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FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

ROMANS 12:1-5

Introduction

Christians are concerned about proper worship. This concern is seen in our liturgy. We do not take lightly this matter of coming into God's presence. Step by step we prepare ourselves to come before Him, to hear His Word, to receive its life-giving benefits and to eat His Son's body and to drink His Son's blood.

God-fearing people are concerned about their relationship to God: they attend church, they contribute, work on committees, lead good clean lives. They are also concerned about their relationship to other people. This concern is often not readily seen. At times they are apathetic, loveless; they ignore those suffering in the slums and the inner-city; they discriminate against black Christians. St. Paul insists that the proper relationship to God brings about a proper relationship to the people He created and loved. This is

The Order of Worship

I. *God's Mercies*

A. God is the object of man's worship. But we do not worship Him simply because He is there. St. Paul does not plead: "I beseech you, brethren, present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice." Paul says: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God . . ." These mercies are mentioned in the eleven chapters which precede the "therefore" in this text. Because God is merciful, therefore worship Him.

B. This is the order of worship: God has been merciful to you, therefore present yourself to Him as a living sacrifice. This

sequence must be preserved. To invert it (present yourself to God as a living sacrifice and you will have the mercy of God) is pagan morality. Alter it (forget about God or His mercy), and the result is superstition.

C. In mercy God comes to us. Merely to know that God exists is no comfort. The devils believe and tremble. Some men who knew that God exists sacrificed human beings in their attempt to appease Him.

1. God comes to be with us. Unless you know God's mercy, you cannot appreciate His presence. When God walked through the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, Adam hid. He knew he had sinned and deserved to die. Those ignorant of God's mercy feel the same way.

2. God comes to us for our benefit. His mercy is manifested in the life and death of His Son. "Christ is 'for us,' not only in word and in His attitude towards us, but in His bodily life. He occupies in His body the place where we should be before God. He suffers and dies in our stead, and can do so because of the Incarnation. The body of Christ is in the strictest sense of the word 'for us' as it hangs on the cross, and 'for us' as it is given to us in the Word, in Baptism, and in the Lord's Supper. This is the ground of all bodily fellowship [worship] with Jesus Christ." (Bonhoeffer: *The Cost of Discipleship*)

3. God comes to us to dwell in us. Our bodies are to be temples of the living God. He wants to sanctify us, that is, dedicate us, set us apart from the rest of the world for His own purpose (Cf. Rev. 3:20). Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He desires to enter every compartment of our lives.

God's coming to us in mercy is the basis of our worship, and it must always remain the first consideration. You have received the mercies of God, therefore I beseech you to offer yourselves to God.

II. *Man's Sacrifice*

A. Our reasonable service to God. God has given Himself to us. He wants us to give ourselves to Him. Giving ourselves to God is our reasonable service. This means far more than setting aside an hour or so on Sunday morning for God. He is not necessarily pleased with ritual. (Cf. Isaiah 1 and Luke 18:9-14.)

1. The sacrifice of praise. "True worship is to turn back and with a loud voice glorify God" (Cf. Luke 17:11-19). "Therefore our task is simply to praise and thank Him, first by receiving and believing in our hearts that from Him are all things and that He is our God; and secondly by coming out with it and freely confessing it with our mouths before the world, preaching, praising, lauding, and thanking." (Luther, as quoted by Vajta in *Luther on Worship*)

2. The sacrifice of body. Give your whole life to God. God can do miracles with it. We live in the world and are tempted to become so much a part of the world that little is left that is godly in us. When we lack mercy, love, and faithfulness, the image of God doesn't shine through. But God wants to take over completely. He wants to be the Architect of our lives. His purpose is to make us over completely in the image of His Son. Once you have given yourself to God, then every activity becomes an act of worship, a reasonable service to God.

B. Our reasonable service to others. The man who gives himself to God actually gives himself to others (Cf. 1 John 2:9-11; 4:4-12). To be one in Christ is to be a part of the body of Christ. In His body we are many members (Cf. vv. 4, 5). The proper

relationship to God brings about the proper relationship to others. This is worship. Through our worship order comes into our lives.

1. Order in the home. Worship in the home is more than family devotions. It is each member of the family using his talents, fulfilling his calling, for the benefit of the whole family — to the glory of God.

2. Order in the community. The Christian who lives out his calling will bring order to his community. He is a neighbor to anyone in need regardless of color. His life is not legislated from Washington; it is properly ordered by the love of God. He has given himself to God and to his community. (Cf. Romans 12:10, 11, 13; 13:1-8.)

