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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**December 12, 2021**

**Communion Sunday**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, I just want to thank you for another opportunity, I thank you for communion Sunday, a time where we can reflect on you and what you have done for us. We just continue to praise you and thank you for the gift of your Son. We pray this morning, Lord, for the gift of your Holy Spirit as we open up your book. As we examine your word, we pray that you would give us the spirit that in each individual household as each household is preparing for communion that you would just supply the presence of your Holy Spirit to make this of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well as I mentioned, this is the day that we remember Jesus Christ and his cross. And Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples for the last time, celebrating a Passover supper with them. It's described by *Matthew 26* which says: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them,*

saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." So Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and his blood and then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup so that they might symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. And then he asked them to repeat the remembrance of his sacrifice on a regular basis, and this is what we call "the Lord's table," and we celebrate it once a month. We do that by meditating on what it is the Lord Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, by examining ourselves, that means asking God's Holy Spirit to point out areas in our lives where we are being convicted of sin, by confessing those sins, and then by participating in the elements. *John 6:53* says: *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

Well we've been following the life of Christ in the gospel of Mark and last time out we looked at two very different miracles of Jesus. There was a very private one and a very public one. The private one we discussed last time. The public one was the feeding of the four thousand with seven loaves and a few fishes. By the power of Christ, seven loaves became seven hundred became seven

thousand, until four thousand ate their fill and were satisfied. But the story doesn't end there. *Mark 8:11* says: *The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.* So fresh from these stunning miracles the Pharisees tell Jesus, hey, we're not impressed. They tell Jesus that his miracles can't hold a candle to the miracles that were done by Moses. And so the next time someone asks you why God doesn't do miracles like he did back in biblical times, you can just point to these Pharisees. I mean they are proof that no miracle is powerful enough to sway someone who's heart is persuaded otherwise.

Mark's gospel says of Jesus in *Mark 8:12*: *He sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."* Now actually there's more to this story than just this brief statement made by Jesus, I mean he said much more than simply no to the Pharisees. It's fleshed out a little bit more in Matthew's account of the very same incident which starts out this way in *Matthew 16*, it says: *And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.* So it's Matthew who informs us that it's not just the Pharisees that were challenging Jesus, it was the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These are two groups that hated each other. They couldn't stand each

other. They had no use for each other except when there was a greater threat that necessitated them coming together. Well, Jesus was that threat. So now they're looking for a sign. Not just any kind of sign but according to their own words, "a sign from heaven." Now understand, they've already seen Jesus heal the sick, feed the hungry, raise the dead, and all those miracles did was increase their appetite for even more spectacular signs and wonders. So now they don't just want a sign, they want a sign from heaven. *Matthew 16:2* says: *He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."* Jesus is marveling that they have enough sense to read the signs to interpret the weather but not nearly enough sense to read the signs to determine something much more important and obvious to those who can see and hear. So Jesus tells them in verse 4: *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."* So he left them and departed.

Now if ever there was a sign, if ever there was a sign from heaven itself, it was that person standing there addressing the Pharisees. This was God in the flesh who had left heaven itself and come to earth for the express purpose of offering up his perfect life as a

substitute for our lives so that we by faith in his sacrifice could claim his righteousness as our own and then stand before God perfected, clothed not with our own wretchedness, with our own sin, but clothed with his righteousness. I mean the ultimate sign from God, the ultimate sign from heaven itself rejects their request for a sign. *Mark 8:13* says: *And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side.*

So yet another meeting with the Pharisees ends badly. And while they're in the boat, a discussion ensues about bread. Verse 14 says: *Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. Then He charged them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."* You know when the wisest person in all of history says, "Take heed," it behooves us to take heed. And so this morning we want to take heed. Actually we want to take apart this statement of Jesus. We want to look at the speaker, at the setting, at the statement and the substance of what it is he was saying as well as the disciples' response and Jesus' reaction.

