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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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The Threat of Hardened Hearts - Communion Sunday

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, we just again, I thank you for just this ability to start to come back to normal. We're back here and back here for communion and this is the first of well over a year where I've been able to sit down here with you as opposed to up there so you don't get my COVID cooties, and I'm just grateful that I have this ability and I'm thankful. And Lord, as we come this morning before your throne, before your cross, we just want to pray for the grace and the insight and the wisdom that only your Holy Spirit can provide, that you would accompany us as we open up your book, that you would give us the privilege and the presence of your Holy Spirit. So we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, it is the first Sunday of the month and this is the day that we remember Jesus Christ and his cross. Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples there for the last time he celebrated a Passover supper with them. It's described in Matthew 26 which says this, it 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 blood, 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. He then asked them to repeat the remembrance of his sacrifice on a regular basis, and this is what we call "the Lord's table." We celebrate it once a month and we do that by meditating on what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, then by examining ourselves, asking God's Holy Spirit to convict us of sin, by confessing our 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 have been following the life of Christ in the gospel of Mark and last time out we looked at the story of Jesus walking on the water in the middle of the night. The disciples have left that desolate area where the feeding of the five thousand has taken place, they're now rowing furiously across the lake into a heavy

headwind, and they see approaching from behind walking on the water the Lord Jesus Christ. They think it's a ghost and they're terrified. *Mark 6:47* says: *Now when evening came, the boat was in the middle of the sea; and He was alone on the land. Then He saw them straining at rowing, for the wind was against them. Now about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea, and would have passed them by. And when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed it was a ghost, and cried out. The scripture says Jesus was about to pass them by and it's a very curious statement to make, almost as if Jesus is kind of casually walking around in the middle of a lake and he just happens to see a boat full of terrified disciples and join them. Jesus greets the disciples, and they see that he's not a ghost. Peter leaps out of the boat and he starts to walk on water till he takes his eyes off of Jesus, puts them on the waves and he starts sinking and Jesus literally has to reach out and grab him. As he does so he basically chides him for his lack of faith. But then God makes this statement, and he makes it about the disciples' hearts. This is what he says, this is *Mark 6:51*. It says: *Then He -- this is Jesus -- went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled. For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened.**

Now I said last time Mark describes this miracle of meeting Jesus in the middle of the lake as something that caused them great amazement when it really shouldn't have because according to Mark and I'm assuming he's including himself in this, he says they really never took the time to reflect about what Jesus had done only hours before in that great miracle of feeding the 5,000. I mean what was there to understand or not understand about the miracle of the loaves and the fishes? Jesus had clearly done this spectacular miracle and I suspect that the disciples were so caught up in the mechanics of it, of just getting the food out to the people that they forgot where it came from. Remember Jesus dismissed them and he dismissed them very hastily because the crowd was wanting to make Jesus into a king and he saw this as a great temptation for the disciples as well. I mean he knew they had given in to that temptation previously on numerous occasions, that they had also participated in trying to make Jesus their king. Now the crowd's calling for it and Jesus, he would want to have it, so he wants the disciples not to come under that kind of influence, so he dismisses them. And I can easily see the task of feeding them, understand feeding 20,000 people. And I can just understand that task gaining the ascendancy squeezing out the need to publicly acknowledge the absolute worship such a miracle should have produced. I mean, believe it or not miracles are not all that they are cracked up to be. They tend to have a hardening effect both on

the crowd and on the disciples. Hey Jesus, you just fed 20,000 people. How about forty? Or eighty? Or a hundred? I mean even our hearts grow hardened by miraculous circumstances and that's what Jesus is insisting on addressing. The whole exercise of the loaves and fishes is Jesus, he's pushing and prodding his disciples to trust him at a higher and higher level to do the very impossible. I mean, after pressing them for a solution, he's got 20,000 people to feed, how are you going to do it? Well, they come up with loaves and fishes; five loaves and two fishes. Jesus says, that's fine, that's all we need. And he goes on to make that paltry amount feed everyone and the disciples, they're just content to move on. Well, Jesus was not. Again *Mark 6:52: For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened.*