Conclusion

Is your worship in proper order this morning? The love you show to your neighbor throughout the week will evidence it. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice . . . your reasonable service."

EDWARD H. BIRNER

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

2 PETER 1:16-21

Introduction

Read the small print before you buy. "Let the buyer beware" is still good advice. No product is any better than its guarantee. Even a good guarantee is no better than the company that makes it. We have learned this from experience. We have been "taken in" before; we don't want to be "taken in" again. We are skeptics. We look at "free" offers with jaundiced eye. Consequently, we are inclined to discount even God's offer to us in His Word. In it He makes a tremendous offer. It is free. It does carry a guarantee that never is found wanting.

The Guarantee for Life

I. *The Offer*

A. The offer is life. "This is the Life." It is a new life, a new love. For many life is spelled with a capital "L." The emphasis is on the individual, the "I." They are egotistical, egocentric. What is said, done, and worn is determined by the individual for his own selfish, self-centered, self-willed purposes. He accepts no standards but his own.

God says: Cancel out the "I" in life. The smaller the "i," the less emphasis on the individual, the greater the life (Cf. Luke 22:24-27). When the "i" becomes nothing, then living becomes loving.

B. This new life has value. Without God life has little value, little meaning (Cf. James 4:14). God gives meaning and value to life. The present moment is valuable only if you are loving, praying for someone, giving yourself for someone, developing your ability in order to serve someone better, worshipping God. What is said, done, and worn in this new life is meaningful when it is determined by God and by what is best for others.

C. This new life satisfies every basic need of man. It gives status and security. God recognizes you, God loves you, God wants you. You are accepted by God as you are.

D. This life is insured for eternity. All life ends in death! Not this life. Death has lost its sting; the grave has lost its victory (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-57). God has canceled out the fear of death. We will come forth from our graves. He will take us to Himself in heaven.

E. This life can be yours. You can afford it because God gives it to you. You can start living it today because God enables you. You need no longer worry about the past or try to make amends for it or cover up for it. God removes all your past failures through Christ's atonement. He frees you

from sin and guilt and enables you to live for Him and for others.

All this may sound like a fairy tale, but it isn't. This is the message we have received from God. We pass it on to you. This is His offer. This is the life for you. (V. 16)

II. *The Guarantee*

Of course, there are many other ways of living that many people consider glamorous, glorious, exciting, challenging, satisfying, and wholly acceptable. What guarantee do we have that this way is not only the best way, but the only way of life? Even "good" Christians may hesitate to go all the way with Christ; they want to be counted in, but with reservations.

A. We know from personal experience that "this is the Life." It is everything it is supposed to be. If this really is the life, then we should be extremely happy with it. Our happiness ought to be obvious to others. But our own personal experience may not be an entirely reliable guarantee.

B. The only sure guarantee comes from God. We have the Word of prophecy which centers in Christ. God revealed His promise of life through the prophets of old, and these promises find their fulfillment in Jesus. God has been faithful to His Word in times past. We have no reason to doubt that He will be faithful to His Word today, especially in the light of the fact that He gave us His Son, who died for us.

We have eyewitnesses to His faithfulness — Peter, James, and John, who were with the Lord when He was glorified. They tell us what took place. They saw it with their own eyes. (Vv. 17, 18)

We have the Word of the resurrected Lord. God raised Him from the dead, received Him into heaven, placed Him at His right hand, gave Him power and authority over all. (V. 19)

This is our guarantee. It is written by God, backed by God. Pay attention to it.

Read it carefully, study it diligently. Seek advice. It is dangerous to interpret God's Word on your own terms. A man with rose-colored glasses might think the world rosy, if others didn't tell him differently. A man with hatred and bigotry in his heart will interpret Scripture to justify his actions and feelings. To rightly understand God's Word, man needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit, through whom the Scriptures are given to us. Our authority is the message from God through the Holy Spirit. (Vv. 20, 21)

III. *Our Personal Pledge*

This new life needs servicing. We, too, have mountaintop experiences followed by valleys of depression. When the going gets rough, when we need reassurance the most, we have the promise of God's Word to support us.

This is God's offer, this is His guarantee. Accept this life and see for yourself the glory of God in Christ.

Greenbelt, Md. EDWARD H. BIRNER

SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY

1 COR. 9:24—10:5

Introduction

A banking concern recently hired 23 people to process 80,000 school savings accounts. All of the new employees were either physically disabled or mentally retarded. After eight months it cost the bank 10% less than before — although these workers were paid the same wage scale as regular workers.

