

(inspirational organ music) ♪ ♪ Praise God, from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise Him, all creatures here below ♪ ♪ Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host ♪ ♪ Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- God, from whom cometh down every good and every perfect gift, except we beseech thee the offerings which thy people here present to thee, with willing and thankful hearts and grant us grace to consecrate ourselves to thy service. Through Jesus Christ, our blood, amen. Let me ask you this morning to gather your thoughts about the very familiar words, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies," part of the 23rd Psalm. Henry Ward Beecher wrote of the 23rd Psalm this surpassing ode is but a moment opening of the singer's soul as when one walking the winter streets sees the door opened for someone to enter and the red light streams a moment forth and the forms of gay children are running to meet the comer and genial music sound. Then the door shuts and leaves the night black. He went on to point out that the eyes, the ears, the heart, and the imagination have seen something that they carry with them into the dark, but he doesn't play down that moment of light and the surrounding night. So Christmas Day itself coming in the midst of the routines of the winter opens a sudden door from which at least for an instant streams of Earth from the light from heaven. The surrounding year may be dreary enough, but that day is different. Even my text suggests something of the oasis quality of a single experience in the midst of circumstances quite distinct. It says, thou preparest a table before me, but it is in the presence of mine enemies. This is a curious situation. I sit down to feast at thee table the Lord has prepared for me. There might be even a few friends present too, but the total environment is hostile. The pleasure of the feast may cause me to forget, or even disdain the hostility, but the latter remains and they peruse all about a continuing threat. The early Christians seem to have had something of this same view of light. Now and then, an alert individual like Saint Paul would see the light from God shining through on the Damascus Road. But for the most part, he lived in what he called the world, a place which did not at all remind him of God, and which was always threatening to close in around him. And who today will say that life is not like that? There are the mountain top experiences, which always for all one's expectation of them seem to come suddenly. They seem almost to have a spiritual content to be morally cleansing. A companion once said to me on the top of a peak from which vast fields of shining snow and ice led down to green valleys in every direction, you can't think a mean thought here, can you? But few of us live in a spot which commands magnificence on every hand. Such places are seldom reached. It is the world in Saint Paul's own meaning that lies about us most of the time. Such a spot, however, is Christmas. Such a place is the Christmas table. I suppose the most famous description of a Christmas dinner is that in Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." You can understand why I thought of that as I read my text thou preparest a table before me. I read this over again last night and took down a few sentences to make your mouth water for your own Christmas dinner a few days hence. "Mrs. Cratchit made the gravy ready beforehand in a little saucepan hissing hot. Master Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigor. Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple-sauce. Martha dusted the hot plates. Bob took Tiny Tim beside him in a tiny corner at the table. The two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody, not forgetting themselves, and mounting guard upon their posts, crammed spoons into their mouths, lest they should shriek for goose before their turn came to be helped. There never was such a

goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavour, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration." Now, let us make no mistake about who it was who prepared that Christmas dinner and who it is who will prepare ours. It all begins with giving on God's part. He gives to us the material universe even to work and live in, and all that sustains us in that universe. The courses of the Christmas dinner, like the elements of the Holy Supper, come from God to us for no man by taking thought can make a grain of wheat or the smallest grape. This is always true, of course, but it seems especially easy to appreciate at Christmas. And that gift from God is a pure one. There is no reason under heaven or above it why he should have given us all these things richly to enjoy, except that he is a loving God. No man can say with proof that he has deserved of God. Any of these things, this is the meaning of God's grace. He prepares a table before me. But what about those enemies? They're all about. I would take them this morning to be the spirits that rule the world, that govern most of the days of most of us. And I shall speak of two of them: the spirit of selfishness and the spirit of impersonality. For the moment, in fact, I should play the devil's advocate and try to show you how much wiser one of these spirits is than the one which possesses you at Christmas. There's your Christmas dinner. It's very good as dinners go, but is every member of the family really getting everything out of it that he might? There is your father, for instance. He's a hard working man who needs and can wisely use all the money he can get. But has not anybody ever pointed out to him what an opportunity for profit he is missing by his inadequate use of the Christmas feast? Why doesn't he invite all the family in as usual and possibly even as many friends and relatives as can be accommodated, and then let them know how much the dinner cost him? Just incidentally, of course, but nonetheless let them know. After all, he had to pay for it, and it's only fair that those who enjoy it should share the expense. A simple and un-intrusive to handle a matter would be to let each one find a little menu at his place indicating that a slice of turkey cost so much, potatoes so much, and that each could have an extra helping of dessert for a mere quarter. But of course, your father is not the only wise member of your family. There's your mother too. I wonder if you and your brothers and sisters realize how much she works for you. The immediate preparation of the meal has been very largely in her hands. She spent a long time over it and everybody knows how busy with other things she is. It would rather too bad if she didn't cash in on the event. She might put a little price mark in the central dishes before she has them brought in, or it could be pay as you enter for that matter. Mother seeing that she got her share and father seeing that he got his, what a happy Christmas dinner that will be. Now you will write this down as the fantastic notion it really is. It's obviously necessary that we should make use of money as a medium of exchange. But when it becomes a paramount matter, when we have more joy in the gaining of it than in the friendship of our friends, the affection of our loved ones, the well-being of humanity, then the world has inner demons, then the enemy has passed through our gates, then the darkness has closed in, then Christmas has gone. Call the notion fantastic, but when you do, remember that it is upon this basis precisely that we conduct much of our life. This is the spirit of economic imperialism. A success at any price. Of no little hard bargaining between the classes, the races, and the nations. The Cold War in its very essence is a business of getting as much from and giving as little to the potential enemy as possible. It may be said that this is inevitable. That may be true. All I'm saying at the moment is don't call it an expression of the Christmas spirit. The spirit which animates it is the enemy, or one of the enemies, in the presence of whom or which our Christmas table is prepared. Now another spirit of the world which is hostile to Christmas, which surrounds it as the night a prison of light, is that of impersonality. Time was an agrarian America. When they eat also the village community dominated the lives of our ancestors and forbade the intrusion of overcommercialized motives,

