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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-01-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass. This week we open with a reading from the mysterious Book of Revelation where we will explain in detail some of the background and context to bring out the meaning of the text. Then we move to another reading written by John from the Book of First John. Then we close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew from the section called the Beatitudes. I remember reading those passages many years ago in Mass and feeling that I needed to be a better person and to try harder to please God. Find out what God's Word says about my feelings and what would have been a more biblical response to them.

I know someone that has been a Christian for a very long time while a certain uncle of hers was resistant to believing in Jesus Christ right up until near the end of his life. As he grew older, he steadfastly refused to bow his knee to Jesus Christ although almost everyone around him were followers of Jesus including his niece who told me the story, and her husband was a pastor. One night he went to bed expecting to awaken the next morning just like every other day. However, God had a different plan for him. As I was a new believer in Jesus Christ myself when I heard this story I remember how it profoundly impacted me as I listened with baited breath about what was going to happen next. The next morning when the man arose and looked at himself in the mirror, he found a depression in the bone of his forehead in the shape of a cross. He instantly recognized this as a miracle as a seal of God calling him to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ which he quickly obeyed.

As others encountered him throughout the last years of his life, he testified of God's grace in marking him in this unique way such that he could no longer deny the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. This marking remained on his forehead for the rest of his life as a seal or marking of him as a follower of Jesus Christ. This week we will read about how God will in some future day "seal" a group of Jews in order to protect them from the wrath of the Antichrist who like many others before him will persecute God's chosen people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Revelation. This Book tells the story of the unfurling of a series of judgments upon the world culminating with what the Old Testament calls the "Day of the Lord." Throughout the Book, John moves his focus back and forth from events happening upon the earth and those in heaven with frequent parenthesis (or pauses) in the chronological progression of events. Understanding of Revelation requires a thorough understanding of the Old Testament and especially the Book of Daniel. John uses much symbolic language throughout the Book, and the reader is challenged to understand the meaning behind the symbols as well as to what extent the language is meant to foretell literal events in heaven and on the earth.

In order to understand the Book of Revelation and today's reading, it is necessary to understand from a high level the primary events that will transpire during the end times. The order of the main events that will unfold are as follows. The sin of the world will grow worse and worse (Matthew 24;12), and many false christs will come. (2 Timothy 3:13, Matthew 24:5). The world will be consumed by "wars and rumors of wars," there will be "famines and earthquakes" (Matthew 24:6-7). This will mark the beginning of the end times. (Matthew 24:8) The AntiChrist will come on the scene and falsely claim to have been resurrected from the dead (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, Revelation 13:3). A peace treaty will be made with Israel providing for resumption of animal sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 9:27). Large-scale persecution of believers will escalate leading many false believers to fall away (Revelation 13:7, Matthew 13:9-10). This point marks the unfurling of the scroll of the first six seals of Revelation. As the AntiChrist rules the world with terror, at some point the believers in God will be reunited with Christ and taken to heaven at His second coming (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18). Somewhere during this time a group of elect Jews will be protected by God as described in today's reading. The final stage will then begin with the unbelieving world left behind and then God will unleash His judgments during the final "Day of the Lord" completing the total destruction of the AntiChrist's worldly and religious empire of mystery Babylon. This is the time when God unleashes His judgments upon the world as stated just prior to today's reading in Revelation 6:17, "for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand." At the conclusion of these events, Jesus will return to set up His reign on earth.

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The particular context of today's reading in chapter 7 is the divine protection of a believing remnant of Jews alive during the time when the AntiChrist will be unleashing increasing persecution upon believers in God. God will protect this surviving remnant in order to complete His promises to them.

First Reading:

Note: Verses 5 – 8 which were omitted from the reading have been included below.

Revelation 7:2-14 NAS95 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 5 From the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7 from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed. 9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; 10 and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." 13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

In the days before Jesus' return (see Acts 1:11), a powerful world ruler will emerge called the AntiChrist who will persecute any believers alive during this time including both Christians and Jews. As the AntiChrist hurls his bloodshed upon the Christians, God will protect a remnant of the Jews who through this terrible persecution will come to faith in the Lord Jesus (Zechariah 12:10). To do this God grants His authority to an angel to set His mark upon this group of Jews from the twelve tribes of Israel – except that some of them were designated by different names because of the curses

pronounced in the Old Testament. (Astute readers can find out more information about this by studying Deuteronomy 29:16-10). In ancient days, the kings used their signet ring to emboss a special marking into wax or clays seals that were placed upon documents in order to show their sign of authority and authenticity. In the last days of the devil's reign over his current world empire, the angel of God's divine marking provides protection to the believing Jews from the wrath of the AntiChrist. The Prophet Malachi said about this, "I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). Whether this is a literal number of people or it is symbolic of a large but finite number isn't readily discernible in the text. However, they will have been regathered for the opening of the rebuilt temple and the resumption of the sacrifices. During the first three and half years of the peace treaty that the AntiChrist makes with national Israel, the Jews will resume their sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem while large scale persecution of Christians accelerates around the world. As time moves to the midpoint of this treaty, the AntiChrist will set an image of himself up in the temple and command his worship as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4). This "abomination of desolation" (Matthew 24:15) will greatly provoke the Jews to rebel against the AntiChrist to such an extent that without God's divine protection all of them would be consumed by this evil end time ruler. It is only through this horrific series of events that unfold upon the earth that the collective group of the Jews will finally recognize Jesus Whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10) as their Messiah.

As the reading continues, beginning in verse 9 John changed his focus from events happening on earth to things occurring in heaven. This is one of the frequent parentheses that occurs throughout the Book. John saw a second group of people, a "great multitude which no one could count," (v. 9) who are believing people martyred up until that point during the great tribulation. John didn't understand who these people were at first, but the angel answered his question about them by describing how they "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14). It's not often when someone can wash their robes in blood and make them white, but that is exactly what Jesus offers to anyone who trusts in Him. Although the believers in heaven were not delivered **from** the tribulation and persecution on earth, they were delivered **through** it to be with Jesus in heaven.

What does this mean for us today? We as Christians must expect that as God's prophets we will increasingly face persecution. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Later in the Gospel reading we will see how Jesus likened the persecution of believers to the persecution of the prophets that came before them (Matthew 5:12). There Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile against you and persecute you." As God's persecuted prophets we can look for our fulfillment not in the things of the world but look heavenward towards our ultimate purpose in serving God. Finally, as we continue to march onwards towards the last days described in Revelation, we can expect to see a growing distinction between the true people of God and the rest of the world. The Prophet Malachi said about these days, "Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who

serves God and the one who does not serve Him" (Malachi 3:18). Although we may not be saved from tribulation, we can be assured that God will deliver us through it.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First John. The context is Saint John's teaching on the characteristics of true believers, something that we will encounter later in the Gospel lesson.