We think that hardened hearts are just the province of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but God is pointing out here that even the disciples, they had to struggle with the hardening of their own hearts. Jesus had become the main show, and the disciples contented themselves with being the supporting crew that made sure that the show ran smoothly. That's not what Jesus was after. He was actively growing them in their faith, in their ability to trust him in impossible situations. And the last thing that he wanted was for the disciples to settle into a pattern not that far removed from what the Pharisees had fallen into themselves. I mean the

disciples were growing intent to try to just kind of manage their relationship with Jesus. He was the main show; they were the support crew who managed the miracles, and that's not what Jesus envisioned for his disciples. I mean just think of a marriage relationship where one partner wants to reduce it to its bare minimum while the other one insists that there's a lot more room to grow here. And it's not like we haven't seen this before, I mean, Jesus knows that we human beings have this limitless ability to turn grace accepted into grace expected. I mean remember the reaction of the Jews in the desert to this miraculous feeding of over a million people every single day by God. I mean he literally rained food out of the sky. And the response from the Jews went from miraculous amazement to absolute scorn and derision. Grace accepted had become very quickly grace expected. *Numbers 21* says: *And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread."* What have you done for me lately, God?

So how have the disciples, how had they hardened their hearts? Probably the same way that we harden ours. We just get used to the blessings and the miracles that we participate in each and every day. And what happened next, it shows how quickly that hardness of heart can enter into the realm of the absurd when it comes to the

Pharisees. So this is after Jesus is in the boat, he's had this rebuke of his disciples, they arrive on shore and Jesus once again goes full tilt into his healing ministry. We pick up on *Mark 6:53*, It says this: *When they had crossed over, they came to the land of Gennesaret and anchored there. And when they came out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, ran through that whole surrounding region, and began to carry about on beds those who were sick to wherever they heard He was. Wherever He entered, into villages, cities, or the country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged Him that they might just touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched Him were made well.*

So just picture the scene here, I mean, everywhere Jesus goes, there's crowds, there's chaos, there's healing, there's wholeness. This kind of blessedness is just too much to take for the Pharisees, and so they respond. This is *Mark 7:1-5*. It says: *Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. Kind of like put your pinkies out, that kind of thing. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they*

have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

This is yet another confrontation that Jesus has with the religious leaders and each one seems to get progressively more and more absurd. I mean, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand right in front of their eyes and their response is you can't do that on the Sabbath. He cast a demon out of another man and they said, well, it's clearly by the power of Satan that you did that. And now they're in complete dismay, the Pharisees see this incredible healing taking place that they have no control whatsoever over. I mean the blind can now see, the crippled can now walk, the diseased are made whole and what really jumps out at them is the disciples' hand washing practices. And to make matters worse, this has nothing whatsoever, this has nothing to do with hygiene. This is a ritualistic washing of the hands that preceded eating that had nothing to do from a directive from God. It was instead a manmade part of the ceremonial law that the religious leaders scrupulously adhered to. Jesus is having none of it. This is what he said in verse 6: *He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME. AND IN VAIN THEY*

WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

You know it was Abraham Lincoln who once said, "It's better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt." Well the Pharisees are living proof of Lincoln's wisdom. I mean in spite of stunning evidence that something miraculous is taking place, they feel compelled to fall back on the only straw they've got left in their arsenal and it's not one that Jesus was willing to tolerate. The Pharisees considered themselves the specialists when it came to understanding the law, I mean, that is -- we're basically talking about the Old Testament, its history, its practices, its examples. What they never understood in spite of the fact that Jesus directly told them is that the entire Bible including the Old Testament was written about Jesus. Jesus in fact told the Pharisees as much in *John 5:39*. He says this, he said this directly to the Pharisees, he said: *"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you -- Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his*

