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In 1st Cor. 11 Paul writes to his friends within the church in Corinth:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, **“This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.”** ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”** ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. ²⁷Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

This is our Autumn Pre-communion service. The temptation for each one of us this morning is for us to simply look at our calendars and think that this is just the Sunday that comes before communion. But there is a very valid reason in having this service today.

Yes it is a service that comes before our time around the table next Sunday - but it is so much more!

Today is what I would call a day of Grace. It is a day when we are given the opportunity to stand before a mirror of sorts and take a very long look at ourselves to see how we actually measure up.

Now for some of you as you came to church this morning perhaps took some time in front a mirror. For those of you who didn’t, take a moment to offer a prayer of thankfulness for your friends who love you too much to tell you the truth! But I am hazarding a guess here that some if not all of you took time to stand before a mirror this morning to check one or two things. Perhaps you wanted to check to see if your tie was on and if so if it was sitting straight. Perhaps you checked your outfit to make sure that your colours co-ordinate and that you weren’t making a fashion statement that no one really wants to make. Maybe as you looked in the mirror you found yourself smiling at what you saw – maybe it filled you with terror and dread especially as you realized that it was 11.26am and there was nothing any professional could do with the reflection that gazing back at you with equal shock! But we are glad you are here today looking just as you are. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. The strange thing is that although some of you put extra effort in your appearance this morning I know that since next Sunday is our sacrament of the Lord’s supper some of you will make that little bit more effort in how you appear as you come to the table. That’s great! That’s fine but you could spend your time far more beneficially.

Now when I was a teenager growing up in church I used to love to wear my jeans to church – if truth be told part of me would still love to. Today’s jeans are meant to be a

fashion statement (if you can call pre-made holes a fashion statement).

They have everything to do with what is on the outside of a wearer and not the inside. It's not what you do in them any more that is important. It's how you look in them that gives the wearer meaning. How scruffy and shabby the jeans are is how we judge the wearer. Utility and work ethic are no longer a part of what "jeans" mean. In a culture obsessed with appearances, it is often difficult to look past the jeans and into the wearers themselves.

But the church I grew up in had some wonderfully godly people who would never have come to church wearing anything other than their suits and best dresses. As the youth of the church we were always waiting for them to make some comment about our attire and we used to be sprung loaded with a verse that many of us know well taken from 1 Samuel:

“The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

Now in fairness I can honestly say that I never ever remember those comments being made to us and so I was never able to use this verse in my defense. But listen, oh what a danger there is in even contemplating using a verse like this!

To say that God looks not at the outside is fine and true but while we might want to use this verse as license for dressing how we want let's be so very careful that the inside that God in fact looks at is whiter than white or we have already condemned ourselves...

The real problem comes when people have the appearance of righteousness written all over them but inside they are as far from God as the person who is still lying in their bed with little or no intention of ever coming to church.

Jesus spoke about such people as this in one occasion in Matthew when he clearly got very upset and angry with the Pharisees.

He was simply giving them a piece of his mind when he raged:

²⁵“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

²⁶Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

²⁷“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. ²⁸In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

As we prepare to come to communion we turn to the situation that existed in Jeremiah's day. As we know by now the people God loved had wandered from him, in fact wandered is for too gracious a word - these people had willingly marched off to the other gods that were worshipped by the people that surrounded them. They had turned their backs on Him and had purposely closed their ears to God's call. They were so far from God that God decided to send judgement on them by allowing their enemies to come and destroy Jerusalem and carry them off into captivity. In our reading this morning we read God's words to Jeremiah when He tells him at the start of chapter 5:

¹“Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares.

If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.“

Although they say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives,’ still they are swearing falsely.” God tells Jeremiah to go and see if he can find one person who is doing what they should be doing. God already knows that this person does not exist in much the same way as Sodom and Gomorrah were judged. But He wants to allow Jeremiah the opportunity to carry out the search so that what He will inevitably do will be justified. Jeremiah is faithful enough to carry out the Lord’s request and so we read in verse 5:

“So I will go to the leaders and speak to them; surely they know the way of the LORD, the requirements of their God. But with one accord they too had broken off the yoke and torn off the bonds.”