Second Reading:

1 John 3:1-3 NAS95 1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

John said that God has so loved love those that believe in Him that He calls them His children (v. 1). Nonbelievers do not understand believers because they cannot know God and didn't know His Son Jesus (v. 1d-ff). During our mortal lives as believers, we do not yet understand what we will become when we either get to heaven or meet Jesus when he returns to regather His church as we talked about in the first reading (v. 2). When we do finally meet Jesus, our eyes will be opened, and we will see Him for what He truly is without the veil of sin covering our minds. Finally, we have hope that God will bring these things about. While living with an eternal focus as true believers we strive to become more and more like Jesus by leaning upon God's power that He has placed within us. As we become more pure by maturing in our walk with Jesus, we become more like the true believers described by John in the reading. This provides an excellent lead-in to the Gospel lesson in which Jesus lists some of the qualities of people whose lives have been transformed by God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Matthew in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount because of the location from which Jesus addressed the crowd in Galilee. The context is at the

beginning of Jesus' ministry just after His temptation in the desert for forty days and the calling of the first disciples including Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus was beginning to draw large crowds and was telling the people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). This is the beginning of a much longer discourse that spans Matthew Chapters 5 through 7.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 5:1-12 NAS95 1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

In this reading, Jesus announced a total of nine blessings, each opening with "Blessed are." Jesus is fulfilling the role of Prophet by providing a series of blessings, a word which means "happy." This contrasts with the usual words given by the Old Testament prophets who announced a series of curses and woes against those who refused to follow God. Jesus came to announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and this is what the kingdom looks like. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of new things that people have to do in order to be right with God, but rather it is a list of defining qualities of people who have been transformed by God.

Jesus is redefining the blessed life. Think about how these traits contrast how the world defines blessing. Someone living the blessed life:

1. Is poor in spirit, meaning humble which leads a person to recognize their spiritual need for God.
2. Mourns, meaning they recognize that this world is not their home and looks to God for comfort.
3. Exhibits gentleness, meaning they don't have to be aggressive to get things done because their

heart is established in Christ's power.
4. Hungers and thirsts for righteousness meaning they prioritize eternal things over finite satisfaction in the world.
5. Shows mercy, because they were offered mercy themselves through the forgiveness given them by God and can extend it to others.
6. Is pure in heart, meaning they are not entangled with the evil ways of the world including lying, deceiving and manipulating people in order to get their own way.
7. Is a peacemaker, not just someone who tries to keep the peace at all costs. They actively seek peaceful solutions even in difficult situations which forces them to rely upon God more deeply.
8. Endures persecution with a vision toward eternity knowing that it is better to suffer than to succumb to temptation to compromise.
9. Endures insult because of their proclamation of truth (Word of God) just like happened to the prophets.

In summary, Jesus raised the bar of understanding to show the people that righteousness was not a bunch of behaviors that came by trying harder, but rather were qualities of the heart that were only possible through God's transforming power. These nine traits are the result of being born from above (John 3:3). Instead of being depressed that we can never be this good, Jesus delivered this sermon in order to invite us into a new way of life. This new way of life recognizes that our self-righteousness is as filthy rags before the LORD (Isaiah 64:6). We must come to the place where we receive Christ's righteousness into our hearts as a substitute for our former way of life (Romans 3:21-22).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How do you respond internally when you read the Sermon on the Mount? Does it feel like another list of impossible feats that you must accomplish in order to win God's favor? Or, have you responded to Jesus' invitation to life in the kingdom (where He is the King of your heart), and the Sermon on the Mount is a reflection of the work that He is doing in your life? If your response is more the former, that this is another list of impossible feats, you can turn to God in prayer and ask Him to give you His life from above and so be born anew.

2. In the first reading we read about how God appointed an angel to "seal" a group of Jews during the end times in order to protect them from the events that were going to unfold as described in the seven seals of Revelation. In what ways are you already "sealed" by God through your faith in Jesus Christ?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-25-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Moses' Book of Exodus in which we see God's concern for widows, orphans, and the poor. Then we move to the second reading, which is a continuation of the study we began last week from 1 Thessalonians. We conclude with another of Jesus' discussions with the Jewish leaders from the Gospel of Saint Matthew, this time with the infamous Pharisees.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Chapter 22 of the Book of Exodus. This is one of the first five Books of the Bible known as the Pentateuch and was written by Moses. The Book is an account of God's sovereign

rising of Moses as a leader to shepherd the Israelites out of their captivity in Israel. The Book also contains the chronicle of the giving of the Law to Moses including the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Anytime that the biblical texts use the term "Law" they mean the whole canon of the Jewish Law including the Ten Commandments and the other several hundred laws contained in the last four books of the Pentateuch: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Chapter 20 contains the Ten Commandments and opens as follows. "Then God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Exodus 20:1-2). God, who calls Himself "I am" in verse one, meaning the "self-existent One," led the Israelites out of their bondage under the oppressive rule of the Pharaoh of Egypt through His ordained leader Moses. God gradually revealed the entire Canon of the Law to Moses during his wanderings in the desert.

Understanding today's reading requires some considerable insights into the cultural and religious milieu of Jews in the ancient near east. Foreigners were not the only downtrodden class of people to whom God afforded special protection in the Law. In those days there were three classes of people that were as low in the socioeconomic strata as foreigners were. These were widows, orphans, and the poor, although the first two certainly shared the characteristic of being poor. These groups of people had almost no rights in the secular kingdoms that surrounded Israel. However, we find throughout the Law God's special protection provided for these groups of people. The fact that God provides protection for the lower classes of people through the Law is an insight into God's very nature. We see in the Book of Psalms God's care for the poor. God says that He is "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows" (Psalms 68:5). The Psalmist said, "I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted And justice for the poor" (Ps 140:12). "The LORD performs righteous deeds And judgments for all who are oppressed," the Psalmist said (Ps 103:6). God made special provisions for the protection of these classes of people throughout the Law. In Lev. 19:9–10 God provided special protection for strangers and the poor in providing for them through the gleanings in the corners of the fields. In Deut. 14:28–29 God provided special Laws for strangers, the fatherless, and widows. The Prophet Isaiah gave God's call to the Israelites to repent of their sin in the opening of his Book. God said, "Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). This admonition appears multiple times throughout the Old Testament, and is in fact what James in the New Testament called "basic religion." He said, "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

As you read the text of the first reading, try to imagine what it would be like to have absolutely nothing along with no social standing in the ancient world. *Note: Verse 27 was included for the context.*

First Reading:

Ezekiel 22:20-26 NAS95 20 'As they gather silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the furnace to blow fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in My anger and in My wrath and I will lay you there and melt you. 21 'I will gather you and blow on you with the fire of My wrath, and you will be melted in the midst of it. 22 'As silver is melted in the furnace, so you will be melted in the midst of it; and you will know that I, the LORD, have poured out My wrath on you.'" 23 And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 24 "Son of man, say to her, 'You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in the day of indignation.' 25 "There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her. 26 "Her priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they hide their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.

The reading opens in verse 20, we find the often-repeated warning about idolatry. "He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed" (Exodus 20:20). In the next verse, God introduces new teaching on proper treatment of aliens. God said, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:21). This time God gave a reason for treating foreigners properly, because the Israelites were once foreigners under the rule of the Pharaoh.