writings, how will you believe My words?" The Pharisees had no idea that Moses was writing about Jesus or that Job was or that the author of Proverbs was or Isaiah or all the Old Testament writers because those Pharisees didn't have a heart to see it. When Jesus said, *"These people honor me with their lips but their heart is far from me"* he's essentially explaining to them how he could be seen, how he could be known. It was not with the eyes and it was not with the ears but it's only with the heart first and foremost. And so we ask the question: How did the Pharisees get this so incredibly wrong that they wound up looking like fools? I mean, they studied the law carefully and it led them to condemn Jesus rather than embrace him even though their source material was the scripture itself.

You know, I've often spoken about that term GIGO, G-I-G-O, garbage in, garbage out. I pointed out that the only source about truth about God is the scripture. These guys had the very same stuff, they had the very same scripture but they arrived at entirely different conclusions as to who Jesus was and what was really important to God. I mean according to the Pharisees Jesus was an ignorant flash-in-the-pan nobody. And what really mattered to God was that these 613-odd rules that they had concocted be dutifully obeyed. Well, so what happened? How did they arrive at that, I mean, was this a case of the exception proving the rule where the

good stuff of scripture is taken in, produces garbage coming out? How does this happen? And of course the question remains, can this happen to me? Well, Jesus made it crystal clear how it happened. He said, *"But their heart is far from me."* And he clearly saw a threat to the disciples' hearts that he felt that he needed to address, again: *For they had not understood about the loaves because their heart was hardened.* See, the Pharisees figured that that heartless religion is really all you need. They created this system of good works and manmade rules and regulations that would codify God enough, just enough to make him manageable. Just like lawyers and real estate agents that have evolved to handle sticky negotiation between two parties who don't really want to face themselves, so these religious leaders evolved their thinking so that they thought they could manage negotiations between God and his people. And you know on paper it almost made sense because after all, God was scary, God was other, and human beings wanted very little to do with him. So a priest or a Pharisee can act as the negotiating middleman between God and his fellow man. And he operated on the premise that man didn't really want a relationship with God, he simply wanted the protection and blessing that God could offer without having to spend the emotional energy that a genuine relationship required. So the priest saw a perfect opportunity there, and they could reduce the relationship with God down to a series of rules and regulations that if followed would

effectively solve man's problem and God's problem. I mean man would get the benefits of a relationship with God and God would get what these priests assumed God was interested in. That's his creatures assiduously tending the things of great importance to God like making sure that their hands were ceremonially clean before they ate bread or that healings were strictly avoided on the Sabbath. The God of these priests was a God of strict order. He was petty, he was picayune, he was pathetic, but that's the God that they represented. And by Jesus' day they had amassed over six hundred of these petty little rules that they thought guaranteed you a God-pleasing but essentially God-free existence. Is it any wonder that Jesus detested this as heartless lip service. Again *He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME. AND IN VAIN THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN.'*

What Jesus is after here, it's not the lip service of manmade rules parading themselves as worship, it's being able to see him and hear him not through your eyes and ears, not through any sensory ability, but through the heart. The reason why we examine ourselves before communion, it's not because we're checking our eyes and our ears to see if we've got our information right, that's how the priests, that's how the Pharisees saw it. And what they

consistently failed to check though was their heart.

This is God's warning about taking communion. God says this in *1 Corinthians 11*, he 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 what God is saying here is that communion is an extremely serious undertaking and it first requires a heart check. And to enter into communion in an unworthy manner, I've often said, is to literally court disaster. I say if you're not absolutely confident that you're a child of the King, if you haven't been faith trusted Christ as your Savior, if you first need to be reconciled to your brother or sister by bringing the sacrifice of yourself before him first, then don't participate. Err on the side of caution and get right with God first. And I always say also on the other hand you can make a mistake of thinking, oh, I have to be spotlessly perfect in order to receive communion. The enemy loves that too because that is just as big a mistake on the other side. Being a child of the King doesn't mean that you don't sin, it doesn't mean that you don't fail, it means that you recognize that the salvation you have

