The value never changes, for it brings salvation from sin and eternal life.
- It is the same value for each and every one of us. There is no such thing as a "better" atonement.

The value is eternally unchanging, for God is eternal.

Christ asks in return that you remember his sacrifice. You didn't pay for it, he did. The price was his very life itself. For this God has given him the name above all names. All he asks of you is to remember what he did. So ask you take the cup and the bread, remember the price that he paid – and thank God that its value is eternal, and eternally yours.

In The Garden

At the Lord's Supper we are often told to think upon the suffering our Lord endured for our sake. Have you ever considered that a part of that suffering was the anticipation of what would happen?

Consider that night in Gethsemane. Christ goes to the Father in prayer with a great deal on his mind:

- Of course, he knows the pain that is coming. Would this not be made worse by the fact that he did not deserve it? The guilty at least know why they are suffering – and that they earned it.
- He is also contemplating his death – often considered the greatest of human suffering.
- He knows, too, that the Crucifixion will cause him to be separated from the Father – severing a relationship both dear and eternal.
- Finally, he knows he will be betrayed by one disciple, and abandoned by all the others.

This might seem to be a little thing to one who is God. But our Lord is also completely human. In his sorrow he does what human beings do.

- He takes three of his closest friends with him. In sorrow, do we want to be alone? The arm of a friend on your shoulder is a great comfort.
- But he prays alone. Some things are too deeply personal for anyone but God to hear.
- So great is his distress and sorrow that he asks his friends to keep watch – to allow him to put everything into that prayer.

Pain is in the body; suffering is in the mind. As you partake, remember the agony of anticipation our Lord suffered – for you.

The Postage Stamp

Consider the humble postage stamp: It costs relatively little. The design may be genuinely artistic, or it might just be a picture of Daffy Duck. In itself, it means little – but the letter it carries can mean a great deal.

Think of what might be inside that envelope!

- If you're a college student, it might be that very welcome letter from home – with a check from Mom.
- It might be from an old friend, telling you that he stands with you in your troubles – an arm around the shoulder from a distance.
- It might be a letter granting you forgiveness for something that happened forty years ago – and has festered ever since.
- Perhaps, even, it is a letter which assures you that you have a warm welcome waiting – at home.

Communion, in a way, is God's postage stamp. The elements themselves cost very little. It doesn't really matter if they are served from an unadorned wooden tray or a fancy, gold plated metal one. But think of what they bring:

- A Friend who will stand by you in all your trials. Indeed, a Friend who has been through horrible trials, one who knows how you feel even when no one else can comprehend it.
- Forgiveness – for any and all things that you have done, given by the only One who can genuinely forgive. Sin is powerful – but Christ has the authority to forgive sin.
- Reassurance of a “welcome home” – a welcome when you die from the one who holds the keys of hell and death. It's also a welcome from the one who will one day divide the sheep and the goats.

If you will come to him in repentance, remembering the sacrifice he made for you, he will grant you the results of that sacrifice – a Friend, forgiveness, and a forever welcome at home.

March 22

Souvenirs

Souvenirs are often simple things. If you've ever had to clean out Mom's house after she died, you found that she had a lot of simple memories of her life:

- From her days in High School, she had photographs of friends and simple memories – pom-poms, pennants and such.
- Her husband was a veteran of the military. She kept his medals and ribbons as a memory of his service (and her service as a military wife and mother.)
- From their travels she kept any number of knick-knacks. These were things like a paper cocktail umbrella from a restaurant long out of business.
- Poignantly, she kept programs from her friend's funerals. They were one last thing to remember them by.

Christians keep memories like that too. We keep little things that remind us of the good times (things we made at camp, for instance). Often enough we have items which recall our service to the Lord – most teachers have a handmade something from one of their students. If we've been on the mission field – even for a very short term visit – we usually have some knick-knack from the country we visited.

And we have a memorial of one particular death. Our Lord knew the importance of such a memorial. He gave us the Lord's Supper as such.

- We take the wine or juice as a memory of the blood he bled on the cross for our salvation.
- We take the bread as a memory of the broken, suffering body that hung on that cross.
- We do this until he returns; indeed, the very act of taking this Communion is a proclamation that he is coming again.

It is good to know what things should be forgotten. It is better to know what things should be remembered.

March 29

Pinch Hitter

Baseball fans know what a pinch hitter really is. It's a phrase so common in our language that it has passed into usage into other areas of speech. But like many such transfers, the people using it outside of baseball often get it wrong.

How so? In baseball, you bring in a pinch hitter because that hitter is *better* than the other one. The common example is bringing in a pinch hitter for a pitcher. Pitchers are usually poor hitters; the manager may decide that losing that pitcher's services on the mound is not as important as a better chance to get a hit. That's the original usage. Often, the phrase is now used to mean not "a better performing substitute" but just a substitute – often meaning "whoever we could get."

Christ is our pinch hitter in the matter of sin and death. He's not just a substitute; he's the only substitute who can actually do the task. Here's why:

- The penalty for sin is death. If someone is to pay that penalty for me, that someone must not also be under sentence of death for sin. Dying for your own sins means you can't die for mine. In short, that someone must be sinless. I'm not; Christ is.
- The penalty must be paid in the manner prescribed by God for an effective substitute. Christ did so in accord with the Old Testament law, at just the right time.
- If someone does pay that penalty for me, how do I know it's effective? We have the Resurrection, clear proof of triumph over death.

Baseball fans often can give you every detail of the last time their club won the World Series. If they had tickets, the ticket stubs are preserved forever as memorabilia. Communion is our method of remember the triumph over sin and death that Christ achieved at the Cross. He is our pinch hitter – not just any substitute available, but the one who could do the job we cannot. Remember his death as you take this bread and drink this cup.

April 5 (Palm Sunday)

Great Beginnings

We celebrate beginnings. The birth may be in a secluded hospital room, but the flood of grandparents and other relatives begins very, very quickly. (There's a reason God made them cute). Later in life we celebrate graduations, markers in life of our children going "to the next level." Then there are weddings – celebrations of the union paralleled by that of Christ and the church. Have you noticed, then, that all of these are accompanied by memory keepers – photos and other souvenirs?

On the original Palm Sunday, Jerusalem celebrated what they believed to be a great beginning. They saw a new king coming to them, one who would throw off the world's ways and govern in God's way. Indeed, this king was somehow connected to the eventual coming of God on earth – the time when God would himself dwell with his people. This, they knew, would bring in a golden age of peace and prosperity that would never end. These expectations were disappointed; five days later the new king would be crucified by the local authorities.

Or were they really disappointed? Were those expectations so unreasonable after all?

Did they get a new king? Yes, they did. He wasn't the king they expected, in the world's way, but a king as given by God. He is known as the Prince of Peace, and his kingdom still grows to this day.

Did they get the presence of God with them? Indeed, Emmanuel is his name to this day – God With Us. In the person of the Holy Spirit he is with us still.

Did his coming usher in a golden age? Perhaps not – but he is coming again; perhaps it is just a matter of patience.

Celebrate with us now the Great Beginning – the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. His atonement gives us our redemption; his resurrection assures us of life eternal. We do this until he comes again – the next great beginning.

While It Was Still Dark

Many wives will sympathize with Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb on Easter morning. They had started out, John tells us, while it was still dark. Any woman who gets up early to throw a load of laundry in the washer knows the feeling. The women were coming to anoint the body with spices – considered women’s work in that time. They walked there with no light – both physically and spiritually, for they were expecting a corpse. But do you notice that they did their task promptly, without hoping that someone else would volunteer? Even in the hopeless times, duty’s call should be answered.

Sometimes Communion seems like that to us. It’s something to occupy some time between the music and the sermon; it’s a ritual that we’ve done this way for years. A ritual, but an empty one. We’re glad to hurry through it.