So first let's look at the speaker. You know it was J. B. Phillips who wrote a little book a long time ago about Jesus and the book was entitled *"Your God Is Too Small."* There's no doubt that Phillips was on to something. You see our notion of just who Jesus

is is not just small, it's not just tiny, actually it's microscopic compared to who Jesus actually is. Listen to what scripture says about this Jesus. This is *Colossians 1:15*. It says: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* But that last statement, that last statement is an astonishing claim. It suggests that the entire universe needs Christ to hold things together. I mean -- quote -- "*and in him, all things hold together.*" When that was written no one had any idea that there has to be in fact some kind of cosmic glue that does just that. You see, the most basic elements of life are atoms which at their core have something that make no sense. Any high schooler will tell you the core of an atom contains protons and neutrons while electrons orbit the outside. Anyone who's ever played with a magnet knows that opposites attract and that like forces repel. And so for years now scientists have been seeking what it is that keeps the very nucleus of the very building blocks of life itself from blowing apart, because all atoms have nuclei that consist of neutrons and they have no charge at all but they all have protons which are all positively charged and they're all together and they should repel each other, but they don't. At the very core of all

physical existence lies something that makes no sense. Well science believes that there's some kind of illusive cosmic glue out there that's not yet discovered. Christians choose to believe it is Christ himself. As *Colossians 1:17* says: *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* We're further encouraged to believe that some time in the future on judgment day, Christ is going to take his hand off his creation, and what follows reads very much like a first century person describing a thermonuclear event in *2 Peter 3:10*. Listen to what they say. It says: *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.* You see, Christians make the case that this person Jesus who's sitting in a boat with the disciples warning them about the leaven of the Pharisees, this Jesus is actually also simultaneously holding the entire universe together as he's speaking. I mean the very Sea of Galilee that the boat they are in is crossing Jesus spoke into existence thousands of years previously. You see, we believe that Christ existed before time itself as the actual creator of all things in the known and the unknown universe. *Hebrews 1:10* says: *And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands."*

You know the Bible itself refers to Jesus as the word. We're all familiar with *John 1:1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.* Furthermore scripture says of this word who was this creative force that two thousand years ago it became a human being and lived out his life among us. Verse 14 says: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* We call the celebration of that event Christmas. It's the season right now. Well this is a very difficult idea to swallow for many who believe in 21st century science. I mean, they see it essentially as our fairy tale. You know, one that includes talking snakes in a garden and a worldwide flood and they feel bad that people would actually fall for what they see as patent nonsense. They prefer to believe that creation itself came about through the actions of two different forces which they label "chance" and "nothing." And according to this belief, infinitesimally compressed matter blew up into an expanding universe at some singular point in time. No one knows where that compressed matter came from but everyone's very comfortable believing that it's already there and that it blew up. And they further believe that after an enormous period of time by chance, through the agency of nothing, inorganic material began to evolve



from simple to complex to where all of life is today. And all of that happens strictly by chance through the influence of no one and nothing. So basically we are all of us faced with two different sets of fairy tales. One insists the man Christ Jesus here in our story this morning standing in a boat warning his disciples that he's responsible for creating and sustaining all of life including the very atoms that surround us and make up this entire universe. And again we have scripture. *Hebrews 1:3* says: *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.* And yes this fairy tale includes a talking snake and a worldwide flood. Or you can choose to believe the other fairy tale that says that creation is the result of a formula that says that matter, which just happened to appear and then blow up, plus time, plus chance, plus nothing, equals everything. One of these fairy tales is absurd. And the other one is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We further claim that the speaker of this warning to the disciples was the wisest, most powerful human who ever walked this planet and so that's got to mean that the warning that he has given is critical.