In the reading we see God's concern for widows (v. 22), orphans (v. 22), and the poor (v. 25). God said that He would hear the cries of the widows and the orphans and answer with judgment by allowing the people to be killed by their enemies with the sword (v. 24). This is something that was repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament, especially in the era of the Judges. When times were good the people would begin to oppress the lower classes, then God would allow an alien nation to overtake the people. Then they would repent, God would raise up a deliver (for example a judge like Gideon in Judges 6), the people would again return to prosperity and the cycle would repeat. God's instruction about not oppressing the poor continued in verses 26-27 as neighbor took his neighbor's cloak as collateral for a loan. This person was so poor that the only thing that they had to pledge was their clothing. God knew that this was a dire situation and provided a clear principle that such essential items were not to be taken as collateral in loans among fellow Israelites. The principle is that when the poor neighbor is taken advantage of by being forced to pledge his essentials in order to survive that God will raise up a deliverer against the more prosperous man to bring judgment upon him for his unrighteous action. Instead, God said in Leviticus something that we shall study later in the Gospel lesson, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Loving your neighbor in the case of what God said about not taking your neighbor's cloak as a pledge instead meant sharing in your abundance and that of the community.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading, ask yourself what it means to act in full conviction of the Holy Spirit in response to the biblical precepts about serving Jesus and others? The Jews knew the Laws about not oppressing aliens, orphans and the poor, yet they didn't practice what was preached. You may have heard the cute acronym "J-O-Y" which means to consider our lives in light of the hierarchy of Jesus, others, and you. We should, as the teaching goes, consider Jesus first, then others, and finally ourselves. See what you can uncover from Saint Paul as your read his admonition on this subject of literally taking the Word to heart.

Second Reading:

5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:5-10)

Paul told the Thessalonians how impressed he was with them because they didn't just do as he had told them to do ("word only," v. 5), but that they also carried out those things that he had directed them to do through the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but they became examples to others (v. 7). The Thessalonians turned from the worship of idols as was the custom of their culture to the worship of the One True God (v. 9). Finally, Paul commended them for holding hope in the resurrection of the dead. When he said that Jesus "rescues us from the wrath to come" (v. 10) he was referring to the eternal punishment that was promised to the unbelievers in hell, not some sort of temporal deliverance or rapture (catching up) from their present circumstances. Later in the Book Paul did discuss how believers who were alive at the time when Jesus did return would be united with him in the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:17), which is the context of the books and movie entitled *Left Behind* (we will cover that in a future lesson). The key point that Paul was making to the Thessalonians was his commendation for them for living out their Christian lives in word **and** in action, something that the Sadducees and Pharisees in the Gospel narrative hadn't learned.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

We saw in the second reading Saint Paul's admonition to take the Word to heart and his commendation to the Thessalonians for doing so. In the Gospel lesson today, we will see how Jesus summarized the Law into two key points that revealed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees hearts who didn't take the Word to heart. This lesson is another of Jesus' interactions with the Jewish ruling authorities during His inevitable journey to death at Calvary, this time with one of the Pharisees' best legal experts.

Gospel Reading:

34 But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' 38 This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' 40 On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:34-40)

First, a bit about the context. When Matthew said, "But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees," he was referring to the story that happened just previously. Here the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, had come to ask Jesus a theoretical expansion of the Levitical Law known as Levirate Marriage. They asked Jesus about the relationship in the resurrection between a certain woman and her chain of husbands afforded to her under the Levirate Law. Remember that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection, but they were just trying to trap Jesus. When they asked Jesus whose husband the woman would be in the resurrection after being married to seven different brothers Jesus answered them as follows: *29 But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." 33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. (Matthew 22:29-33)*

The short-term silencing of the Sadducees provided the Pharisees with the opportunity to test Jesus

for themselves. They asked Him, "which is the great commandment in the Law" (v. 36), again addressing Him with the honorable title of Rabbi (teacher). When the Pharisees use the term "Law" they are referring to the whole of the Old Testament. During that era, a frequent debate among the rabbis was which elements of the Law held the most weight and which ones could be given less weight or even discounted. Jesus' answer summarized the whole Canon of both the Law **and** the Prophetic writings. He answered them by quoting from the Levitical Law, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (vv. 38-40). Here, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 or the "Shema," a phrase that religious Jews stated twice a day. He also quoted from Leviticus 19:18 that we mentioned in the discussion of the first reading.

What Jesus is saying is that a true follower of God is a unique whole being, one with a heart that is united in purpose (heart, soul, and mind) rather than compartmentalized into theoretical knowledge that does not lead to action. Loving God naturally leads us to keeping the commandments of God. Jesus said in John 14:23, "If anyone love Me, he will obey my teaching . . . ." Saint John continued Jesus' connection between love and action when He said, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with action and in truth" (1 John 3:18). And again, "We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:19-21).

This was the heart of the indictment against the Pharisees. They were a group about which it could be said, "do as I say, but not as I do" as the expression goes. Love demands concrete action, not just correct information about God. This means to give help your neighbor when he needs help, not offer him a loan by taking his cloak as collateral as we saw in the first reading. Loving your neighbor as yourself also means loving yourself as one that was created in the image of God. This means caring for our bodies both spiritually and physically as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Reflection Questions

1. As your journey through the week, what does it look like for you to have a heart united in love and action for God? In our global society, what "neighbor" is God placing on your heart to help with a gift that doesn't require a loan and payment of collateral?

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2. Spiritually, we are all as helpless as the orphans and widows of the ancient society. How do you respond to God's heart for you in your own spiritual poverty? What spiritual resources (see below) have you appropriated in your life? Which ones do you need to continue internalizing?

Spiritual Resources in Christ:

- I have been washed (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been sanctified (set apart for special use) (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been justified (pronounced "not guilty") (1 Corinthians 6:11)
- I have been forgiven of my sins (1 John 1:9)
- When I sin, I have an Advocate – Jesus Christ, who speaks to the Father in my defense (1 John 2:1)
- I am a new creation, the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- I have been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3)
- I belong, I have been adopted, I have a spiritual family (Ephesians 1:5)
- I have resurrection power (Ephesians 1:19-20)
- I have God's grace that teaches me to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live a self-controlled, upright and godly life (Titus 2:11-12, 1 Corinthians 10:13)

3. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-14. Unpack the meaning of verse 13 in light of the context of the surrounding verses. How does this spiritual truth help you to live your life as a Christian in light of temptation?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-18-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Isaiah where we see a prophecy about a future world leader that was fulfilled some 150 years later. Then we move to the second reading from Paul's Letter to Thessalonians and include a general introduction to that Book. Finally, we conclude with another of Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees from the Gospel of Matthew.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, which is a book filled with an amazing series of prophecies especially regarding the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. His prophecies include many detailed predictions about the Messiah including that He would be born of a virgin and even that He would be named Immanuel meaning God with us (Isaiah 7:14). The reading today also contains a prophecy about a world leader who like Jesus was not born yet and the prophecy also includes his future name although he wouldn't be born until a century and a half later. A lead-in to the message for today was given one verse before the beginning of today's reading. God said through Isaiah:

"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" (Isaiah 44:28).