A spokesman for the concern who trained these handicapped people said: "They have more at stake. The idea that they are working competitively gives them a big boost. Their job is their life."

For us Christians our job is also our life. Being a Christian is often hard work (Matt. 7:21). Likewise, not all those who live on

the nebulous fringe of Christianity really are Christians. Even those who work hard at their faith, who try to maintain a close relationship with God, find the task most difficult. Today's text speaks about this.

Christianity — Its Foundation and Demands

I. *The Foundation*

A. God's protection (1 Cor. 10:1). The Israelites were protected against their enemies by the shielding cloud and the pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21). The towering waters of the Red Sea were parted for them by the staying hand of God (Ex. 14:22). When we are in danger or troubled, but also when things are going smoothly, God protects us.

B. Christ's atoning work (1 Cor. 10:4b). The promises of God accompanied the Israelites both in their physical and spiritual needs, pointing them to their coming Savior. Christ is also our Rock from whom we receive the Water of Life (John 4:11-15). Through His death and resurrection our sins are forgiven, and we have His promise to sustain us forever. (John 3:13, 14)

C. Resources of the sacraments (1 Cor. 10:2-4a). The protecting cloud, the sustaining manna, and the water from the rock were not only safety measures and food and drink for the Israelites but types of the close relationship we have with God through the sacraments (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). Putting on Christ in Baptism and refreshing ourselves frequently by receiving Holy Communion, we are using resources which will give our Christianity a strong foundation.

II. *The Demands*

A. Christianity is not just a matter of receiving. The faith-life must be active. Christianity does make demands. We are constantly challenged to overcome temptations: idolatry (v. 7), immorality (v. 8), testing the Lord (v. 9), grumbling. (v. 10)

B. Be temperate in daily living. (1 Cor. 9:25)

C. Keep your body under strict control (1 Cor. 9:27). Keep your bodies in the service of the Lord instead of the world and our wayward desires, even if this means severe fighting on our part.

Application

We must continuously fight the good fight. The word "all" is used five times in the text to indicate the extent of God's love and protecting care for the Israelites. And yet, of the original number, only Joshua and Caleb entered the Promised Land (1 Cor. 10:5). Going through the motions is not enough (1 Cor. 9:24). 1 Cor. 9:27 applies to all Christians because by word and act they preach to others. May God give you His grace so that you may rest your faith on a firm foundation and be strong to meet the various demands of life.

WALTER J. BAEPLER

SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY

2 COR. 11:19—12:9

The famous author O. Henry won great literary renown in the field of short-story writing. Many people eagerly awaited his work and applauded him as one of the finest authors of his time. But as O. Henry lay dying, his fame and glory gone, nothing but fear filled his heart. "Nurse, bring me a candle," he spoke, "I am afraid to go home in the dark." This famous literary person who had strengths in so many areas found himself, at the end of his life, weak, alone, and filled with fear.

As we look at the problems which confront us, at the trials and troubles which we endure, at the various things which threaten us, we, too, feel weak. We feel alone. We wonder if we will have strength to carry on.

From his varied experience St. Paul preaches a mighty sermon to us. As we study this text we see that we are

Weak, Yet Powerful

I. *Weak*

A. False leaders were deluding the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:19, 20). Paul had been gentle and long-suffering, but the people often took advantage of him. Now these same people were willingly accepting insulting treatment from false leaders.

B. The apostle suffered indignities because he preached the Gospel (2 Cor. 11:23-27, 32, 33). His life was in danger from enemies within and without, from elements of various sorts. (1 Cor. 4:10; Acts 9:23; 13:50; 14:5, 6, 19; 16:23; 17:5, 13; 27)

C. The daily pressure of Paul's work was so great that it regularly caused him anxiety. (2 Cor. 11:28)

D. He had a severe impediment which bothered him continuously (2 Cor. 12:7; Job 2:7; Phil. 1:29). This unnamed affliction caused him much anguish and anxiety over a long period of time.

Application

How many things confronted Paul which caused him to be weak, to want to give up, to wonder if he would be able to go on! Are not many of us in similar conditions? Certainly we do not face the indignities that beset Paul, but if our religion is sincere, sneers, jibes, loss of friends, distaste for certain pleasures and business activities, etc. — these and other problems are bound to confront us. Daily responsibilities are often enervating — working hard, balancing the family budget, the difficult routine of daily life. The awesome responsibilities of church leadership coupled with the indifference of many members within the church makes one feel weak and powerless. How many of us have not a "thorn in the flesh" — mental or emotional problems, physical ailments or longstanding conditions, things we may live with for years, perhaps for the remainder of our lives? Left to our own resources, how many of us would not be terribly weak?