How is it that we fall into this dreadful habit? We have no light; it is still dark in our minds. How do we bring light to our minds? By examining ourselves, so that there will be repentance to cleanse the heart and clear the mind. If we will not do that, an empty ritual is all that is left.

Some might ask whether or not just performing the ritual is enough. Some of us were taught that way; don’t think, just do it. Indeed, the fancier the ritual, the better, right? To dispel this illusion you need only recall the words, “let a man examine himself.”

We must not forget that we do this in memory of Christ’s death – and we will do it only until he comes again. Communion looks forward as well as backward. The true meaning is kept alive in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. To bring this out, we must remove sin as a barrier between us and the Risen Lord. Examine yourself, and submit yourself to him. Does it seem like he will never return? Patience, child; first the cross – then the light.

April 19

Drink Responsibly

Perhaps you have seen the ads or heard the commercials. Stuck in at the end will be something like, “Megalithic Brewers urges you to drink responsibly.” It is an almost pious appeal, showing their sober concern for our drunken welfare.

Of course, the cynical among us might think that they are doing this to avoid lawsuits from the victims of drunkenness – who often are the drunks themselves. But isn’t that the way of the world, to say one thing and mean something entirely different?

A similar warning is given to the Christian. We too are advised to “drink responsibly” at the Lord’s table. Perhaps we might look at irresponsible drinking:

Irresponsible drinking might be treating Communion as nothing more than a stale ritual, something we do every week at this time, and no more.

Irresponsible drinking might be to partake without self examination. Some of us, as C. S. Lewis put it, want to “let sleeping worms lie.”

Worst of all, how irresponsible it is to drink hypocritically, to give others the impression that you really believe when you are just keeping up a reputation you don’t deserve.

Irresponsible drinking has its consequences. We all know the consequences of drunken driving; but did you know that those who take Communion in an unworthy manner can be afflicted with sickness and even death? Did you think that God Almighty would allow those who insult the sacrifice of Christ to go undisciplined?

Responsible drinking is this: “Let a man examine himself.” By examining yourself, confessing your sins and repenting, you prepare yourself for the memorial which proclaims your salvation by sacrifice. Do not do this lightly; drink responsibly.

Funeral Dinner

It is the custom in many Christian churches to end a funeral with a dinner. At my father's funeral the dinner was at home, the ladies of the church and friends providing the meal. For my mother's funeral, we went to her favorite restaurant. But in both instances the meal was not centered on the actual food, but the memories we shared of my parents. Stories were brought out by friends and family, some of which I had never heard, as we celebrated a long life in Christ. It was a reunion of family and friends, and a good time. One reason we were so upbeat: as Christians, we share the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead.

Communion is somewhat like that. Indeed, the Bible tells us that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper somewhat like we might have a church dinner. Unfortunately, this brought abuse which humiliated the poorer brothers in the church, so the Lord's Supper was separated from ordinary church meals together. It still bears some resemblance to those funeral dinners, though:

It is celebrated in churches humble and grand – simple elements served in the style of the congregation.

It is a time of memory – thinking about what Christ has done for us, his sacrifice and our salvation.

It, too, is celebrated in “sure and certain hope” – of our Lord's return in glory.

As you partake, then, remember these things. Do not be dazzled by the elegance of the serving trays, nor ashamed of their humble simplicity. The caliber of the meal is not the caliber of the person celebrated. Remember too that you do not partake of Communion alone; we, the church, take it as a body. Most of all, remember what Christ has done for you in his atonement, granting you salvation.

Photographs

The advent of the computer and the digital camera have convinced many of us that we, too, can be photographers. One reason for this is the abundance of computer programs used to treat the photographs we take. Consider what one may do if you have a lousy photograph:

Most commonly, we “catalog” the photograph. We file it away and, having done something with it, we consider the matter finished.

We could also “enhance” the photograph. For example, programs often remove the “red eye effect” of flash photography. Once we have it looking the way we want it, we might then “share” it with others, in several different ways. If we’re really proud of our enhancements, we might even print it and frame it.

Of course, there is the hard method. You fix the problem. You take another picture, this time with the right light, framing and other elements of photography.

Photographs are a graphic memory; our minds have memories of other sorts. Have you considered that we can treat the memory of our sins in much the same way?

We might just tell ourselves that yes, that’s a sin, and catalog it away. Having filed it, we forget it.

Sometimes we enhance our memories – we justify ourselves, or tell ourselves it really isn’t a sin. This can rise to the point where we actually begin to brag about what we have done – sharing our triumphs instead of being ashamed. If this goes far enough, we might even have a trophy of this for our desk. Greed often produces a physical testimonial.

But you could handle it the hard way. You could repent.

“Let a man examine himself.” It is not an idle thought, nor is it a suggestion. If you are to approach the Lord God Almighty in the sacred rite of Communion, you should do so with a clean heart. A clean heart comes from self-examination and repentance. Therefore, do not file and forget, nor justify, but repent.

Going to Jail

Have you ever been to jail? Thousands of Christians have, not as criminals but as those involved with various prison ministries. It's not easy to recruit volunteers for this ministry; some people feel that prison might just be contagious. Indeed, it's not for the faint-hearted:

It's a frightening experience, especially the first time. Often enough the prison officers consider visitors – especially those not part of a group ministry – as simply the criminals who haven't been caught yet. To be despised in a cold, official manner is unpleasant to the mind – especially when reinforced by the clang of steel gates between you and freedom.

The experience has its moral effect as well. One woman, after her first experience visiting a friend in prison, said that she just wanted to go back to the motel, burn all her clothes and take a shower with a scrub brush and lye soap.

It's hard to remember, sometimes, that the prisoners are human beings too. Whatever your crime, it is a climate of fear – you are surrounded by some of the worst of humanity. One Christian received a panic phone call from his friend in prison: "I'm in a cell block with 14 guys – and you know two of them." "Who?" "Sirhan B. Sirhan (Robert Kennedy's murderer) – and Charles Manson."

Yet in this world Christianity flourishes. Why? Perhaps it is simply that they have time to sit and think – and repent.

What is this to us? Simply this: these men and women, too, are those for whom Christ died. When you take the Lord's Supper you proclaim his death – even on behalf of such as these. We must remember that all of us are sinners. Christ never made a distinction between good sinners and bad; he died for all. His instructions for salvation start with, "whosoever will."

As you partake, consider the extent of his sacrifice. Not just for the righteous, not just for the worthy, not just for the nice guys – Christ died for "whosoever will." Even the least of these may have pardon. Remember how great his sacrifice, how great his love.

May 17

Eucharist

One word for the Lord's Supper, or Communion, is "Eucharist." It is not in common use in evangelical churches, but remains with the liturgical churches. The word itself was in more common use in prior centuries; the changes in the English language have confined it to particular churches.

The word itself, however, comes from the earliest days of the church. Much of the early church outside Jerusalem spoke Greek. In that language, the word used for what we might call Communion was *eucharistia* – which means, simply, “thanksgiving.”

Have you ever thought of the Lord’s Supper as a time of thanksgiving? We can certainly see it that way in our own personal lives; I have much to be thankful for.

I am thankful, first, for my salvation. That Christ died for one as yet unborn – me – is something to be thankful for indeed.

But he did not give me just one chance at salvation. No, when I sin (as all of us do) he is faithful and just to forgive my sin as I repent. Such patience!

I am thankful, too, that by his sacrifice he broke down the wall between me and God the Father. He is the peace that allows me to approach God Almighty and call him “Father.”

We as a church have reason to be thankful too. Among many other things, we should be thankful for:

By his sacrifice he has established the church – Christianity is not a solo flight!

By the example of his suffering we are prepared to suffer; by the example of his death we are prepared for martyrdom. Who can say that it will not happen to us?