which murder community. The farmer milked his cows in the morning, gave the milk to a boy known to everybody in the village to deliver it for an agreed upon wage, and saw to it that it was duly delivered at the houses of those who were not only his fellow citizens but his fellow church members and friends as well. At the end of the month, or even of the year, these paid the farmer what they owed him, either in cash or in kind. Producer, distributor and consumer all knew each other well, and no one tried to levy upon the line of exchange all the traffic would bear, as I'm afraid we must say is characteristic of our economic life today. But now, if Durham is anything like the city in which I live, the milk you drink here is brought from farms you never saw. It's distributed by an organization whose ramifications probably covered a good part of the middle Atlantic and Southeastern seaboard and involve thousands of men and millions of dollars. The price of the milk reflects in partly stripe between groups of labor and capital, the rank and file of whom wouldn't know each other if they met. In a word, the procedure has become enormous and impersonal, in the very nature of which there can be little left of village amity to lay a restraint upon ungoverned human motives. This is the world, partly immoral because it is selfish, but partly simply unmoral because there's so little personality left in it. This is the enemy. This is the dark. Now, what are you going to do about it? Some of you will say, I'm sure, "Can't we extend the spirit of Christmas so that it will cover the year? Can't we thrust the edge of its light into the darkness and eliminate that darkness? Can't we enlarge the oasis so that the whole desert will bring forth and blossom as the rose?" I'm glad you said that. I believe it in a way, but don't go Pollyanna on us. Don't think that this is any little chore that you can get tidied up before supper time. You are right now in the midst of cosmic forces. The fight against these enemies I have named is colossal beyond all computation. No one can see the end of it. And in the very immensity of it, I think this is fair, nonetheless to say in the very immensity of it lies its challenge. It's brought its power to bring you up to your best. To you and me, the forces of selfishness in the world are at the moment invincible. Not long ago, a real estate man well-known in his community as a public spirited citizen said to me, "We do our best." But of course, a real estate broker cannot be Christian. When I looked a bit uncertain, he went on. It's true, simple. If I wanted to be a Christian to my brother man about to buy a house, I should point out the defects in the property as well as the advantages. But if I want to sell the house, although I mention the defects just to sound my own conscience, I do so in such a way that the advantages outweigh them in his mind. If I don't do this, then my competitor will sell him a house, and I shall finally end up on the poor farm where I shall have plenty of time to ruminate on the thought that a man cannot be as Christian as he would like to be in a non-Christian world. Years ago, before the laws against it had been passed, the sweating of labor was prevalent in the garment making industry in New York state. Right-minded employers simply hated the system, but as one of them said, "Why do your competitors sweat their labor? They can undersell you if you do not. You cannot be part of this industrial system without conforming." I could go on and on with illustrations, as undoubtedly you could, but this isn't necessary, for any person of experience realizes that we are all parts of one bundle of social life, each one being infected with any moral disease which is endemic in the whole. The forces of the enemy are well-coordinated. They are as old as the race, and as well-disciplined as time can make them. A single individual may preach against them, may educate against them, may even provide inspiration to a society to move against them. But a social evil finally demands a social attack. This race is not a sprint. It will not be to the sweat. This battle is a war. It will not be to the temporarily strong. If you are going to direct the spirit of Christmas against the spirit of selfishness, remember that it is a long job. I shall now more than mention the difficulty of overcoming the impersonality of the human situation today. Which of you by taking thought can add a Cupid of intimacy to a world of over a billion people, or even to a nation of 150 million, or