Cyrus was the King of Persia (in present day Iran) who reigned over that country from around 559 BC to 530 BC. God used King Cyrus as his shepherd to "regather" the Jewish people (Ezra 1:1-4) after their deportation to Babylon in three waves in the years 605, 597, and 586 BC (2 Kings 24-25). King Cyrus gave the order in 538 BC to rebuild the Jerusalem temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The rebuilding of the temple under the direction of Nehemiah marked the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy above. As we move onto the text of today's reading, we will learn more details about Isaiah's predictions regarding Cyrus who was named even though he hadn't yet been born. *Note: Verses 2-3 were included for context.*

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, Whom I have taken by the right hand, To subdue nations before him And to loose the loins of kings; To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:

Omitted verses (2-3):

2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.

4 For the sake of Jacob My servant, And Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; 6 That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other," (Isaiah 45:1-6)

God called Cyrus His "anointed" in English or transliterated from Hebrew as "mashiyach" that means "the anointed one or Messiah." This is the same word used for the "Messiah the Prince" Jesus in Daniel 9:25. This language makes it clear that God meant Cyrus to prefigure the later Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was God's true and final Shepherd of His people (Isaiah 44:28, above). God said in verse 1 that although Cyrus would not be a believer in God (v. 4d "Though you have not known me") He would be used as God's "right hand" to "subdue nations before him" and subdue and kill kings

("loose the loins"). This prophecy was fulfilled after Darius the Mede, who was Cyrus' maternal uncle, overthrew the Babylon Empire as recorded in Daniel 7:30-31. Cyrus proclaimed himself King of Babylon in 540 BC after the great battle in that city. The biblical record of these events is backed up and further details are given by secular accounts including the famous "Babylonian Chronicle," a clay tablet that was found showing details of Babylonian history during the period.

You may ask why God would prefigure the Messiah through an unbelieving, civil king like King Cyrus. God provided some insights into this in the verses that were omitted from the reading:

2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. " (Isaiah 45:2-3)

Cyrus was a king that God set apart by His divine providence to use for His purposes. The power that Cyrus had to "shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars" (v. 2) was given by God Himself. God said that it was He who would give Cyrus "the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places **So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name**" (v. 3, emphasis added). God promised Cyrus these victories for the purpose of revealing His divine power. God used nonbelieving people throughout the Old Testament for this purpose, including men like the Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus. God not only uses men but even animals such as Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:21-39).

Contemplate how God may be using unbelieving rulers even in the present time. Even though you may disagree with the actions of the rulers, consider whether it is possible that God is working out His larger plan even through these ungodly leaders. Although Cyrus was an ungodly type of Christ, we can rest in the fact that God used even this ungodly leader to accomplish His purposes. When you consider these things, you can find comfort that since God was able to predict with exact precision who the ruler would be that would "regather" the Israelites after their deportation to Babylon He will superintend all of human events in order to accomplish His purposes. You can also praise God for raising up godly spiritual leaders such as Saint Paul who we are going to be reading about in the next reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. This Book is one of the earliest Letters written by Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:1), penned sometime around the year 51 as confirmed by an inscription found in the temple of Apollos at Delphi (near the town of Corinth). Paul's two Letters to the Thessalonians are sometimes called the "eschatological epistles" because of the wealth of content in them regarding the end times but were primarily Letters dealing with people in the local church in Thessalonica. Paul's occasion for writing was to show his concern for the believers there after he had visited them on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1). He had a variety of purposes in writing to them including instructing them in holy living, commending them for their significant progress made in implementing the biblical truths he had given them, and correcting a misunderstanding that they had about the return or the Lord Jesus.

Read the text and ask yourself, what key points jump out at you?

Second Reading:

1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-5)

They key point that jumped out when I read this passage was Paul's overwhelming thankfulness to God for how the Thessalonians had embraced and lived out the Gospel truths. First, Paul thanked God for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (v. 3). Second, Paul was thankful that they didn't just mentally embrace the truths of the Gospel, but they also lived them out "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (v. 5). Finally, Paul was thankful for how they had emulated him (v. 5). The example of the Thessalonians faith provided comfort to him as he endured troubles from the Jews and Gentiles as he traveled on his missionary journeys. Paul said in Chapter 3, "we were comforted about you through your faith" (1 Thessalonians 3:7b).

A final observation of the reading is how Paul honored all three Persons of the Godhead in the very opening verses of this Letter. Paul commended God the Father and God the Son in verse 1, and God

the Holy Spirit in verse 5. Paul indicated to the Thessalonians that the source of their power was God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (v. 5). The word translated "power" in the English is the Greek word "dunamis" from which we also get the word "dynamite." The Holy Spirit provided the dynamite to the Thessalonians but they had to set and light the fuse. Paul rejoiced because the Thessalonians took advantage of God's power. As we move to the Gospel lesson, we will see how the religious Pharisees **didn't** take advantage of God's power but instead took the Scriptures for their literal "word only" (v. 5).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is another of the interactions that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Last week we studied Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Feast that is found just before today's reading. In this previous study, we saw how Jesus told the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders how the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to the Gentiles. In the reading this week a new group is introduced called the "Herodians." The Herodians were a group of secular, non-religious Jews that held the political power in alliance with King Herod Antipas (reigned 4 BC to 39 AD). Their alliance with King Herod and secular worldview set them at odds with the ultra-religious Pharisees. As you read today's Gospel lesson you will discover a new alliance that emerged to fight a common threat.

Gospel Reading:

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. 16 And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodian's, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. 17 Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" 18 But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? 19 Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. 20 And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 21 They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:15-21)

The Herodians and the Pharisees allied themselves to fight their common threat, Jesus Christ (v. 15). Their plot was to trap Jesus by asking Him some question (v. 15) that would reveal Jesus' opposition to the ruling Roman authorities and therefore make it easy for them to bring an indictment against Him. They began their attack by patronizing Jesus by calling Him by the title "Teacher," a word meaning Rabbi (v. 16). Their plan backfired. When they asked Jesus about the lawfulness of paying

taxes to the Roman government, Jesus amazed them with His answer. Matthew said in the next verse after the end of today's reading, "And hearing this, **they were amazed**, and leaving Him, they went away" (Matthew 22:22, emphasis added). Jesus told them in effect that He had not come yet as a military leader. Jesus not only spoiled their plan to entrap Him with their question, but He also validated the legitimacy of the Roman government in collecting taxes, something to which the Pharisees would have been deeply opposed. The irony of it all was that the Pharisees took the lead in collaborating with their former enemies for the purpose of defeating Jesus. But what ended up happening was that Jesus defeated their beliefs about the illegitimacy of the Roman taxation system. In yet another irony the whole account was recorded by none other than Saint Matthew, the former tax collector!

Sometimes the easiest way for us to learn is when a teacher provides us with a clear contrast between two conflicting positions. The message that God gave us in the Gospel lesson today illustrated two opposing forces that came together for the purpose of defeating the Messiah Jesus. During our study, we saw that these forces weren't really in opposition at all. Instead they were both aligned with false religion. The Pharisees strived to obtain a righteousness through the Law, and the Herodians found their faith in aligning themselves with the right group with the necessary influence in the Roman government.