By his word we know that we celebrate this meal “until he comes again.” We are thankful that we know of his sure and certain return.

As you meditate upon the Lord’s Supper, remember: Give thanks. He did this for us.

May 24

Sacrifice

Have you ever considered the motivation for ordinary human beings to make sacrifices?

Sometimes we do it for those we love. Grandparents have been known to be extravagant towards their grandchildren.

Sometimes we do it to obtain some good thing – we save money for a college education, for example.

Occasionally, we sacrifice to honor someone or something – a gift given “in honor of” someone, given as a token of our respect and admiration for that person, for example.

Often, it’s simply “the right thing to do.” We pay our bills on time despite the thought that we might like to use the money for something else.

Jesus had much the same set of motivations in his sacrifice at the Cross:

Sacrifice for love? Indeed, so great is God's love for us that he gave his only son as a sacrifice for our sins.

Sacrifice to obtain some good thing? It is by Christ's sacrifice at the cross that he obtained the church, the "bride of Christ."

Was that sacrifice in honor of someone? Indeed, Christ honored the Father by being obedient to him, even obedient to death.

Was it "the right thing to do?" From before the beginning of time this was planned; from the earliest sections of Scripture it was prophesied. Though Christ asked to avoid the cross if possible, his prayer showed he knew the right thing: "not my will, but yours."

Therefore, when you remember Christ's sacrifice by taking this Communion, remember the great love which moved him. Remember that he provided the church, so that you would not be alone. As you remember, honor God by your obedience to him. And do so until, as prophesied, he comes again.

Seeing Things Unseen

Many living today are proud of their hard-nosed, “show me” attitude towards life. But if you examine it, even such people still have the problem of seeing that which intrinsically cannot be seen. A simple example of this is ever-present: the wind.

It’s easiest done, I’m told, at sea with sailing ships. An experienced sailor can tell you wind speed and direction simply by looking at other ships. Determining the course of the other ship and the set of her sails will tell the speed and direction of the wind.

On land it’s a bit more difficult. But all of us are familiar with the sound of the wind; trees bending in the wind are familiar sight. We see the unseen, then, by its effects.

In the air it is more difficult. The best methods use radar – that is, we use the unseen to see the unseen.

We may be assured that others do this to measure the Holy Spirit in our lives. Some see us as sailors do – they see the direction we’re headed in, and the actions we are taking (like setting sails for that sailor) and can then determine just how much the Holy Spirit is in us. Others see us like the trees – bent, and making a howling noise. Our anger and our words also tell others about the Spirit within. People see our results and estimate the unseen cause.

We have a more difficult problem in Communion. All that we can see are the visible elements of bread and wine; how does the Christian see beyond this? Those looking at us see the visible; when we look at Communion we must see the unseen – and discern the body and blood of Christ. We do it (like the radar for the wind) with the unseen –the power of the Holy Spirit. If we see only the elements themselves, we see nothing. But if we have the Spirit open our eyes, we see the body and blood of Christ – the sacrifice he made on the cross for our salvation. As long as Christ remains unseen we will do this. When the faith becomes sight, we will need it no more.

I Also

If you remember the story of the centurion of Capernaum – the one whom Jesus said had “great faith” – you will remember that he said he was a man under authority. What you may have missed is that he said “I also” am a man under authority. (The NIV translates this rather poorly, but almost all other translations get it clearly.) It’s not just that he was in the army; he recognized that Jesus, too, was under authority. His faith was based on his understanding of how authority works, a concept which was very familiar to him. It is a source of great faith.

Whether or not the centurion truly comprehended who Jesus is, we do not know. But we do know under whose authority Jesus acted: that of God the Father. We may observe two things:

First, if you acknowledge authority, you are obliged to be obedient to it. Christ was obedient to the Father’s authority, even to the point of death.

Second, His obedience was perfect, for he and the Father are one. His will is the same as the Father’s; he therefore does his Father’s will.

What exactly was that will? It is God’s purpose as set forth from the beginning:

First, that the curse of sin be lifted from mankind.

Second, that sin be paid for – that God’s righteousness would be satisfied at the cross.

Third, that God’s love be shown to all mankind.

Fourth, that man be reconciled to God.

All this was accomplished at the cross.

At the time of Communion Christ commands your obedience to him, just as he was obedient to the Father. Just what is that obedience? That you remember his sacrifice. Given what he has done for you, is that obedience too burdensome?

Warning

Most of us see them fairly frequently – flashing yellow lights mounted on a barricade, or on top of a traffic sign, even on the back of trucks. Their purpose is consistent: to warn you of something. They don't require that you stop, necessarily, but they do require you to decide what to do. You are the one who must look for things to be wary of, and take appropriate action. More importantly, you are responsible for your actions. If you fail to take warning, it's your neck that you risk.

Communion, in its own way, serves a similar function in the life of the practicing Christian.

One warning is this: are you omitting Communion altogether? You are commanded to partake; you have the example of others around you. And if you refuse?

Another warning comes of taking Communion lightly (1st Corinthians 11:27). Is it something you do every week because it is something you do every week?

A third warning, most serious of all, is in taking Communion and also taking "the cup of devils" (1st Corinthians 10:21). That means one who has no difficulty acting like a heathen on Saturday night and a saint on Sunday morning.

Like the flashing yellow lights, these warnings should compel you to action. If you are one who skips Communion, it may be that you know you should reconcile with your Christian brother – and can't face God until you do. Then reconcile. Do you see yourself taking it lightly? Then use your head: see with your mind's eye, and see the body and blood of Christ – no light thing. Are you that heathen on Saturday and saint on Sunday? You know the word: hypocrite. You can only correct that problem by renouncing either Saturday night or Sunday morning. You know the right answer to that one; have the courage to follow through and do what you know is right. The lights are flashing; take warning and then take action. The results are your responsibility.

Blood Pressure

Consider, if you will, the measurement of human blood pressure. First, it is a dual measurement – it measures two things because measuring one is not sufficient. Second, have you noticed that the medical people do this every time you come in? You can go in to be treated for acne and they will still take your blood pressure. Third, it is a diagnostic of other diseases, not a disease in and of itself. You measure blood pressure, but the doctor uses it for many purposes.

Communion is much like that. In its own way it too is a measurement, bearing some resemblance to blood pressure:

It too is a dual measurement – we examine ourselves in both the body and blood.

Like the Apostles, we do it every week. Last week's results are not sufficient for this week's examination.

It is a diagnostic – one which allows us to treat conditions such as the hardened heart, the unrepentant mind, hypocrisy and pride.

We said it is a dual measurement of the human soul. Let's look at each measurement:

We examine ourselves as we partake of his body. We should cast our minds back to the ugly scene of the Crucifixion, and remember that Christ went to that cross voluntarily – because he loves us. We are to show that same love, and the same spirit of sacrifice. We need to examine ourselves in this: is our love shallow, or deep? Are our sacrifices coming from our excess, or from our substance?

We examine ourselves as we remember that the blood he spilled is the blood of the new covenant – a new relationship with God. No longer is God distant from us, up a chain of priests, reachable only with animal sacrifices. The way to God is open, because of Christ's blood. Are we in such a relationship with God? If not, it's not his fault.

Measure yourself each week; then act.

June 28

The Colonel's Visit

Children growing up in the home of a young military officer will quickly find that having the colonel over for dinner is no simple affair – not even for the children:

The house must be cleaned, even your bedroom.

The table will be set with the good china and silver, and set to micrometric precision.

The children will be scrubbed and well dressed.

Most important, the children will be on their very best behavior. This is not a time for dad to find out just how mean you can be.

There are certain parallels here to Communion; we might ask these questions:

Is your house clean – are your relations with family and friends free from thoughts of vengeance, for example? Can Christ accept your worship if not?