is a gift, it's a gift that you've been given that no one is ever capable of earning by being good. And we quote Dane Ortlund each month because his words are so pregnant with meaning, and what he says is: "In the kingdom of God the one thing that qualifies you is knowing you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." It also means that when we do fail we understand that we are sinners because we have God's Holy Spirit within us, he speaks to us, he convicts us, and so we grieve as children who know that we have a Father in heaven who longs to forgive and cleanse us, who wants us to confess our sins, 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 being a child of the King doesn't mean that you are sinless. It means you understand that you are a sinner saved by grace who has an advocate in heaven, somebody speaking on our behalf, the Lord Jesus Christ. *1 John 2 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.* So our whole reason for being able to sit here at the Lord's table is that we have Christ's righteousness and not our own, and because we have his righteousness we're free to eat from the table. And so if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that Jesus purchased for you. He lived the life that we were supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die in our place so that we

could be made worthy of heaven.

So what I'd like us to do this morning is just take a couple of moments and just ask ourselves, have I given God my heart or do I give him lip service? Just take a moment for that. If anyone needs the elements, just raise your hand and someone will bring them by. *1 Corinthians 11:23* 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 you know, I can hear somebody hearing what's been said and just wondering about this whole idea of giving my heart to God and there's one serious ground for an objection of sorts, and that's this holy idea of giving your heart to God is incredibly subjective. What does it mean? What does it mean to give your heart to God? I'm sure the Pharisees would describe their passionate dedication to hand washing and other minutia as an expression of a heart's desire to obey God. You know what? If all of those minor things were legitimate and sincere expressions of your heartfelt desire to be obedient to God, God would honor that, he'd honor that and accept your sacrifice. It's when that type of minor obedience is offered up as a substitute for your heart that

Jesus rejects it out of hand. You could crawl over broken glass and show how dedicated you are and God would simply say, okay, you've already had your reward as opposed to somebody quietly giving a cup of cold water in his name because you care about that person who bears the very image of your Lord. That's something that God finds of infinite value and that's what he wants to grow in the lives of his disciples and in us.

Why was Jesus concerned that his disciples were growing hardened hearts? Well, it's for the same reason that everyone around him was doing so in response to the miracles that he was doing. The crowds, they were getting larger and larger, the expectations were growing larger and larger, Jesus was going to heal the sick, he was going to raise the dead, he was going to feed the hungry and much of the crowd was really there just for the show and the free food. I mean their hearts were already hardened by the miracles and more miracles made it even more so.

The gospel of John dives deeply into Jesus's conflict with the crowds' desire to use him for whatever they could get. And when Jesus consciously decides that he's going to call out a heart that's not really looking for a relationship with God but for whatever it can get, well he then makes a series of statements so bizarre, so culturally inappropriate, so blatantly offensive, that

only those who've already given him their heart will have the will to stay. This is *John 6:26*. It says: *Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."* Jesus is calling out the crowd. He's calling them out and he's telling them you're only in this for the free food, and he's literally offering them himself. These folks are hard-hearted indeed and they respond by telling Jesus how unimpressive he and his miracles are. I mean you fed 20,000 people with five loaves and two fishes, big deal. You only fed them periodically. I mean our Moses fed the whole nation of Israel for forty years every single day in the desert. This is what they said. This is *John 30*. It says: *So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'HE GAVE THEM BREAD FROM HEAVEN TO EAT.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* You understand there's a level of divine insanity going on here and it's from the crowd's side, it's not from God's. This is a crowd arguing about God with

God. They claim it was Moses who fed them and Jesus tells them it wasn't Moses who fed you, it was my heavenly Father who's now sent me as the bread that gives life forever -- quote -- *"The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* So the crowd hears this and they're not thinking at all about spiritual things here and Jesus is offering his very self as the author and sustainer of life and they have no interest at all. They are thinking, well, this guy's offering us an everlasting food supply. Hey, we'll take it. *John 6:34* says: *They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