What does this mean for us today? First, we can trust that although Jesus didn't come the first time as a military leader, He will do so the second time He returns, as chronicled in the Book of Revelation. John said in that Book, "And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war" (Revelation 19:11). Second, Jesus' answer revealed that during the intermediate period between his first and second comings we will have obligations to obey civil governments. Paul said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). Finally, we must recognize that God owns everything, and even though we may have to give to Caesar that which bears the resemblance of Caesar, we are to give to God the things that are God's (v. 21). This means that unlike the Pharisees who only gave lip service to doing God's work, as we saw in Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians, we are to emulate God by giving back to Him what is His own. This includes the stewardship of our time, talents and treasures far beyond what is required by our civil government. Paul praised the Thessalonians for emulating his character, and Paul strived to emulate Jesus Christ. Paul said:

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of

faith, (Philippians 3:8-9)

May we find our righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ and not in our political power, like the Herodians, or through our good works in obedience to an elevated and false interpretation of religious laws, like the Pharisees.

Reflection Questions

1. Since humans are made in the image of God, what did Jesus mean when He said to give to God what God's?

2. How do you live this truth out in your own life each week?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-11-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah 25 in which we see a song of praise and a promise of redemption of the fallen earth and its people in a future age. Then we move to the second reading that is a continuation of the study from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Finally, we conclude with a parable of Jesus in The Gospel of Matthew addressed to the Jewish leaders that is very similar to what we studied last week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah who wrote of God's judgment and blessings. The context is just after God spoke about warnings of wrath in Chapter 24 that began with, "Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface and scatters its inhabitants" (Isaiah 24:1). This theme continued throughout that chapter with promises of wrath for those who dealt treacherously (v. 16) as well as promises of judgment on the angels who rebelled against God. God said, "So it will happen in that day, That the LORD will punish the host of heaven on high, And the kings of the earth on earth" (Isaiah 24:21). Chapter 25 then opens with a song of praise reminiscent of the Book of Psalms as follows, which will provide a backdrop for the first reading later in this study.

1 O LORD, You are my God; I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; For You have worked wonders, Plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness. 2 For You have made a city into a heap, A fortified city into a ruin; A palace of strangers is a city no more, It will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore a strong people will glorify You; Cities of ruthless nations will revere You. 4 For You have been a defense for the helpless, A defense for the needy in his distress, A refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; For the breath of the ruthless Is like a rain storm against a wall. 5 Like heat in drought, You subdue the uproar of aliens; Like heat by the shadow of a cloud, the song of the ruthless is silenced. (Isaiah 25:1-5)

These verses apply both in Isaiah's near-term context as well as in the eschatological (end times) future, which is a frequent occurrence in Isaiah. The city in verse two is symbolic of any city that sets itself against God, rather than some particular place. In the Old Testament, this was pictured by cities including Moab, Edom and Babylon. The Babylonian Empire was destroyed some two hundred years after Isaiah wrote about the capital city of Babylon, marking one of the near-term fulfillments of verse 2. However, in a future time, a city also called Babylon will also set itself against God and ultimately be overthrown as we read in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:8, 18:2). In the verses that follow, God promises to be an advocate for the weak (v. 4) and to silence all of His oppressors (v. 5d). An understanding of this context helps to understand the banquet described in the subsequent text of today's reading because God will prepare this feast for His believers after he vanquishes the enemies of His people. As you read the text of the first reading, note how God will at some future time prepare a banquet for His people.

First Reading:

6 The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine. 7 And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken. 9 And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." 10 For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain, And Moab will be trodden down in his place As straw is trodden down in the water of a manure pile. (Isaiah 25:6-10)

God promises us that at some future time He will prepare a banquet for His people, either during Christ's one-thousand-year reign on the earth as described in Revelation Chapter 20 or some other

time. God says that this banquet will be held "on this mountain" (v. 7a) most likely meaning the location from which the rulership will be centered, meaning Jerusalem, the center of the earth (Ezekiel 5:5, Revelation 11:2, Daniel 8:14). Next, God says that He will remove the veil that is over the nations (v. 7b) and eliminate death forever. Saint Paul spoke about the spiritual veil that exists in the heart of every nonbeliever. He said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). Before this bountiful feast, once the earth has been purified during the time described by Jeremiah as "Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7), the people that remain will enter into God's eternal reign. Any nation that ever exalted itself against God, typified by "Moab" in verse 10, will be put down into the "manure pile" (v. 10b).

This passage in Isaiah is reminiscent of what John wrote about in the Book of Revelation. The way biblical revelation works is that God has gradually unfolded information about His divine plan, first through the Old Testament writings by Moses and the Prophets, and finally through Jesus and the New Testament. Jesus' disciples understood more than the Old Testament saints did, and John understood more than did the readers of Isaiah as God gradually unfolded more of the scroll of revelation. Perhaps this is why the events in the Book of Revelation are the unrolling of a scroll (Revelation 5:1). Notice the similarity in Revelation Chapter 21 to what we read from Isaiah:

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." 5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." (Revelation 21:3-5).

We can rest in the promises of God, because as we have seen how He faithfully accomplished His past promises He will also accomplish His future promises. God is faithful in doing what He says He will do, and generous in what He both gives us and promises us in the future. These truths are true regardless of how we feel about them, although as believers the veil has already been lifted from our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:16). As we move onto the second reading, we will see a continuation of the themes of faithfulness and generosity as God calls His people to model both traits.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The context is Paul's teaching that we studied last week on the antidote for worry. Paul made a commanding call to prayer, correct thinking, and right actions in order to combat anxiety. He said that instead of worrying we should pray (Philippians 4:6). Second, we should focus our thoughts upon the correct things including a list of good things that are worthy of praise (v. 8). As you read today's reading, note that we have included verses 15-18 in order to understand the full context.

Second Reading:

12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.

15 You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; 16 for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. 17 Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. 18 But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.

19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Philippians 4:12-20)

Paul said that he understood how to "get along with humble means" (v. 12), meaning just the necessities of life such as food, water, and clothing. He said that he had learned "the secret" (v. 12) of being satisfied whether he had an abundance or a lack of the things he needed. Paul revealed the secret of his success in verse 13 for dealing with a lack of provision. He said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." The verb that Paul used for being able to do all things means to "be strong," or to have strength. The word he used for "strengthens me" means to "put power in." What Paul was saying was that he could be strong when he was lacking because God infuses him with the necessary power until He provided the necessary provision. In the closing verse, Paul said that God would supply all of our needs "according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (v. 19). This means that God will supply our needs in proportion to His **infinite** resources.

In trying to understand the application of Paul's message, it is important to understand the context given in verses 15-18. The Philippians had given generously to Paul, and they were the **only** ones to do so. This provides us with a strong insight into the application of Paul's message. As believers we are to be generous in our giving because this is how God supplies other people's needs. We are to hold our possessions that God has given us with an open hand and let God take from them and add more as He sees fit. A principle is that the more generous we are, the more that He will place into our hands for the stewardship of giving to others. This is far from the "name it and claim it" theology often seen on many of the TV "preachers." Rather, this is how God ordains us to give to others by entrusting us to be good stewards or what He has given to us.