Like the best china and silver, do you bring your best to your Lord? (You might want to look at that offering check.)

Are you, personally, clean? Have you repented of your sins and asked your Lord's forgiveness?

Are you on your best behavior? Do you approach this memorial with reverence and sincerity?

Sometimes we miss these things in preparing for Communion. Given what we know of its importance, how does this happen?

One reason is that Communion comes so often. It's not "special." But Christ is.

Distractions – of all kinds – do their damage. One reason we pray "in the closet" is to practice tuning out those distractions.

Worst of all is sin in your life – clean hands are required.

Sometimes it seems that the colonel gets better treatment than the Christ. Just who ranks number one in your life?

For the Person Who Has Everything

Neiman Marcus has long had a section in its catalog featuring a Christmas gift “for the person who has everything.” Some of those gifts included:

For a mere \$110,000, a motorcycle capable of speeds up to 190 miles per hour. Excellent for senior citizens commuting to church.

You prefer four wheels? How about a replica of a 1914 Stutz Bearcat racing car?

A personal favorite: his and hers matched Brahma bulls, with the note solemnly stating that they would be “gift wrapped as best we can.”

Compare these with the gifts that every Christian is given:

God has given us himself, in the person of Jesus the Christ. We give things; he gives himself.

In so doing God has given us our salvation. We don’t deserve it, therefore it must be a gift.

Cars, motorcycles and cattle soon go the way of all things temporal. God gives us eternal life.

Which brings us to a problem: what do you give to the God who quite literally has everything?

We are taught to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to him. Parents are pleased when their children do as they are taught; how much more pleasing is this to our heavenly Father?

Our love – heart, soul, mind and strength – pleases him too, for God is love.

But here at Communion we give something small – but very pleasing to him. We remember what he has done for us. As grandparents love thank you notes from their grandchildren, so too God is pleased when you remember his sacrifice for you. As you partake, then, remember just what great gifts you have been given – and what price was paid to give them. You cannot repay or earn them, but you can remember and give thanks.

Aerospace Ways

It is not long before the beginning aerospace engineer will hear the phrase, “Beat to shape, trim to fit, paint to match.” When the internal design changes, it often requires the surface of the aircraft to be modified – to keep the aircraft flying. Christianity has somewhat the same process.

“Beat to shape” – in the original, changing the shape of the sheet metal as required. For the Christian it might take one of these forms:

God may use our trials to bring us to salvation – those who found Christ as an adult often have this experience.

Once we are Christians, God often uses our pain and suffering to shape us a particular type of Christian, to encourage others.

Often enough our trials are shared – so that in their endurance we may be brought together to be one.

“Trim to fit” – the major changes made in pain in suffering, other changes made in quieter (and perhaps deeper) ways.

How often the teacher hears someone tell him that his lesson must have been tailored just for that one person. No, just God trimming.

Sometimes it’s reading a particular author; how many lives have changed by reading C. S. Lewis?

Such minor corrections are given to us in the examples of others.

“Paint to match” – making the appearance on the outside be consistent. Why would a Christian be concerned with appearances? Because they are a way of telling the truth. On the inside we have received the grace and glory of God, given at the Cross. On the outside, therefore, we must tell that truth.

We have been given a way to do this in Communion. For as often as you partake, you proclaim the Lord’s death – and thus the grace that flows with it and the glory of God who gives it. He is making you into what he wants you to be; acknowledge this, and let the world see it too.

Substitute

One of the most difficult aspects of the English language is that a given word may take one several shades of meaning, depending entirely on the context. Take, for instance, the word “substitute:”

One meaning is that of an alternative – two equal and interchangeable items. For example, swapping a blue car for an otherwise identical red car at a rental agency.

Another possibility is an artificial substitute – as in a sugar substitute for your coffee. Not really interchangeable, but used for the same purpose, sweetening your coffee.

Sometimes we use the word to mean a counterfeit or imitation, as a thief might substitute a copy of a painting for the real thing.

None of these meanings touches on the Christian use of the word – which is a vicarious substitute, Christ at the cross, dying in our place.

Satan certainly likes to baffle us with other meanings of “substitute.” For example, we have:

“All religions are equally true” – so anything would be a substitute for the true faith. Satan tells us they are interchangeable.

We also have synthetic religions – substitutes for the real thing just like sugar substitutes. Not really interchangeable, not really as good, but avoiding what we see as drawbacks.

There are also counterfeit religions – those with their own “special revelation.” Add this and subtract that – it looks the same, but it isn’t.

The real use of substitution is what Christ did for us on the Christ. Please note these two things:

First, he did what we could not do – atone for our sins. Only the sinless man could do that. He is our necessary substitute.

Second, he didn’t do it for himself, but for us. He did it on our behalf, because of his great love for us.

At Communion we remember this. Christ commands those who love him to remember his sacrifice at the Cross. Accept no substitutes.

July 26

Prison Conversion

Most Christians will recognize the name, Chuck Colson. For those who don’t, a little history is in order. Chuck was one of the main figures in the

Nixon-era Watergate scandal. For his part in this he was convicted and sent to prison. Prison gives you plenty of time to think, and think he did. He became a “born again” Christian there.

When the news became public, the general reaction of our cynical press was that this was a “Sahara Snowflake” conversion – meaning that once Colson left prison his conversion would last about as long as a snowflake in the Sahara desert. It was assumed that his motive was to get more favorable treatment in prison. (This is an ignorant assumption; being a Christian more commonly makes prison life worse. Prisons, too, are “of this world.”) But as he maintained that conversion after being released, opinions changed.

The principle is sound, though. We are to judge the truth of such a conversion by its fruits. If you go around with a “holier-than-thou” attitude, people will question the genuineness of your faith. If you don’t walk the talk, they will see a hypocrite, not a real Christian. If they see your anger controlling you, they will know that you are not under the lordship of Christ.

So how does the world know you are genuine when you come to Communion? What signs should you be exhibiting which show that you receive the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner?

Repentance – have you confessed your sins, asking forgiveness, turning from those ways?

Reconciliation – have you reached out to those who are not at peace with you?

Reliance – have you placed your full trust in Christ – even to the point of facing death?

The way to look genuine is to be genuine.

August 2

Body of Christ

Those familiar with the Scriptures will quickly recognize three different but related meanings for the phrase, “body of Christ.”

The first meaning is the most obvious: the actual, physical body of Christ. One of the most important tenets of the faith is that Christ came in the flesh – not some angelic visitor, or vision, or mental image. He has a body like every other human being.

The second meaning comes after the resurrection: it means the church. We, as his people, are the body of Christ.

The third meaning, expressly stated by Jesus, is the bread which is used in Communion. “This is my body,” he said.

These meanings can be used to help us discern the body of Christ when taking Communion. The first is easy: do we acknowledge that Christ came in the flesh, and suffered in his physical body just as we can suffer?

When we contemplate his body as the church, we realize that our faith is no solo flight. By his command we are to accept this organization as his will for us. Along the same vein, we also know that if we are a part of the church we represent our Lord to the world.

The bread as body presents us with two thoughts:

First, bread is physical. In using a physical token, we acknowledge the physical reality of Christ.

Second, we are what we eat. Christ is the food of the full grown Christian.

All this will become clearer when he returns. Then we shall see him in his physical body – the resurrected one. Praise God, we will be raised with just such a body as well. The church – one Lord, one body – will rise to meet her Lord and join him. But we will no more partake of the bread in Communion, for faith will have become sight. We take this bread and cup in hope – the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to come.

August 9

Skull and Crossbones

Have you ever considered the symbolism on the rather common version of the pirate flag, the skull and crossbones?

The skull and crossbones symbolizes death, of course.

The black background symbolizes evil.

So why, then, are pirates always played by romantic leads such as Errol Flynn? Why is it that such a symbol is sold – and to little children – at places like Disneyland?