II. *Powerful*

A. The basic source of strength was Paul's well-grounded personal faith in Jesus, his Savior, who had lived, died, and risen to procure the forgiveness of his sins. Paul had a zeal to share with others this most important fact in his life, and this kept him going, even in the face of the severest difficulties.

B. In order that his faith might be bolstered and strengthened, he received a special revelation from God. (2 Cor. 12:1-5)

1. His humble nature made it hard for him to speak of this extraordinary occurrence.

2. Nor was he entirely clear about the details.

3. It was a heavenly vision in which God Himself spoke to him.

4. He is willing publicly to glory in this.

Application

Weak as we are by ourselves, our faith in Christ gives us the same power that Paul's faith gave to him. Regular communication with God through the use of Scripture, prayer, hearing the Word, attending Holy Communion will give you strength also to meet the vicissitudes of life as well as to withstand great trials and troubles if they arise.

WALTER J. BAEPLER

QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

1 COR. 13:1-13

We hear the word "love" used frequently today and in various ways. There is filial love, often a very noble form of love. Such love is strong enough to cause a person to give up his life for a beloved one. There is erotic love—as we see it on every side in movies, magazines, the theater, newspapers, etc. The American concept of erotic love has distorted lives. It is assumed that this love must be strong in marriage; when

it is not always in evidence, marriages begin to fail. There is selfish love, possessed by all of us at times. The love which is spoken of in Paul's letter to the Corinthians—ἀγάπη—is entirely different. It is this strictly biblical and Christian love which motivates a person as no other love can.

God-Pleasing Love

I. *Its Source*

A. God the Father's love to us. In His mercy (1 Peter 1:3) God continually displays His love to us in various ways—guarding our health and the health of those who are near us, being with our country, protecting us at work and play, sending us His Son as our Savior.

B. Christ's work for us.

1. As displayed by His becoming man. Son of God and true God Himself, He became a true human being in order to fulfill His Father's Law for us.

2. As displayed by His life, truly human, yet sinless.

3. As displayed by His death. He suffered the agonies and indignities of one of the cruellest deaths in the world to win the forgiveness of our sins.

4. As displayed by His resurrection, which proves beyond any doubt the fact that He is victorious and that our sins are forgiven forever.

II. *Its Nature*

A. Stated negatively. Without love there is no

1. Basis for eloquent and moving speech (1 Cor. 13:1). Only if I have love, can I speak with the utmost sincerity.

2. Basis for deep knowledge and power. (1 Cor. 13:2)

3. Basis for charitable acts. (1 Cor. 13:3)

B. Stated positively.

1. It is levelheaded (1 Cor. 13:4). How often we speak too quickly, act too quickly,

accuse too quickly! When love motivates our lives, we are not apt to do this.

2. Thinking the best of others (1 Cor. 13:5,6). Love helps us think and speak the best instead of the worst about other people.

3. Endures when all else fails. (1 Cor. 13:7)

III. *Its Full Application*

A. Never completely possible in this world.

1. All things are incomplete here (1 Cor. 13:9,10). How often we are positive about things only to find out later that we had at best incomplete knowledge. How often we yearn to know more than we do because we think that in so doing we will function better.

2. Our love is often childish (1 Cor. 13:11a). The attitudes, behavior, and speech of children are often seen just as well in adults.

3. It is often opaque (1 Cor. 13:12a). We do not always get the exact picture.

B. It is fulfilled in heaven (1 Cor. 13:

12b), where we will know all things and where we will live in total love.

Application

Our world with its veneer of sophistication, helpfulness, openness, and concern for others is actually a world of selfishness, hate, greed, and a strong desire for individuals to get ahead, no matter what this does to other people. Such attitudes may cause temporary feelings of happiness, achievement, and love, but these emotions eventually are replaced with feelings of frustration, bitterness, rage, and helplessness. The only basis for true contentment is Christian love which has as its basis the redeeming work of Christ. Only when this is the most meaningful concept in the world for us, and only when we love others out of thankfulness to God, who loved the world by sending His Son, do we have a truly satisfying personal life and an ability to show true love to others. None of us will do this perfectly, but with the help of God all of us can enlarge our lives and the lives of those who surround us by this love. May God give us all strength to do this!

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