How many of us can understand what it means to live with nearly nothing? I remember a story about a friend of mine from Liberia who immigrated to America and is now a pastor. During the oppression by the various military forces in the country, he was forced to live without any food for a period of two weeks. He said that looking back on it he was able to endure it through his faith that God would provide for his needs. It was his faith in God that got him through this and kept him safe during his harrowing journey out of the country. He told me something like, "It wasn't bad, you would be surprised how easy it was to go without food for two weeks when you are on the run and you know that God is on your side." Saint Paul said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Matthew and is like what we studied last week with Jesus addressing the Jewish religious leaders. This time the story is about a king that planned a wedding feast for his son. Notice how Jesus opened the story with "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (v. 1) which provides an insight into the meaning that Jesus intended the chief priests and Pharisees (Matthew 21:45) to understand.

Gospel Reading:

1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. 3 And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. 4 Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.' 5 But they

paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, 6 and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. 7 But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. 11 But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:1-14)

In the story, we see how the king, who by application is God, sent the good news (aka the Gospel) of the marriage feast for his son, who by application is Jesus. The invited guests were by application the Jews to whom the kingdom was initially given, except they rejected the message from the king and instead went about their worldly business (vv. 3-6). Some even went so far as to kill the king's servants, who are by application the prophets that we discussed last week. The fact that the invitation came directly from the king made the rejection of the invitation that much more of a serious matter. By application, the Jews rejected the offer of salvation provided by God through his Son Jesus Christ. As a result, they will bear the rage of the king (v. 7). When the invited guests failed to attend the wedding, the king sent his servants to find other guests, by application the Gentile world. The Gospel message went out to the Gentile world and many came to the church but not everyone who came was clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ (v. 11). The person that the king discovered without the wedding clothes (v. 11) was guilty of a great sin because God was the One who provided the attire in the first place. The application is that of a person who goes through the motions of Christianity but was never "born from above" (John 3:3). The penalty for committing the only unpardonable sin of not putting on the righteousness of Christ (Romans 13:14) is assignment of the soul to a literal place known as hell, where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12, 13:42). Jesus taught about this in His Sermon on the Mount:

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23)

God provides everything that a person needs to be properly clothed at the upcoming feast that we read about in the first reading from Isaiah. People obtain the necessary "wedding attire" by

repenting of their sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross. Any good works that believers do flow out of their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9) as a result of the new heart that was given to them the moment that they believed (2 Corinthians 5:17). They are justified in the eyes of God, meaning that it was just as if they had never sinned. Although the Scripture is clear that the sins of a believer are not held against them, as we saw in the second reading they are accountable for the stewardship of what God has given to them. As believers, we are accountable to God for the use of our time, our talents and our treasures. We will give account of ourselves to God for our stewardship (Romans 14:12) resulting in various degrees of reward in heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. God will lovingly hold us accountable for the use of our spiritual gifts, so it's very important to understand that which we have been given. Sometimes the best way to understand your gifts is to ask others. A second insight about understanding our spiritual gifts is that we can ask ourselves what we like doing. What gifts, meaning time, talents, and treasures, have you been given by God? Write down a list of two or three gifts that you feel or others have told you that you possess.

2. How are you using each of the gifts that you have been given. Pray that God would enlighten your heart to show you ways in which you may expand your ministry. Perhaps you will receive an insight similar to this, "I have the sense that I want to volunteer in a nursing home one night a week" (gift of helps or hospitality). Alternatively, "Many people have always told me how positive I am" (gift of encouragement), "I will be more intentional about encouraging those whom I come in contact with each week."

For Further Study:

If you desire a more comprehensive method of determining your spiritual gifts there are some innovative spiritual gift tests available online. Here is a link to one such resource: http://tinyurl.com/spiritualgifts

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-04-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we reverse the normal order begin with the second reading where we examine Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Then we look at the first reading from Isaiah and close with the Gospel lesson from Matthew.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the New Testament reading we find how obedient believers can have a clear conscience and live without worry. This reading is a continuation of the study from the Book of Philippians that we have been reading for the last several weeks. As a reminder, Paul was in prison for his faithfulness to God in preaching the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In the previous verses, Paul admonishes two specific women in the church to resolve some certain unmentioned conflict. You can imagine that hearing of this conflict while he was in prison would have been discouraging to Paul. In

the verse leading up to today's reading Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). Before you read the text ask yourself, what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord especially given Paul's unpleasant conditions and his admonition to resolve interpersonal conflict?

Second Reading:

6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:6-9)

In the reading, Paul made a commanding call to prayer, correct thinking, and right actions; which he said would result in peace in the heart of a believer. As we saw in the context leading up to the reading, Paul said first to rejoice in the Lord. This means that as believers we can rest in the finished work of the Lord Jesus in securing our salvation and rejoice that regardless of our circumstances we can never be taken away from our relationship with the Lord (John 10:28-29). Paul said in the reading that we do not have to suffer anxiety if we turn our anxiety into a prayer request (v. 6). The word "supplication" is an even stronger word, for it connotes a sense of urgency, desperation and humility. This is the attitude with which we can approach the throne of grace.

This is the same message that the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples in His great Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told them," And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name'" (Matthew 6:7-9). In Jesus' model prayer He instructed His disciples to first begin with adoration of God and thanksgiving. Jesus continued, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:10-12). After adoring God and thanking Him for His provisions we should remember to confess our sins to Him before we move onto asking Him for the matter about which we need help. One of the things we can confess (which literally means "to say the same thing" which implies we agree with God) is our limited perspective, which is causing our anxiety in the first place. We can approach God with confidence (Hebrews

4:16), which should produce thankfulness in our hearts, no matter the circumstances we face. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

Finally, Paul made a call to the believers in Philippi not only to prayer when tempted with worry but to think about the right things as a second means of combatting worry. Paul told the believers to think about those things that were pure, lovely, of good repute, things of excellence and worthy of praise (v. 8) as well as the Scriptures that they had received from Paul (v. 9). Not only were they to concentrate their thoughts on the correct things but they were also to practice the things which they had learned from Paul (v. 9). Many people have discovered that one way of forgetting their own troubles is to help others with their troubles. After they had done all of these things **then** the peace of God would be with them (v. 9c).

To summarize, Paul said that instead of worrying, we should pray, being thankful that God hears us and that we are not alone in our trials. He also directed believers to focus our thoughts upon the correct things including a list of good things that are worthy of praise. In addition, we should practice the things that Paul taught which would entail walking by faith in the truth of Scripture and not by sight (or our feelings). Finally, we can only expect and look forward to experiencing the peace of God after we have done these things that are connected to living in the truth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Old Testament reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. He was a prophet to Judah during the reigns of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1). His prophetic view frequently extended far beyond the immediate circumstances of Judah who was facing a threat from Babylon. Isaiah prophesied about a distant day when the Lord's temple and holy city of Jerusalem would be exalted and the world would be at peace. The following biblical text provides a backdrop of hopefulness in the midst of Judah's impending exile.

The events about which Isaiah spoke were often "telescoped" together in such a way that distant events were seen as happening with near-term events. This is sometimes called the "mountain peaks of prophecy" or "prophetic foreshortening." The "last days" about which Isaiah spoke in verse two above is the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) that is chronicled by John in Revelation. It is at this time that the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to usher in His kingdom reign over the world and finally bring an era of peace (Revelation 19:11-16).