Perhaps more significantly, why is it that women just seem to love their pirates?

One reason might be that they want a bold, dominant, alpha male – who of course has sense enough to do just what his wife tells him.

Another thought is that pirates are dangerous; knowing one is an adventure, and most of us have a taste for adventure – as long as it's not really too dangerous. (This explains roller coaster rides, too.)

Besides, we all know it for what it is: play acting. Nobody ever got busted for flying the Jolly Roger from the staff of his fishing boat.

But a lot of Christians have been busted – even crucified – for the act of insisting on the Lord’s Supper instead of doing things the world’s way. Millions of Christians died just for refusing to symbolically worship the Roman Emperor. Apparently some symbolism is more meaningful than others.

This symbolic act is easy to interpret. In the bread we see Christ’s body, in the cup we see his blood. Like the skull and crossbones, these things symbolize death. But the act itself is a proclamation of love, not of evil. Indeed, it is also a proclamation of life, not death, for we take this bread and drink this cup until our Lord returns.

So as you take this supper remember that it is no light-hearted, amusement park bauble. It is the body and blood of Christ, and it symbolizes life eternal.

SS Catalina

A recent article in our local paper announced the scrapping of one of the most romantic ships of the twentieth century: the SS Catalina. She sailed from Los Angeles to Catalina Island. A pleasure cruise on the Great White Steamer, as she was known, was a romantic occasion. The ship featured a large dance floor, with a “big band” orchestra. When she arrived, her deep ship’s horn started the traditional reception: speedboats racing around her. The article included happy memories from many former passengers.

Why do we remember such things with so much fondness? There are several reasons:

We like to remember pleasant times. This is especially true when the episode has a happy ending.

We like to remember significant events in our lives. If it’s the trip where you met your husband, it’s memorable.

Sometimes, the experience is a “once in a lifetime thing.” Do you remember where you went on your honeymoon?

But ultimately, nostalgia was not sufficient to keep the ship afloat. Pleasant memories didn’t keep her from the breakers’ yard.

What kinds of memories do move us to action?

People who made an impact on our lives do – have you ever answered a call for help from an old friend?

Often, the memories are of hard times. Have you ever said that your children would not have the hardship you did growing up?

Frequently enough, the hard times end with victory, and we continue to preserve and celebrate the victory.

Communion is like that. Jesus of Nazareth has had more impact on more people than anyone else who walked the earth. Communion celebrates the death of Jesus – and has continued for two thousand years. That death ended in victory – so we celebrate this memory.

The Whistle

Most of us have owned a common police whistle at one time or another. Children are fond of them; anything that makes a loud noise does seem to appeal to them. But there are adult uses too:

Whistles are used to get our attention. Sometimes we need to focus on the danger at hand, and the sound of a whistle does that for us.

As Boy Scout leaders know, giving each child a whistle makes it easier to find a lost Boy Scout. All he needs to know is to whistle back.

We also use whistles to direct traffic – drum majors start a march with them, police officers direct traffic with them.

But did you know there is another, more exuberant use of the whistle? It is used as a musical instrument! Particularly in jazz, and Caribbean music, it provides a joyous sound – very often like listening to a parade.

Communion parallels much of that. Perhaps that seems an odd way of looking at it, but think about it:

We are commanded to do it regularly. It's one way God gets our attention. By this we must have a time to go before God Almighty; he thus has our attention – and, we hope, repentance.

Often enough, some of us are “found in the woods” – coming to Communion. The week leaves us feeling lost in the world; the Lord's Supper is a welcome home.

If we are repentant, then it is at Communion we get directions confirmed. Sometimes it is easier to hear the still, small voice when the room is hushed in reverence.

But in Communion there is also an element of exuberant joy, as if we had joined an angel chorus. For if we share in the death of Christ, do we not also share in his victory over death? Indeed, if you can take Communion honestly, is it not an assurance of your own salvation? And exuberance? The parade will begin at his return, but even now we proclaim his return in taking Communion. Let your joy be full; Jesus has triumphed over the grave.

The Mask

The Mask came into church today. He – or who knows, is it she? – is sitting with us right now. The Mask often is here with us; it's just that we usually don't recognize the Mask. Indeed, what is there to look for? The Mask is all smiles; the children are doing just fine; everyone's healthy – and no one's heart is troubled with spiritual problems. It's better than that; the Mask is never offended, for no one can offend the Mask. Never offended, the Mask never needs to forgive. You won't get much chance to look at the Mask, though; it might crack under the strain of serious conversation.

You might ask why the Mask comes here at all – why not just plain honest folks? You don't understand: the Mask knows that this is not a hospital for sinners but a health club for saints. Therefore, the Mask should never be in pain. But behind the mask there is pain, and this must be kept from sight. The Mask, you see, helps its wearer hide in plain sight. For without the Mask, wouldn't people begin to judge? Wouldn't they say that the Mask's troubles are of his own making, and therefore leave him condemned to stew in his own juices?

What are we to do? Perhaps we might tell the Mask some simple facts. First, you're right – we can't see through your Mask. You won't let us. And even if we did, we'd be afraid to look – for seeing through your mask might expose cracks in our own. We might even have to take off our masks to see through yours. So do not fear us.

But give some thought to your Lord, Jesus Christ. Do not think that you can deceive him, for blackest night is like clearest day to him. But he does not judge you; rather, he wants you to bring your troubles to him. He longs to hear you repent; he longs to hear you forgive. He went to the Cross to have mercy triumph over judgment. Indeed, as he has no mask, removing yours allows sweet fellowship between you and him. Perhaps you could set an example for the rest of us. Repent, and then receive.

Under His Wings

One of the instincts built into human beings is to seek shelter when threatened. It's a good thing, but have you noticed that the shelter depends upon the threat? If you are in a lightning storm, you seek shelter which has a lightning rod. If it's a tornado, you look underground for a storm cellar. If it's an earthquake, you do the opposite – you want to be outdoors. Indoors or outdoors – it depends upon the threat. But in all cases you seek a shelter which is stronger than you are.

But what if the threat comes from within? Where do you seek shelter from yourself? Where do you hide from problems of your own making?

Some of us simply deny them.

Others treat the symptoms with drugs or alcohol.

Many just blame the problem on someone else.

Surely, though, the answer is just as simple as before: you seek shelter in that which is stronger than you. Denial, drugs and blame simply don't work, for they too spring from within. You cannot conquer weakness with weakness.

So it is that the Lord tells us that we are to seek shelter in Him:

Psalm 91:4 He will cover you with His pinions, And under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.

His shelter is not just shelter, but care and love. You are sheltered by one who has shown you the ultimate proof of his love – the Cross.

Communion is a memorial of that love and care. When you partake, you confirm that you have accepted that care. You have found the one who is stronger than self, and have taken refuge in him. As you partake, then, remember your own weakness. Then thank him for the love which extended his power even to the worst of sinners. This do, in remembrance.

Just Between You and Me

Just between you and me, God, I hate coming to communion. I have my failures, you know, and I really don't like to have to talk about them.

Take my anger, for instance. Why do I go into a foul-mouthed rage when some idiot cuts me off on the freeway? I mean, I knew the idiot was out there somewhere. It's just a matter of time before he finds me. So why do I explode like that?

Another thing – vengeance. I have these daydreams of doing something really horrible to someone just because she flew off the handle at me. It gnaws at me; I'm not a cruel person – am I?

Self-control, that's a big one with me. My eyes are after every pretty girl, my mouth is after every dessert with chocolate. I'd be in a lot more trouble if I weren't so lazy about it.

But I'm not lazy when it comes to making a buck – just the opposite. I cut every corner I can for money. But who wouldn't? I live in a world where there is always more to want – and I always want more. After all, my best buddy has a bigger fishing boat than I do, you know.