So here's God himself and he's humbling himself to the point where he's offering them not a show, not free food, not healings, not anything but himself. They have no interest at all. Their hearts are hardened. I mean if Jesus really is the bread of life, they'd rather starve. *Verse 41* says: *So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"* You have to understand Jesus' miracles, obviously they meant absolutely nothing to these people. These are the very same people I mentioned at the beginning of this message who saw Jesus

creating the crowds and the chaos, the healing and the wholeness and all they can see, all they can reflect on is that the disciples are eating bread in an improper manner. Again: *Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"* Are you kidding me? This is astounding. I mean so it's bread eaten improperly that hardens the heart of the Pharisees and it's bread misunderstood that hardened the hearts of the disciples. Again he says: *Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled. For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened.*

See, no one is immune from hardened hearts. It afflicted the crowd and it afflicted the disciples and it would have continued to afflict them had Jesus not intervened. So Jesus responds to the crowd and his response is he doubles down and then he triples down. He tells them: *"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of*

this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed."

Well folks, if those last words sound familiar it's the very scripture that we introduce communion service with: *"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed."* See, one of the main reasons for communion is the prevention of hardened hearts. If you are one of his you recognize how critical it is to make him the source and center of your very being, the one whose nurture you cannot live without. If you're not one of his, then this statement is nothing more than cannibalistic insanity. It says: *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is*

the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

So what made the disciples in that boat that night so different that Jesus would appear to them to address their hardened hearts while the crowds who saw the very same miracles, heard the very same plea from Jesus fall on deaf ears? There's only one difference and it has to be the grace of God. I mean Jesus couldn't have said it planer -- quote -- *"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."* This is what God says in *Ephesians 2:8*, he says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Verse 66 says: After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."*

See anyone who truly loves Jesus is here because they have nowhere else to go. I mean this world is so full of pain and misery and evil, with so many unanswered questions about why there is so much pain and misery and evil that if we don't have a God who's embraced pain and misery and evil for us so that by faith we could have his righteousness instead of our sin, then we too would have no place to go. Our answer to life itself is and will always be the cross. And our secret to finding life in Christ is not through our brains, it's not through our senses. And Jesus himself said, "*The flesh is no help at all.*" It's through what God says it is in *Jeremiah 29*, he says: *You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.*

As we're about to take the cup, ask yourself am I searching for you with my heart? And if you're not, ask God for that heart. Just like David did in *Psalms 51*: *Create in me, O God, a clean heart.* God can create that right here and right now. So just take a moment before we participate in the cup.

1 Corinthians 11:25 says this: *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.

We conclude our service with what I call head, heart and feet which is really just trying to find how do we practically remember Jesus Christ? And what I wanted to use this time to describe -- first of all, I want to say clear out we have a problem as a church. We have a problem that we have been praying over, talking about, arguing about, trying to come up with a solution. The disciples had hardened hearts over bread. We here in this church have hardened hearts over Covid-19. We are not what we want to be. Christ's church is supposed to be a community of people whose lives revolve around growing their relationship with Jesus, who are committed to helping each other in that process. Listen to what *Hebrews 10:24* says, it says: *Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* The word "encourage" literally means to pour courage into somebody who doesn't have it. I saw a great example of that, just a few weeks ago there was a teacher in Virginia who was at a school board meeting. He was a Christian. And he stood up and he said, I don't really care what happens to me, but I'm not going to lie to a boy who says he's a girl that he's now a girl. I'm not going to lie to a girl who says she's a boy that he's a boy because I'm Christian and I can't lie like that. That's what courage is. But you know what that did? That encouraged half a dozen people in that meeting. They stood up and

they encouraged others and others and others and more and more people are rising up and speaking because they've been encouraged and we can have that effect on each other as a church.