Jeremiah’s search has come up with no one and he is forced to admit that there is no one who is doing what God would have them do. They are not the people God requires them to be. Not even the leaders whom God has appointed to lead His people. The examination of Jerusalem has been carried out and they have been found wanting. They laugh at the very thought that God will in fact do anything!

¹² They have lied about the LORD; they said, “He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine. ¹³ The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them; so let what they say be done to them.”

As if God isn’t angry enough with the fact that they have turned away from him, his judgment is being laughed at as hollow words from someone who doesn’t know what they are talking about.

¹⁴ Therefore this is what the LORD God Almighty says: “Because the people have spoken these words, I will make my words in your mouth a fire and these people the wood it consumes. O house of Israel,” declares the LORD, “I am bringing a distant nation against you - an ancient and enduring nation, a people whose language you do not know, whose speech you do not understand. Their quivers are like an open grave; all of them are mighty warriors. They will devour your harvests and food, devour your sons and daughters; they will devour your flocks and herds, devour your vines and fig trees. With the sword they will destroy the fortified cities in which you trust.

Jeremiah had to examine the people to see if any could be found who were doing what God wanted them to be doing. He was sent out to see if at least one could be found righteous. If not then judgment was coming.

²⁸ A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Could it be that that same God is in this pre-communion service telling his Holy Spirit: ¹“Go up and down the pews of this congregation, right into the pulpit and look around and consider, search through her halls. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this church.

But hold on since we cannot ultimately answer for the rest of this congregation let's take it as step closer to the bone.

Could it be that God is commanding his Spirit?

¹“Go up and down the lives of each individual, look around and consider, search through his or her public and private places. If you can find but one who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive that person.

This morning as you came into church looking the way you do – quite possibly seeking to give the rest of us the impression that everything in your life was upright and holy did you manage to fool God?

Psalm 139 : 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

I recently read of a lady who out of sincere concern over sin and desire to be what God wanted her to be, she prayed, "God, show me the sin in my life. Show me what I really am." She said that in a couple of weeks she began to pray, "Lord, I've seen enough! Please, Lord, don't show me any more. I can't stand myself!"

As difficult as it may be - this is exactly what we need to do today. If we are to have a heart prepared for coming to the Lord's table, if we are to remedy the problem of our unholy affections, we must pray such a prayer as she. The people in Jeremiah's day were accused by God as not taking his judgment seriously. They said, "He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine. Let us not fall into the devil's trap of believing that we will never be judged. There will be judgement one day. Paul warns us of this in 2 Cor. 5 when he writes:

So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

But I stand by what I said earlier – this is a wonderful day because it is a day of Grace – a day for us to come to God and accept his forgiveness offered through the sacrificial death of his son Jesus Christ. I know I have perhaps used this illustration before but I just want to finish with it.

At a comparative religions conference, the wise and the scholarly were in a spirited debate about what is unique about Christianity.

Someone suggested what set Christianity apart from other religions was the concept of incarnation, the idea that God took human form in Jesus. But someone quickly said, "Well, actually, other faiths believe that God appears in human form." Another suggestion was offered: what about resurrection? The belief that death is not the final word. That the tomb was found empty. Someone slowly shook his head. Other religions have accounts of people returning from the dead. Then, as the story is told, C.S. Lewis walked into the room, tweed jacket, pipe, arm full of papers, a little early for his presentation. He sat down and took in the conversation, which had by now evolved into a fierce debate. Finally during a lull, he spoke saying, "what's all this rumpus about?" Everyone turned in his

direction. Trying to explain themselves they said, “We’re debating what’s unique about Christianity.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” answered Lewis. “It’s grace.” The room fell silent. Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims God’s love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim.

After a moment someone commented that Lewis had a point, Buddhists, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It’s not a free ride.

Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions.

Someone else observed the Jewish code of the law implies God has requirements for people to be acceptable to him and in Islam God is a God of Judgement not a God of love. You live to appease him

At the end of the discussion everyone concluded Lewis had a point.

Only Christianity dares to proclaim God’s love is unconditional.

An unconditional love that we call grace.

Christians boldly proclaim that grace really has precious little to do with us, our inner resolve, or our lack of inner resolve.

Rather, grace is all about God and God freely giving to us the gifts of forgiveness, mercy, and love.

² Cor. 13 : 5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.

Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?