You know, you wouldn't think I could be proud of all that – but I am. It's not anger, it's righteous outrage. It's not cruelty, it's what they deserve. At least I'm not as bad as some people – somewhere. As long as people don't attack my pride, it's harmless, right?

Just between you and me, God, I love to come to communion. It's the only time in the week I can look in an honest mirror. I look down at the bread and cup; I know I'm looking at the body and blood of a better man than I am. How can I stand proud when a better man than I had to take the punishment I deserve? When he did it not because he had to but because he loved me? It's when I see myself as I really am.

I love to come to communion, Lord. That's where I can see forgiveness, because forgiveness comes from love, and your love is in my hands. Don't let me forget, Lord. I'm the sinner, you're my salvation. Don't let me forget, Lord. You paid the price, I got a new life. Don't let me forget, Lord, don't let me forget.

The Price of Obedience

It falls to a select few Christians to receive a high and hard calling in the faith. Most of us are called to lowly things – which just might be a practical form of “lead us not into temptation.” Most of us are not cut out to be heroes, leaders or even modestly famous. Those who receive the high and hard calling are, in a sense, privileged. They receive high honor and recognition for this calling; most of us will receive the simple, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” But for that honor there is sacrifice – hard work at the very least. Often enough that sacrifice carries with it martyrdom – the honor of dying for Christ. Indeed, the ultimate example of the high and hard calling is in our Lord himself, who was sent to take away the sins of the world.

There is a secret to those who succeed in the high and hard calling, and it is one we can use: obedience. Permit me a comparison. Some of you will remember Jim Jones, the preacher who led his church to mass suicide in Guyana. Compare him to Billy Graham. Both men worked hard. Both men made sacrifices to achieve their goals. Both were loved by those who followed them and derided by the world around them. But only one was obedient to his Lord; the other followed his own vision.

Things go right, you see, when you follow the instructions given by God. That’s Christian obedience. The ultimate example is, again, in Christ himself – who was obedient to the Father, even to death.

The ultimate price of Christian obedience is one most of us will never pay: death. But is it not obvious that there can be no greater price a man can pay? It is a fact that millions of Christians paid this price; many were martyrs simply because they would not proclaim Caesar as a god. In this they followed their ultimate example: Christ.

It is fitting, therefore, that we should remember that obedience. The time may yet come when we are called to imitate it; therefore it is good to keep the example fresh in our minds. Do this – in remembrance of Him.

Undeserved Love

It is a Norman Rockwell classic. The young boy who has just received an injection is pulling his pants up – while standing on a chair, carefully examining the medical degree on the wall. Is this guy a quack?

The truth is that most of us judge our family physician not by the medical degree on the wall but by his manner in treating us. The famed neurosurgeon can be a graceless clod, but our family doctor had better know how to dispense sympathy as well as antibiotics.

Note, too, that we expect this kind of sympathy even if the medical problem is our own fault. For example, suppose you cut yourself on your table saw. It's easy to say, "I definitely shouldn't have done that." It's your own stupid fault, really. But you don't go to the doctor to be lectured or laughed at; you go for sympathy and stitches.

It is a fact: we often don't deserve the sympathy. Many of our medical trips are caused by our own actions, but we still expect the sympathy. It's true in spiritual matters as well. If we seek forgiveness, we want it to be from the heart – which, by the way, is why we are commanded to forgive that way (Matthew 18:35). Cold charity and dutiful sympathy are a meal of cold, shriveled leftovers.

The only way forgiveness comes with sympathy is from a heart that loves, for only love can forgive that way.

That is the core of Christ's forgiveness for us – his great love for mankind. The proof is at the cross; there is no greater love than this. It is in this great love that he asks us to be reconciled – to God, and to each other. As God forgives us with gracious sympathy, we should forgive one another. So communion, then, is a time of repentance and forgiveness. Even more, it is a time of remembrance. The emblems before you are a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for you. More than that, they are a remembrance of Christ's unsurpassed love for you. Do this, in memory of him.

In Prison, Lonely

Sherlock Holmes called them the “agony columns.” They are the personal ads which even yet appear in the newspapers, and increasingly on various web sites. A common one comes from someone who is an inmate, seeking someone to write and perhaps to visit. Prison is a surprisingly lonely life. You are surrounded by thousands of sinners, each looking out for number one. You are therefore alone in a crowd; you dare not seek help – for that betrays your weakness, and you will be crushed. Surrounded, yet completely alone.

In such a life the letter from outside is greatly prized; a visit is like a light in a dark tunnel. For most prisoners, these things are rare. There may be thousands of prisoners in the institution; a few dozen will get a visit. Letters are a little more common, but also rare.

Those of us outside may say, “It’s your own fault. Stew in your own juices.” That is usually true – but does nothing to comfort the lonely.

In a sense, we should understand this. We are all prisoners on Planet Earth. We too are surrounded by sinners, who are admittedly more polite about it. And, if you will, it’s our own fault, for we are sinners all. Our lives are no doubt more pleasant than that of the prisoner, but our chance of being lonely is still great. Consider that we trust our fellow sinners much more; when they fail us the rejection and loneliness is even greater. We are serving a life sentence; no hope but death.

But for the Christian there is hope. Do we prize a letter from home? Yes, we have a whole Bible full of them. We have not been left alone. Is not the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, indwelling us? We have not been left alone. But the great comfort comes at communion – it is a visit from our Lord. He tells us, “this is my body.”

There is greater hope than that. We celebrate this memorial until our Lord returns. It is then that the bars of death will be torn away. We shall see the end of tears and loneliness, and celebrate indeed.

Rain

It seldom rains in Southern California. It rains a great deal in Iowa. The farmers in Iowa usually welcome the rain as necessary for growing corn; once in a while there is too much, but usually “no rain” is bad news in Iowa.

It’s different in Southern California. Rain is welcome – in the abstract. You’ll hear things like, “We really needed the rain – there’s been such a drought, you know.” But rain in person is not welcome – especially on the freeways. Rain lifts the large accumulation of road oil and other things. But there is usually not enough rain to wash this away; just lift it. This turns the freeways slick, like glare ice. Traffic accidents pop up everywhere.

Our reaction to Christ is somewhat like that reaction to rain. Some of us, to be sure, welcome him unconditionally. When life seems to be one long drought of love, Christ is welcomed like rain in Iowa. But for most of us, Christ is more welcome in the abstract than in the personal. We nod agreeably as the Communion meditation is delivered – thankful that it has no personal impact on us. Because if we let it, we’d find that Christ is not so convenient in our daily lives. We’re sinners; we want to let sleeping worms lie.

Now is the time we meet him in person, so to speak. Our abstract approval must give way to the knowledge that we are sinners – and sin makes us uncomfortable around the sinless man. We want to hurry through this part of the service.

But he established this reminder not to show us that we are sinners; we already knew that. He established this meal to remind us of his forgiveness, and the price he paid for it. It is not our sin we commemorate but his grace. So, don’t be uncomfortable as you partake; rather, be grateful. It’s not about us; it’s about him, and all he has done for us.

Feasting Alone?

Every Christian businessman eventually encounters the difficulties of business travel. It's not just the delay at the airport, or the 800 lb. gorilla in the seat next to you. The Christian businessman faces a frequent dilemma concerning his evening meal.

He can, if he desires, take the "party" option. This might take the form of dining with a vendor determined to wine and dine his way into a sale. It might also be with his fellow travelers who view a road trip as a convenient time to do that which they couldn't do at home. He will often be ostracized because he doesn't take one of the girls to his room. Indeed, they will wonder why he isn't at the bar every night just for that reason.

Otherwise, he can feast – alone. This takes the form of an overstuffed restaurant meal delivered to the room, or the chance that he can find a coffee shop nearby. It's best to bring a newspaper or a book.