Next we want to look at the setting that Jesus made that warning in. We go back to *Mark 8:11*. It says: *Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.* Well we've learned previously the disciples had seven large baskets

of fragments that they had collected from feeding the four thousand. They left all of them behind and they brought with them only one loaf of bread. Now I certainly can't say for certain but it sounds like Jesus is just in the boat overhearing the disciples discuss this, and he simply makes a general statement about leaven and bread. This is what Jesus says, he says: *"Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."* And what do you know once again the disciples, they just leap to the wrong conclusion. Verse 16: *And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have no bread."* Well in fact Jesus wasn't talking about bread at all. He was talking about leaven, and leaven is always about influence, either good or bad. In fact in the past Jesus had referred to leaven as a good thing. This is what he stated in *Matthew 13*, he said: *"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."* What Jesus is emphasizing is the fact that leaven is self-replicating, that even a tiny amount of leaven hidden in three large measures -- and that indicated a large amount of flour -- that even that small amount worked into that large amount of flour will work its way all through the dough because that's just how the leaven of the kingdom works. I mean think about it. It all started with Jesus and twelve disciples. And over the last two thousand years it's been self-replicating, working its way through the leaven of the entire world. And

everywhere it goes it is an influence for good. I mean just look at the places in the world where the gospel has either been removed or it's not yet arrived and what do you find? You find disease, you find death, you find oppression, you find brutality. Well compare them to the places where the gospel has been established and it's pretty obvious that the leaven of God's kingdom has been nothing but good. And so this morning at this communion service, I want you to just take a moment as we are about to partake of the bread, just take a moment to reflect on what the leaven of the gospel has done for you and for me.

We also look to *1 Corinthians 11* for our warning, which says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* And I repeat this every month and in particular in this unique kind of circumstances where most folks are at home, I just want you to understand that communion even at home is serious business and to enter into it in an unworthy manner is to court disaster. And so I appeal to you all, if you're not absolutely confident you're a child of God, child of the King, if

you haven't by faith trusted in Christ as your Savior or if you first need to be reconciled to your brother and sister before you bring the sacrifice of yourself to the altar, then skip this part. If you don't feel right about participating, then err on the side of caution and get right with God first. And on the other hand I point this out as well, you can make the mistake of thinking, okay, unless I'm flawless I'm unworthy to receive communion, and that too is a mistake the enemy loves. I point out each time that being a child of the King doesn't mean you don't sin, it doesn't mean you don't fail. It means you realize that the salvation you've received is a gift that no one's ever capable of earning on their own. So once again we quote Dane Ortlund who puts it this way, he says: "In the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." So we also add that when we do fail we are aware of the fact that we've sinned. Why? Because we have the Spirit of Christ inside us convicting us. And so because we have that spirit, we grieve as children who know that we have a Father who longs to forgive us and cleanse us, a Father who says: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* So no, being a child of the King doesn't mean that you are without sin, it means that we understand that when we sin we have an advocate, someone speaking on our behalf with the Father. *1 John 2:1* says: *My dear*

*children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And that's the key, that's the key to it all. See, because we have Jesus' righteousness and not our own, we are now free to eat from his table. And so if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that he purchased for you. He lived the life that we were supposed to live and then he died the death we deserved to die in the first place so that we could be made worthy of heaven.*

So as we're about to approach the partaking of the bread, thank God this morning for the gift of his leaven working its way through the loaf. So in whatever household you're in, whatever bread you have taken, if you take the bread, let me read to you from *1 Corinthians 11:23*, which says: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* So take, and eat.

Well so far, so far we've looked at the speaker. We've seen the King and the Creator of the universe who stepped down into human flesh, he's now sitting in a boat and he's warning his disciples. We looked at the setting. I mean, the disciples have just left

another bad confrontation with the Pharisees. They're sitting in a boat discussing the fact that they've left these baskets of bread behind. Jesus overhears their statement and he gives them this specific warning in verse 14. It says: *Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."*