I mean I spent a lot of time talking about Rod Dreher's *Live Not By Lies*, that book describes the importance of us as a community having each other's backs and understanding that this world out there is not friendly. It's hostile to the gospel and to Christ. And if we don't recognize that we have each other's backs, we're in trouble because that's not going to get any easier out there.

COVID sucked the life out of us and we need to get it back. We need to return to the place where folks recognize that we have to have each other's back, not just in times of trial and tribulation but simply as we live life together. We need to hit the reset button. And to me that's actually an encouragement. It's an encouragement to me because that's really an impossible task, and I know God loves the impossible.

We've been around here for 30 years, around here as a church, 30 years. It's amazing to me. And one of the reasons why we've been around here for 30 years is that we are uniquely qualified as leaders for the church. And what uniquely qualifies us is our incompetence. I look at myself. I was a cabinetmaker. We have a

cabinetmaker, a contractor, a state trooper, a computer tech, a teacher, and a food tech. That's who's leading this church. There's nobody remotely connected to the professionalism of the pastorate. You know, a pastor's supposed to have a D.Min or an M.Div after his name, that means he's a pastor of divinity or a doctor of ministry. I've got NPT, no professional training, after mine. I mean that kind of incompetence produces a holy terror, and that holy terror drives us to what *2 Corinthians* speaks to. It says: *"For my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* We buy that. As elders we buy that, and so that has led us to prayer. And it also leads us to our confession. We dropped the ball. I mean, we as elders prayed for every single person in this congregation every month by name, we work through the entire families, everybody. We dropped that ball and we made Covid-19 the excuse. And so for a full year we haven't prayed for you guys like we should be. And I think part of that is we're paying the price. We intently feel that we're not back to where we're supposed to be. And you know as well as I know that that world out there is not getting any better, it's falling off a cliff. And I've just been struck incredibly with *2 Chronicles 7:14* which says: *If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and*

heal their land. And boy we need that desperately. So we are recommitting to prayer. We're recommitting to reconnecting where the elders and deacons and wives are all going to get together not this Sunday but the Sunday after that just so that we can reconnect what's been disconnected.

And so I have a task that I'd like for you to do. I want you to take two names of two people, individual, somebody that you haven't had any contact with for this past year or so. Not folks that you're in regular contact with but somebody that you realize that you've been out of touch with. And I would like you to pray for that person and I would like for you to somehow drop them a card, a note, a text, let them know, hey, I'm praying for you. I want to encourage you and so I'm asking each and every one of us to think of two people that we have not had much contact with over this past year and pray for them and remember them and contact them. And I also want to ask you to pray for your neighborhood. I want us to -- I really believe that God is going to bring about a revival because I don't believe it can get much worse than it is out there.

And God has really pressed on me to be praying for my individual neighborhood. I dropped that ball. For the last month and a half I've been praying intensely for my neighbors. And just strangely enough I got a text just yesterday from the son of one of my

neighbors who -- he's in his mid '30s and he's a helicopter pilot in the military, he's been in Korea for the last seven or eight years, then Alaska, now he's in Alabama. We used to meet all the time and he used to say, you know, we'd have these conversations, he used to say, "Christianity is absurd. Tell me why it's not." So we have these conversations, and every year he would come by and he just texted me, he said, we need to sit down for our annual chat especially since COVID has made us miss our last. And I just thought to myself, that came about because I started praying for my neighbor. That's how God works. That's what he wants us to do. He wants us to care about each other, about our neighborhood and start being the agents that are going to bring this revival in. Let's pray.

Father, I just again, I recognize and I confess that as leaders we have dropped the ball. We let Covid-19 dictate to us rather than the other way around. So I just confess that publicly, Lord. I pray for your forgiveness, I pray for the ability to lead in prayer which is the absolute only way to get the wisdom and the insight and the grace that we need to make your church work. I pray for each and every individual here, those that have lost touch, those who feel out of touch, Lord, that you would just give each and every one of us the impetus to pray and to encourage one another, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.