You can thus imagine what a pleasure it is to be on the road but able to dine with friends or family. It is a rare thing, but much more pleasant.

We enjoy a restaurant meal; the ancients would have known this as enjoying a feast. A feast is an occasion out of the ordinary:

We feast, we enjoy the plenteousness of the food. One does not feast while on a starvation diet. Have you ever noticed that restaurant portions are rather large?

We feast, we enjoy the variety of the food. That's why restaurants have menus.

We feast, we enjoy the company. It's not just a meal, it's an occasion.

Communion is rather like that. At Communion we enjoy the plenitude of God's grace, forgiving over and again. At Communion we enjoy the variety of God's grace – even the "vilest offender" is pardoned. More than that, at Communion we enjoy sweet fellowship with Christ. Communion was instituted at Passover – a feast. It is a spiritual feast; enjoy it with a glad heart. God's grace is here in abundance.

First Communion

In those denominations which practice infant baptism or christening, a child's first communion service is a major event. It is customary for the girls, for example, to wear a white dress, and it's not unknown to have a party afterwards to celebrate the occasion. Indeed, anyone's first communion service is a major event in life. But there are several items available for sale which might not seem quite as normal as a white dress:

- For the girls, a matching set of soap and perfume for the occasion.
- For the post-communion party, a band, of course – one that specializes in rock music for first communion parties.
- Need something cheaper? How about a first communion mouse pad?
- Or a specially engraved pen and bookmark set?
- A commemorative tie tack for the boys is available.
- And finally, for those who have all of these already, a personalized, extra large size first communion chocolate bar.

Our Lord, in instituting Communion at the Last Supper, did not see fit to prescribe any of these. Indeed, what he instituted had a very different set of virtues:

- First, he implemented Communion in *simplicity*. Nothing elaborate is required, merely bread and wine. It is something that any church can afford.
- The elements of communion are rather common, in both senses. No one sniffs the cork to check the vintage; bread and wine are easily available.
- These elements are simple, but also symbolic. In this we meet the body and blood of Christ. Simple does not exclude the profound.

It does not matter your status in life. Rich or poor, gifted with good taste or blessed with a sense of the wacky, Communion knows no fashion sense nor required income. It is a gift, to remind us of the greatest gift ever given mankind – the body and blood of Christ, given for our sins.

Self Examination

The church which your author attends has recently made a deep commitment to what is called Consumer Christianity. This has had a particular effect upon the communion service itself: the service has been revised to completely prevent self-examination. The usual method is to have a special number by the worship team which is loud and intrusive.

Upon inquiry, the explanation is given that communion is a time of congregational praise, not as solemn remembrance. The music is fast and happy (the definition of “praise” music today) so that one’s mind does not focus on self examination, but clapping along.

Communion is now secondary in worship here; it is “fit in” to the service wherever it can be fit to accommodate the music and the message. Those who object are classified as fossils and then ignored.

Why are we doing this? Consumer Christianity, by definition starts by finding out what people want, then delivering it to them. It’s fairly clear that people don’t want guilt; it’s unpleasant and pop psychology says it’s bad for you. So if you have a portion of your service that causes guilt, you change it. It keeps guilt from spreading. It keeps people happy.

Why, then, does the Scripture command that a man should examine himself? The answer is relatively simple: self-examination reveals the guilt you already have – and leads therefore to repentance. We are commanded to do this regularly at communion for the same reason we remove splinters quickly: the pain goes away faster, and the infection has no chance to spread. Regular self-examination does the same thing with regard to sin in your spiritual life.

So I encourage you today: examine yourself. Take the time to see if there is sin in your life. If there is, repent of it and seek the Lord’s aid in keeping it away from you – “deliver us from evil.” Then take the Lord’s Supper, knowing that it was given for you so that you might receive the Lord’s forgiveness. Forgiveness – whether it was on your spiritual shopping list or not.

Latitude and Longitude

Since the earliest days of sailing, ships have always needed to know where they are. This is expressed in latitude – how far north or south of the equator – and longitude, how far from a north/south line running through Greenwich, England. Latitude is easy to find with a sextant – but until the invention of very accurate clocks longitude was difficult. So the method of sailing was simple: find the latitude of your destination, sail along that latitude until you arrive. The system is extremely simple, and was used on a daily basis.

This worked well until you met an obstacle – for instance, a chain of islands in the way. Then things got complicated! For that you needed a few more things:

First, you'd need a series of charts to tell you what you will encounter on the way.

Then, you need a navigator to read those charts, and guide your ship through the obstacles.

Likely enough, there would be times when you also needed good seamen on whom you could rely.

In a way, Communion is like our sextant – simple enough, used frequently. In the Christian life we need that constant checking to make sure we are on course. We have the Bible as our chart; Jesus as our navigator and the church a collection of seamen of experience. Piloting the ship needs all of these.

Some of us act like our ship is sailing in Kansas. We are surprised when things change and new troubles come along. That's one reason we are reminded to examine ourselves every time we take Communion. This lets us know where we really are on the spiritual journey of life. By making course corrections while they are still small, we keep the ship sailing smoothly. Is your life in Christ sailing smoothly? If not, take the time to examine yourself. You may just see the course corrections you need to take.

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Do you remember Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer's Apprentice in Fantasia? The brooms carrying the water into a flood? Ask yourself: why did Mickey want that sorcerer's hat?

First, of course, he wanted someone else to do his work. He wanted to kick back and relax. But more generally he wanted three things:

He wanted power – to get things done without Mickey doing the work.

He wanted prestige – think about wearing that hat!

He wanted pride – think of sending the stars around at your command, the wind and waves obeying you!

It's important to note that the sorcerer wanted the same things – it's just that he was better at getting them.

The Christian gets a very different life. First, there is work to do in the church, and the Christian does it. At Calvary, Christ did that which we cannot; but he commands us to do our part, even carrying water. Power, often in dramatic form, is ours – through God, not our own will. Prestige we will have, the prestige that comes from "Well done, good and faithful servant." Pride? It is replaced by humility. It's a very different lifestyle indeed.

That's the choice we have to make. We must choose either the world's way, and pick up the wizard's hat, or Christ's way, and pick up the servant's towel. One brings power, prestige and pride according to our abilities and our chances. The other brings service, a workman's reputation and a life of humility.

Perhaps that doesn't sound like much of an option, put that way. Remember this: Christ died on the cross to give you that option. As you eat the bread and drink the cup, remember the price paid that you might be a servant in heaven, rather than a wizard in hell.

Safety Signs

Most of us who have worked at a major corporation are familiar with the ubiquitous safety signs. Often enough, warning signs are humorous – and sometimes intentionally so. For example:

“Be Aware of Invisibility” (Huh?)

“Caution: Pedestrians Slippery When Wet.” (I would rather think so, wouldn’t you?)

“Caution: Water on Road During Rain.” (Must have taken a lot of research to figure that one out.)

“Do not look down the barrel of the laser with your remaining good eye.” (Not a mistake you can repeat too often, that.)

Seriously, we use signs to prevent problems. Sometimes they alert us to a danger we didn’t know about, but more often they remind us of the dangers we do know about. They are there to keep us from repeating our mistakes – and tell us how to get help when we do repeat them.

Communion is like that in a way:

First, we are to use the time of self-examination to hear the Spirit alert us to sin which lies ahead of us – in time to prevent it.

Second, in examining ourselves we are reminded of our sins – so that we might not repeat them.

Third, when we do sin, Communion reminds us that we have the chance to repent – and be forgiven.

Safety signs are of no use unless you heed them. Communion is of no use unless you use it as Christ commanded. Therefore, examine yourself, so that you may know your own sins, repent of them and keep them from returning. Then praise God that he has provided you forgiveness, even at the price of his only begotten Son.