Well Jesus knew that leaven was influence and that the influence of the Pharisees and Herod was particularly dangerous because it came from within, it permeated, it transformed, and it changed. Jesus was warning them that not all evil, particularly the evil that Jesus was referring to, that not all evil comes from outside, from out there. It was not something you can put your finger on and say, "Oh, there it is, there's the evil." And understand, Jesus was preaching at a time when external and obvious evil was everywhere. I mean this Herod that he's warning them about had just imprisoned John the Baptist, was soon going to cut off his head for pointing out his wicked life-style. So Jesus knows exactly what he's speaking of by describing the threat that the Christians faced, and it wasn't imprisonment, it wasn't torture. I mean that's not what consumed Jesus in giving us the warning that he did. In fact Jesus saw threats to the flesh and I don't mean to minimize this, but he saw them as not that big a deal. This is

what he said in *Matthew 10*. He said: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Jesus is saying what is truly worthy of fear was the leaven that blinded your eyes and corrupted your soul without you even realizing it. You see, it's one thing for us to identify this evil that's kind of out there, I mean, we see it all the time, it's in our collapsing culture, it's in our face. As author Rod Dreher said in his book *Live Not By Lies* there are certain societal lies that now all of us are expected to live by, that all of us are expected to affirm, and whether it's gender equality or gay marriage or a host of other social mores that are now touted as enlightened and blessed which stand a hundred percent against the vision of life and human flourishing that the Bible affirms, folks they are lies. They are lies that are absolutely real and we need to resist them. But that's not what Jesus is warning us about today. Corporate or external evil was not the problem that Jesus concerned himself with in dealing with the Pharisees. It was an evil that was not only personal but even more deadly, it was an evil that transformed like leaven does, permeating the victim so thoroughly that it no longer had the ability to see what they were becoming. Remember, Jesus' comments are coming once again after yet another conflict with the Pharisees who've witnessed a stunning miracle and yet can't bring themselves to acknowledge it. It's the very same problem, spiritual blindness

repeating itself over and over again. I mean the leaven of the Pharisees works in such a way that the more it pervades your being, the less aware of it you are. Jesus saw that from day one. In fact he'd been alluding to it right from the very beginning of Mark's gospel. In *Mark 2:16* it says: *And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* You see, these were folks who were profoundly sick and yet they thought they were in the peak of health. It was their willful blindness that made them grow progressively more and more blind. And we see that again illustrated in John's gospel. I mean when the man born blind has his sight restored, he winds up being thrown out of the temple by none other than these same Pharisees who resent the fact that his healing took place right in front of their eyes. Jesus tells them flat out, you are going blind. This is what he says in *John 9:39*. Jesus said: *Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."* *Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains."* The stunning irony here is that Jesus



warning them about their impending blindness is ignored because they can't see it. This leaven that Jesus was warning the disciples about had worked its way into the very fiber of the Pharisees' being, blinding them so thoroughly that they had already decided ahead of time that if anyone declared Jesus was the Christ, he would be thrown out of the temple. It didn't matter how much evidence Jesus could supply, their minds were made up.

You know the important thing to understand though is how does this leaven work? How did the enemy of our souls get one group of people to go from seeing Jesus as an annoyance to seeing him as an existential threat? I mean, how did the devil turn people who claim to love God into the very ones who murdered him? Well the same way he does all of his evil. He does it incrementally, in steps so small and so seemingly innocuous that they seldom get noticed before it's too late. The blindness advances in steps too subtle to be noticed. Listen to how James puts this in *James 1:14*. He said: *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. See, the end goal is death. In this case we're talking about the death of the Savior. And what lured each Pharisee was their own desire for honor and respect and what caused them to be enticed was their inability to honestly see themselves. What made them go from petty*

and pathetic to a people committed to murdering God himself was the complete absence of anything approaching introspection. Instead of ever looking inward, these Pharisees fixed their eyes on things outward, on things that didn't matter, like a ceremonial washing of hands or a healing on the Sabbath or any of a dozen other petty rules that they had made up about how you're supposed to approach God. But you have to understand, from the enemy's standpoint that was their individual entry point to being lured and enticed. And what made them go from mundane to murderous was a decision to never, never look inward. They never realized that the leaven they were embracing was slowly but surely blinding them.