But before peace could come, Judah must face the consequences for her disregard for the relational covenant that God had made with her. Judah repeatedly rejected God's overtures of loving provision, and His desire for relational loyalty was continually met with spiritual adultery. As you read, listen to God's heart as He faced the disappointment of unmet relational expectations with His chosen people.

First Reading:

1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. 2 He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. 3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? 5 So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. 6 I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress. (Isaiah 5:1-7)

In today's reading, Isaiah is singing a song about God, who is Isaiah's beloved. God had a vineyard that was planted with a choice vine. Isaiah explained the metaphor of the vineyard being the house of Israel (v. 7). This metaphor of Israel as the vine occurs throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. After tending it and building a tower to protect it, the vineyard produced "worthless" grapes (connoting wild or sour grapes). God had no other choice but to remove the hedge of protection that He placed around Jerusalem and Judah and allow it to become a wasteland because of their rejection of the covenant relationship with God (v. 5). This prophecy of physical destruction was fulfilled through the invasion of the Babylonian forces in successive waves with the last one in 586 BC resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (2 Kings 25:1-10). The final destruction of Jerusalem will occur in the future, when God allows a person called the AntiChrist to establish his kingdom rule in Jerusalem (Revelation 13). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see that a second part of the destruction of Jerusalem was the spiritual element that came when the Messiah, Jesus, whom God sent, was rejected by the Jews.

This passage teaches about God's heart and the fallen human condition. God provided everything for

his chosen people to thrive and be fruitful. The passage shows God's great amount of care in establishing and tending His vineyard, the house of Israel (v. 7). "He dug it, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine" (v. 2). This parallels the creation account of what He did for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was part of the original design for humans to be image bearers of God and to be fruitful here on Earth (Genesis 1:27-28).

The consistent nature of human beings, as seen in Adam and Eve and in His people Israel, has been to break God's heart and to not live up to their noble identity as image-bearers. "Then I expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones" (v. 4). Isaiah repeats God's unmet expectation: "Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold a cry of distress" (v. 7). These verses reveal the systemic human condition of fallenness (or depravity). Even with the best of conditions, humans show their propensity toward rejecting God and choosing a life of self-reliance.

Therefore, God's response toward these choices of autonomy and independence are not justified and necessary. It's almost as if God is saying, "What else can I do? They have rejected Me, so I will honor their choice." But their choice to live in autonomy from God has dire consequences. "I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed . . ." (v. 5). Israel was free to live outside the covenant relationship set up by God, but she would also forfeit the benefits of this loving and protective relationship. They would reap the natural consequences of life apart from God. Rejecting God had dire consequences for the nation of Judah, as it continues to have for us today.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson continues the theme of God's vineyard as Jesus teaches using a parable. The context is extremely important this week in order to understand Jesus' intended meaning. It is clear that Jesus' message was addressed directly to the Jewish religious authorities. This group had just witnessed Jesus riding into Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Matthew 21:7), something that would be done by a king in that culture. As Jesus rode past the crowds they cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" (v. 9b). Immediately afterwards Jesus escalated the tense situation even more as Matthew recorded that Jesus "entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves" (v. 12). Next, while still in the temple He healed the blind and lame (v. 14). All of this inflamed the Jewish leaders and further exposed their hatred of Jesus. Matthew recorded what happened next. "But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children

who were shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became indignant and said to Him, 'Do You hear what these children are saying?'" (vv. 15-16a). Jesus responded, "Yes; have you never read, 'OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF'" (v. 16b). The next day, Jesus returned to the temple (v. 23) after staying overnight in Bethany (v. 17). After cursing the fig tree in front of His disciples (v. 20), He was confronted by the chief priests and elders in the temple who questioned His authority (v. 23). Finally, in the verses leading up to today's reading He told the authorities in the temple the parable of the Sons in the Vineyard that we studied previously. That particular lesson, directed squarely at the hearts of the Jewish leaders, revealed that even though a person may outwardly act in a religious manner they could be spiritually dead on the inside (Matthew 7:13). Jesus had taught the crowds earlier about this as recorded in Matthew:

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23)

The religious leaders were not pleased with what Jesus told them. Later in the chapter Matthew recorded, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet" (Matthew 21:45-46). How insightful of them, they were afraid to seize him, at least at that point, because the people considered Him to be a prophet!

Now that we understand the context of the Gospel lesson, as you read the Gospel text take particular note of the identity of each of the characters in the story. *Note: Verse 44 was included for context.*

Gospel Reading:

33 Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT AND DUG A WINE PRESS IN IT, AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 "The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my

son.' 38 But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers? 41 They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons." 42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES'? 43 Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.

44 And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." (Matthew 21:33-46)

This parable shows the goodness of God and the reasonable expectation that His peoples would respond to His goodness by being obedient workers on God's behalf and producing fruit in His vineyard.

The story starts with a landowner who planted a vineyard. The text in all capitals in verse 33 is a reference to Isaiah 5:1 that we read in the first reading. It is also very similar to the wording that God said about Israel being a "choice vine" in Jeremiah 2:21. The vinegrowers rejected their role as laborers on behalf of the landowner by abusing and killing the landowner's servants who came to collect the produce (v. 35). The escalation continued to the point that the vinegrowers killed the landowner's son (vv. 37-39). In light of the context, it is clear at this point that Jesus is referring to Himself. Jesus then let the Jewish leaders dig their own graves, so to speak, by asking them what they would do in such a situation. They said, "He [would] bring those wretches to a wretched end, and [would] rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who [would] pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons" (v. 42). In other words, the landowner would entrust the vineyard to other people who **would** be trustworthy. Jesus then seized the opportunity to teach them from their own Holy Scriptures by quoting a verse from Psalm 118 with which they would have been familiar. What Jesus was telling the Jewish leaders was that **He** was the stone who they (the builders) were about to reject. But their rejection of Him as Messiah did not deter God's plan, for Jesus would become the cornerstone of real faith for past and future generations.

Below is a summary of the characters and subjects along with their meaning in the story:

1. The landowner represents God the Father. The landowner made a huge investment in the vineyard and then entrusted it to the vinegrowers. In the same way, God invests in people and then entrusts His ministry to them for the purposes of bearing fruit.

2. The vineyard represents Israel. It contained a tower and walls which were protective measures taken by the landowner to preserve his valuable investment in the vineyard.

3. The vinegrowers represent the Jewish religious leaders.

4. The slaves are the prophets that God sent to the Old Testament Jews to remind them of their covenantal relationship with God.

4. The landowner's son represents God's Son, Jesus Christ.

5. The "other tenants" are the future church that would consist primarily of the Gentiles in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies.

Some insights about the parable are as follows. First, this parable provided a key insight into the hearts of the religious leaders. The priests and elders claimed to belong to God's kingdom but were not obedient to God the Father. Instead they were obedient to a different father, their father the devil (John 8:44).