Ordinary and Sacred

Have you ever considered just how ordinary the Lord's Supper really is? Those who prepare it could tell you that there is nothing magic about it. Mankind has been making bread for thousands of year; wine, no doubt, goes back as far. The elements themselves are routine staples of human existence. However they are served, human hands – sinners' hands – are used to assemble them before worship.

Yet we say that these things are sacred. How is it that we see these things as holy when they have such a common origin?

First, they are holy from the source – Christ himself. When light passes through a dusty room, it does not become dirty. It just shows the dirt; the light remains pure. So it is with Communion.

Next, they are holy by the command of God. This is not something devised by the mind of man but instead it comes from the grace of God. He commands it; He is pure; and to the pure, all things are pure.

Finally, as in the Old Testament, things are made holy by sacrifice of blood – in this, the blood of Christ on the Cross. There is no greater sacrifice.

Sinners, therefore, handle the things of God. Just as you will handle them in this ceremony. How is it that God permits such a thing?

To begin with, they are the things of God – but also the things of men. Just as Christ is fully God, and fully human, so are the things he called his body and blood.

It is permitted also for God's purposes: for in the Lord's Supper he shows us his divine grace.

He does ask one thing of us: that we examine ourselves before partaking in this meal. His purpose is grace; grace comes with repentance. Repentance comes from examining ourselves, confessing our sins and weaknesses. Only then can that which is sacred bring grace to the sinners who love the Lord.

Shame of the Cross

It is hard for the modern Christian to associate the Cross with the word “shame.” There are a number of reasons for this:

The death penalty is rare today; it was common then.

Criminals were seen as despicable human beings then; now they seem much more like victims of their environment.

Executions are private, veiled to the public today. Then, an execution was a form of entertainment as well as a warning.

The shame extended to the criminal’s family, as well. Today the mother of a serial killer receives a fair amount of sympathy, having such a personal disaster. In those days, people assumed she was just as evil.

Few of us approach the shame of the Cross. We are perfectly willing to hear the gentle Jesus speak to us; but we are quite uncomfortable when the suffering Savior speaks. We seek his comfort in times of suffering, but seldom share his suffering as the honor it is. If you think not, what is your reaction when you hear Christianity mocked? Do you shrink away quietly, or are you willing to proclaim your Lord? We can share his suffering; we can also share his shame.

Communion is a reminder of Christ’s conquest.

First, he conquered the shame of the Cross. Once a symbol of evil, it is now placed in honor in the church. It is no longer a symbol of shame, but of Christ’s sacrifice by which he conquered shame.

It is also a symbol of the conquest of sin. Before the Cross there was no true forgiveness; only the poor atonement of animal sacrifices. Now, the blood of Christ cleanses all who believe.

It is the symbol of the conquest of death. Without the Cross there is no Resurrection. We know that his resurrection is just the first; at his return, all the dead in Christ shall arise as well.

Shame, sin and death – Christ conquered them all. He did so at great price; he did so out of great love. As you partake, remember the shame – and the conquest.

Divine Style

Glory is to God as style is to an artist, we are told. It is an eternal characteristic of God that he shows us mercy – and does so in a style which befits the Almighty. Consider the elements of His style of mercy:

First, he is compassionate. Christ did not go to the Cross grudgingly, but willingly. We did not earn the Cross; he freely gave it. He gave it to us out of his great love and compassion. Indeed, he became man so that he might share our passions – and we his.

Next, he is kind. There are passages in the Old Testament which show the God of wrath; there are passages which show the God of mercy. At the Cross we see the kindness of God, for he died for the unworthy. If you are kind in feeding the poor, how much more kindness is in the Cross?

Did Christ go to the Cross with head held high, reminding one and all of his greatness, of how he was condescending to us? No. He went to the Cross like a lamb to the slaughter – in great humility. There is no trace of pride and arrogance, only the model of humility for his followers.

Indeed, because of the Cross he now calls the sinner home – and does so with consummate gentleness. The Omnipotent God applies no force to his children; softly and tenderly Jesus is calling the sinner home. The gentle Jesus needs no ax to break down the door; he stands at the door and knocks.

The mercy of God is also patient. He waits for the prodigal to return home, never giving up hope of the sight of a son coming over the horizon. Even at death's door, God's mercy is still available.

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience – these are the primary colors with which God paints his mercy. It is good for us to remember the style of God. It reminds us that none of us deserve the salvation we are given. It also reminds us that when we leave this place of Communion, we should imitate our Lord – in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We follow our Master's way, in our Master's style.

Dealing With Sin

Man is the creating creature. We can be very clever in our creations – especially when dealing with our sins. Communion is a time in which we are to examine ourselves; unfortunately, it is also prime time for creative excuses. Have you heard these?

“What sin?” Like Satan in the garden, we’re pretty sure that God didn’t mean to call *that* a sin. Surely that’s just a legalistic interpretation of the Scripture, right?

“It’s not as bad as all that.” Sure, it looks like a felony at the moment, but perhaps we could plead guilty to a misdemeanor, your Honor? This misses the point: either way, we’re still sinners.

“Don’t worry, God. I’ll make it up to you.” We have this picture of God as cosmic bean counter; if we have more white beans than black beans, all is well, right? No. God’s standard is perfection; in his love he offers mercy.

“I don’t think you understand my situation.” Some of us have the disadvantage of coming from a broken family; others have the disadvantage of coming from a Christian home. Either way, it’s an excuse for the way I behave, isn’t it?

“In this instance, I have an excuse.” Maybe I plead circumstance, or provocation. We often use one sin as an excuse for another. My anger flared up; she yelled at me first. Surely I am excused because of it?

“If I can convince myself that I’m innocent, surely God will believe it too.” God can hardly expect me to repent if I decide I’m innocent – and come to believe it. Deception is still a sin, even self-deception.

“It’s not my fault.” Blame someone else.

It is an interesting fact: the Scripture never tells us which of these techniques are valid. Indeed, we are told that we are all sinners, and all of us need to repent. Praise God, then, that his mercy is made available for all who do. Examine yourself; throw away the excuses and accept the mercy of God purchased at the Cross. Pride needs excuses; mercy never does.

Abundance

Christmas is a time of abundance for many of us. Many of us are delighted at the sight of a Christmas tree, lavishly decorated, topping a mound of gifts. Even those of us who are old enough to have everything except a place to put it and memory to find where we did see the tree as a reassuring sign of material abundance. The children among us see such a thing as almost magical. Even the youngest child loves the bright colors – and the empty boxes make wonderful playthings.

The word for “abundant” in the Old Testament has a more specific meaning: “to exceed a measure.” To be abundant is to exceed whatever measure you have for “enough.” That’s typical of how God deals with us. He is not stingy with our blessings. Nor is He inclined to “just barely enough.” No, he asks us to call on him to bring out blessings as if the windows of heaven had opened upon us, pouring out a blessing for which we haven’t room to put it. God is not constrained by our measurement; rather, he exceeds it so that we might know that he is God.

Nowhere is this clearer than at the Cross. There is no sense that the blood of Christ is barely sufficient; nor is there any sense that we have to make up some deficiency in it. No, it is an abundant grace. As Paul tells us, where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Our sins can be measured; God’s grace knows no such limits.

The wrapping paper on Christmas gifts tells us that good things are inside. Such paper is often brilliantly colored, even gaudy in its appearance. The sign of God’s gift to us is quite different. The cup and the bread are simple symbols. Some churches perform this with implements of gold and silver; others with less ostentatious (and less expensive) materials. But in all cases God’s sacrifice is given to us in simple form. Nothing we can do could accurately picture God’s abundant grace. But he has given us the means to portray the price of that grace. Simple in form, pure in its meaning, it is a greater gift than any Christmas wrapping could ever hold.