Now the danger for evangelicals, it's entirely different but it is just as real. Our danger is the overt collapsing of a culture. I mean, it's an evil that lures and entices us to see evil itself as something out there, something those people do. And if we concentrate solely on the bad guys, on the outsiders who are pressing in on us with their -- quote -- "evil" and forget that evil itself oftentimes comes from within us, we run the exact same risk that the Pharisees ran, progressively growing more and more blind while championing how greatly we can see. The substance of what Jesus was saying can be summed up in one word. He says, beware, this leaven is going to eat you up and spit you out and you're not going to even realize it.

So how did the disciples respond? How did Jesus react? Well first of all, understand Jesus could not have cared less about bread. What he cared about was the disciples not being aware of their own internal evil and how easy it was to go to grow and metastasize to influence their souls. Jesus' concern about his disciples centered around the fact that they too couldn't see what should have been obvious to them from a spiritual perspective. I mean remember, the disciples had at least five different encounters with the Pharisees' willful blindness. They'd often seen Jesus just literally destroy it. It was one of the most important lessons that Jesus was trying to teach them and instead of understanding Jesus' warning about that way of thinking, they think he's concerned about bread. When you look at Jesus' reaction to the disciples, you can palpably feel his frustration. I mean in response, he fires off eight straight questions at them. I can only guess but the questions and the way Jesus poses them reminds me of the way I used to fire off questions at my kids that were really more a statement of my frustration than a quest for information.

I mean I remember one summer day in particular when two of my sons -- who will remain nameless but just both happen to have the same age -- when they decided at age eight or nine that it would be clever to take the grill off an oscillating fan, turn it up full

blast and then feed saltine crackers into the back of it to entertain their siblings. They thought it was fun to make snow saltines all over the room to the absolute delight of their brothers and sisters. And I remember coming upon this and a series of questions that I asked them. Something like, "You think you're cute?" "You think you're smart?" "You realize you could have lost a finger?" "You could have lost an eye?" "You think crackers grow on trees?" "Who do you think's going to clean this?" I mean, you get the point. These questions, they're not seeking information that I recall a reflection of how frustrated I was, although there was a part of me that thought it was hilarious too. But this is what I get when I read Jesus' reaction to his disciples thinking about that what he was talking about was bread. Listen to the questions that he asks and the way he asks the questions and then picture yourself as the disciples answering. It says: *And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?"* It says *"They said"* and I can just picture them while they're staring at the ground and they're trying to like: *"Twelve."* *"And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?"* And they said

*to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"*

I mean these sentences read to me like Jesus is doing a classic face palm, he's doing one of these (indicating). And here's why. Jesus is approaching the end of his time on earth, he's been with these disciples for three years. They've seen repeatedly his proof of his divinity, they've seen him heal the sick, they've seen him give sight to the blind, raise the dead and feed thousands with nothing, they even saw him raise somebody who had been dead for days and yet they're still thick as a brick when it comes to spiritual insight. And you know that's a blessing. I mean what a blessing to know these men are not spiritual superstars, these men are fishermen and tax collectors and farmers all conscripted into a group of men that God would pour his life into for three years. On more than one occasion we've seen Jesus give the equivalent of a face palm where he just is like so frustrated, and this is one of those instances.

And again, just to set the stage here, the disciples are coming off a major series of miracles that they've seen Jesus perform. Certainly no ordinary human could even begin to attempt what he's just done. He's just fed four thousand people with seven loaves and a few fish. And found the Pharisees gathered there at the site of the miracle not to marvel at the supernatural power displayed

but instead to argue with him over the nature and extent of his miracles. Well Jesus finds he has two, actually two separate problems to deal with. The first one has to do with the Pharisees' blindness and it's by far the most serious. The second one though has to do with his disciples' spiritual density. I mean they're not remotely blind like the Pharisees were which was an intentional willful blindness they were fully responsible for, but they were instead so spiritually dense that the most basic biblical understanding that Jesus expected them to have grasped had clearly escaped them. Jesus simply couldn't hide his frustration at their lack of understanding. Jesus gives them this incredibly important warning cloaked as it usually is in parabolic language that only his sheep could fully grasp and it goes right over their heads. Jesus tells the disciples: *"Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."* And they immediately arrive at a conclusion so far removed from the spiritual reality Jesus is trying to convey that I can easily picture him just throwing up his hands, just putting his face in his palms and saying, "I just don't believe this." They think he's talking about loaves of bread. They've missed completely what he was trying to convey.