to any of our greater cities? Bigness almost carries with it the quality of impersonality. A community can legislate against certain selfish practices, but how can you legislate against the unmoral dimension of a total contemporary population? Will you write on the statute books? Be it hereby enacted that after the last day of December of the current year, the citizens of this community shall be and are hereby enabled to be brotherly and sympathetic members of society. A lot of good that will do. The business of expanding Christmas to the fullness of the year, I'm inviting to its table the whole human race, is not any easy one. It is too simple for us to resort to impersonal principles. And upon this resort hangs much of our difficulty in the world. How are you going to resolve, for instance, the difficulty which now holds between the Jews in Palestine and the Arabs round about? You can see that there isn't enough justice to go around. You yourselves, I'm sure, can advance a series of arguments to prove that the Jews should be there. An equally long and as strong series of arguments can be abused to prove that the Arabs should be there. Who are you going to place the boundaries of Poland? If you go back to the seventh century, you'll place them in one spot. If you go back only 150 years, you'll put them in another place. In order to do justice to the people who traditionally have lived there. The same holds of the boundaries of Alsace-Lorraine. Justice sees the end to which we should all strive, but you can make only the first attempt to look toward and then find that you are confronted with a situation that you cannot quite meet, and it is so big that you cannot discover any way of bringing that essence of personality which is forgiveness into the situation. How will you teach the great world of man to forgive? How will you lay that basis upon which alone these difficult political situations may be resolved? Now, before you have any negative thoughts about my proposition, since it is so difficult, remember that we have an ally as well as an enemy, and an ally who will overcome them in the end. Thou preparest a table before me. The spirit that makes Christmas what it is takes its source from the very heart of God himself. It reflects the very character of the universe's maker. Stay close to him and see what happens. Worship at his altars regularly, and regularly give yourself to thought about him and prayer to him. Maintain your contact with him and you yourself will become a channel through which his slowly but surely created work in society may be done. Transfer the center of your life from yourself to him. Begin to see the world through his eyes. Look at your age through the eyes of the aegis. That, after all, is the greatest aid you can give in the battle against selfishness. And what better defense can you have against succumbing to impersonality? He is not far from any one of us. You cannot see the world through his eyes without seeing it within intimate concern. With him, you begin to weep over Jerusalem. Stay close to him, eat at his table, and then eventually he will work his will through you and through others like you on the world. Just after the Great War, a few of us flew to Japan to see what was left of Christianity there. Actually, we found a good many who hadn't bowed beneath the bail. It was on that occasion that we had an audience with the emperor, and I remember well walking along the passageway that led to the audience room, wondering what the emperor would be like and how we would receive us. Would he be standing or sitting? If sitting, would he be in a chair or perhaps even in a throne? On a throne? Actually, he stood and held out his hand in most democratic fashion. On another occasion many years ago, and this has been repeated more than once, I saw another emperor. This was not on a flight by airplane, but on a flight of fancy. But just remember how right Ruskin was when he said that imagination is the human ability to see things as they are. And on this flight, I saw not the emperor of a mere Japan, but the emperor of the universe, of all that is therein. Now, no man has seen God at any time, but through his word, he contrives to reveal himself. Saint Paul thought he saw him in a great light that he'd made the noontime seem dark. Isaiah thought he saw him on a throne high and lifted up, his train filling the temple. Imagine my surprise after wondering what he looked like to

find him neither standing nor sitting but nailed to a cross. Now he didn't need to be there. He could have remained in quiet Nazareth under his own vine and fig tree. But in no other way could he reveal in human terms the extent of his love for mankind, except upon the cross. He gives all and demands nothing in return. This is the very essence of his love and the very essence of all love. This is the essence of his table. This is the essence of Christmas. Now make him the host at your Christmas table and at every table, even though your enemies are many, and you will find him slowly but surely changing your own light, giving you the power of patience in conviction. Stay close to his mighty person. Potentially, he has already overcome the world. Gradually, he will do so indeed. Then you will have no fears for the enemy round about, but always looking to him. Be strengthened in the inner man. In other words, you will be allowed to be the person he designed you to be. Let us pray. Almighty God, if there be truth in the words which have been spoken, we humbly pray that thou would right that truth upon our hearts. Now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. (inspirational music) ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ (church bells ringing)