So as we approach the cup, let's take a look now at the substance of what Jesus was saying when he said -- quote -- *"Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."*

What did Jesus mean? Well if you want to know what Jesus was saying, look no further than what he said in *Matthew 15:19*. There he said this, he said: "*Out of the heart*" -- understand, out of the heart, not outside, not out there -- "*Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.*" Here's the bottom line. You see, if you think that kind of evil is beyond you, consider that shortly after Jesus took the disciples to task. On the night before he was crucified they got into a huge fight over who was the biggest big shot among them. You talk about evil thoughts. You know, when he desperately needed them, they fell asleep and then they all scattered like sheep abandoning him completely. And yet Jesus was very clear that he loved these men enough to die for them.

See, communion is supposed to be a time when we are examining our conscience. This is not the time to be kind to yourself. It's a time to be especially aware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod. This is a time to be brutally honest with our own hearts. I mean it's so easy in a collapsing culture to look outside to find all kinds of reasons to feel good about myself. Look at those bad people out there, look at all the bad stuff that they do. Well the problem is we wind up sounding exactly like another person that Jesus spoke about in *Luke 18*. It says: *He also told this parable*

*to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray," says Jesus, "one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

You know folks say don't be so hard on yourself. Apparently the tax collector never got that memo. And there's not a person hearing my voice who if they were not honest with themselves would react any differently than this tax collector who said: *"But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"* You see, if you've ever feared that Jesus couldn't possibly love a heart as dark as yours, if you've ever feared that if Jesus ever truly discovered it, he'd surely reject you, trust me, he's already discovered it. In fact he discovered it before you were born. There is nothing that you could ever think or do



that will ever, ever be a surprise to Jesus. So trust him enough to ask this of his Holy Spirit in *Psalm 139: Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.*

Just take a moment right now ask God to show you if there be any wicked way in you and ask him to lead you in the way everlasting. See it's not the bread that Jesus cares about. It's the leaven. Take a moment to examine your conscience before we lift the cup. *1 Corinthians 11:25* says: *In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."* So take, and drink.

This is the part that we call heart, hands and feet, where we try to come up with a practical way of understanding what it means to remember the Lord Jesus Christ and his sacrifice. I just want to start out by saying this has obviously been a very wild week here at Grace. You can almost imagine that we are under attack. One thing that I think that sickness really demonstrates and one of the things that has happened due to all of the sickness is that we have seen a care and concern for this body among the body that has been a beautiful thing to behold and we've seen people caring for other people all over the place this week. So I have one assignment that

I would like each of you sitting in your homes today to think of. Lots of you have reached out to people that you know. I would like each of us to take a family or an individual that you have no contact with or minimal contact with or you don't really know that well, somebody that's just on the other side of the church, so to speak, physically, mentally, any other way. If you say well, I don't even know what their number is, just text me, I've got the numbers for everybody. I've got texts you can get in contact with. So call and text and email somebody that you haven't done before and just say, how are you doing? Say I'm praying for you, I'm praying that you get through this Christmas season and that this whole thing would be a blessing because with Christ there's always a good side to the bad side. So let's pray.

*Father, I just again, I thank you that you are still God, you are still sovereign, you are still leading us through this difficult time of sickness in our church. I just continue to pray for each and every one who is struggling physically. I pray for the doctors and the staff of those who are ministering to them, that you would give wisdom and grace and healing. I continue to pray, Lord, that each and every person would come out of this having been stronger for it and having seen your hand in it. And I pray 24 in Jesus' name. Amen.*