Second, the implication of this parable is that the disobedience of the Jewish people throughout history up until that time was actually a **conspiracy** against God. In verse 38 Jesus said, "they said among themselves," meaning they conspired to kill the landowner's son. Conspiracy has always been regarded as a greater crime than manslaughter in the legal system. In modern times each of the vinegrowers would have been charged with both murder **and** conspiracy to commit murder. Jesus knew that the Jewish leaders had murder in their hearts. We see later on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem who killed the prophets (Matthew 23:23), the greatest of whom was John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11) who had just been killed by King Herod (Matthew 14:10). This meant that a rejection of God's prophet John was a rejection of God Himself. In general the prophets were frequently persecuted by their own people. Some were stoned (2 Chronicles 24:21), and some like

Jeremiah were persecuted and killed in other ways (Jeremiah 26:7-11, 38:1-28).

Finally, the parable is a prophecy that Jesus would be rejected by the leaders of the Jewish community. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected, but after His exaltation, He became the Chief Cornerstone of the church (v. 42). Jesus told them very clearly about the penalty for their rejection, which was the loss of their kingdom. "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it." In the end, the kingdom of God was given to the universal church made up primarily of Gentiles. This mystery of God's grace wasn't revealed or understood until after it had happened, though in hindsight clues such as this were provided by God.

God, in His grace provided one final warning to the Jewish leaders in verse 44. "And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." Jesus is saying that rejection of Him is fatal. Falling or stumbling upon the Rock will break those who reject the Messiah, for the 2nd advent of the Messiah will be that of Judge who will pronounce everlasting judgment. Anyone that has ever dropped a dish onto a ceramic floor knows the peril of a hard surface. Jesus is the Rock over which the Jewish leaders stumbled. By application, we can see that anyone's rejection of Jesus is a fatal mistake that cannot be forgiven. Rejection of God's provision for the forgiveness of sin through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the only unforgivable sin (Matthew 12:22-32).

Reflection Questions

1. What is your response to God's claim of ownership on your life? Would you describe yourself like the vinegrowers who rejected the Son who came to seek payment or would you describe yourself as one who has surrendered to God's rightful ownership of your life? How would others describe you, based on your words, your attitudes, your values and your lifestyle?

2. In the last two readings, we saw God's reasonable expectation that His people bear fruit for Him. We also saw Paul modeling the fulfillment of this, for though he was in very unpleasant circumstances, he pointed the way to have peace in God through connecting to God in prayer. In what ways is God calling you to be His image-bearer in the world, despite your less than ideal circumstances? How can depending on God through prayer be a life-line for you to fulfill your God-given purpose?

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Web Site Improvements



You may have noticed that sometimes the previous Mass Notes were delayed. This was because of limitations of the previous server. In order to keep up with the volume of emails that go out each Friday for the Sunday Mass Study Notes we have implemented a new hosting server. The new server is designed to better handle the traffic and to complete the email sending in under two hours. We have also completed the move to the .com version of the domain, all traffic to the .org has been redirected.

Please let us know if you have any issues with anything.

May God richly bless you.

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Jim Hill, Christians for Christ Ministries

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-27-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the Prophet Ezekiel in which we learn about the seriousness of sin. Then we move to the second reading with a continuation of the study in the Book of Philippians. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. We provided a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Ezekiel in a previous edition of Mass Notes. The context of the reading is the Lord's teaching on the seriousness of sin. "The soul who sins shall die," (v. 4d) the text says in the opening

section of this chapter. Specifically, God taught on the seriousness of idolatry (v. 6), covetousness (v. 6), robbing the poor (v. 7), depriving the hungry from food and the poor from adequate clothing (v. 7), and charging interest on loans to a fellow Jew (v. 8). Obedience to God's Laws flows from an obedient heart, one that has been changed through embracing the mystery of God's love. Saint Paul said, "[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). God's gift is eternal life but it comes only through faith in Him. In the Old Testament times, this meant trusting in what they knew about God and looking forward to their Messiah Jesus' future conquering of sin forever. In a sense, God had already provided salvation because Jesus is called the Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world, although that event was yet future (Revelation 13:8). In a similar way, the Kingdom of Heaven is an already, not yet proposition. In our day, we receive eternal life by trusting in what we know about God and looking back to what Jesus did for us on the cross.

A summary of this section is given in the verses that immediately proceed the reading:

"Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord GOD, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live? 24 But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die." (Ezekiel 18:23-24)

With this context in mind let's proceed with the reading.

First Reading:

25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? 26 When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. 27 Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die." (Ezekiel 18:25-28)

The reading is a study in contrasts, first, that of a wicked man that repented of his sin, and second,

one that continued in his sin to the point of death. We see in verse 26 that habitual sin can have serious consequences, even to the point of death. Let's back up and look more closely at the difference between someone whose heart has been renewed by God and the person who remains spiritually dead. The Scripture reveals very clearly that there are two distinct classes of people, two different roads with only one of them leading to heaven. Jesus called them the narrow road and the broad road (Matthew 7:13-14, below). The first class is those whose sins are forgiven and who are spiritually alive, born from above (John 3:3). Ezekiel said something about this earlier in this chapter, "All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live" (Ezekiel 18:22). The second class is those whose soul is spiritually dead and whose sin will be held against them for an eternity after they die. This is a crucial point especially since most people in the world are unknowingly on the broad road. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). If a person never truly experiences and trusts in God's saving grace through faith in Jesus then their soul remains spiritually dead during their life on earth. When they die physically, their already dead soul enters the abode of the dead and at some future point they will experience a second death. This fearsome event is enough to scare anyone and is described in the Book of Revelation. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Let's go back to the reading. In verse 27 God said, "when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life." Is God saying that a person earns their way to heaven by their good works? No, the whole of Scripture is clear that good works flow out of a heart that has been regenerated by God. Yes, nonbelievers can do good works, but their motivation is different from a child of the kingdom. Even though they are spiritually dead, they are still human beings created in the image of God. Whatever they do flows out of their existence as an image bearer of God, but their deeds do not result in them obtaining eternal life. The Scripture shows that works that are pleasing to God flow from a heart that is submitted to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said this plainly in John 6:29. When people asked what they should do to fulfill the works that God requires, Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: To believe in the one He has sent."

Ezekiel's message is reminiscent of an event that occurred in the Book of Acts with a couple named Ananias and Sapphira that showed the deadly result of sin in the rapidly growing, early church. The story best tells itself as follows below.

1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? 4 "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. 7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." 10 And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:1-11)

While not every sin is met with such immediate consequences, we see that sin is a serious matter and believers are called to holiness. As we move onto the second reading, we will see Saint Paul's call to holy living by being unselfish and walking in unity to accomplish God's purposes. The context is that Paul had wrestled with a hypothetical argument whether it was better for him to continue ministering amidst his struggles in prison or go to heaven to be with the Lord. His conclusion was that it was better for the Philippians if he stayed (Philippians 1:24), and that he was confident that he would indeed continue (v. 25). Next, Paul admonished the Philippians to walk in a unified way worthy of Jesus Christ (v. 27). He warned them that they may have to suffer for Jesus' sake (v. 29).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

All of this leads to the second reading for today which opens with the adverb "therefore." Therefore, with these previous things in mind, let's read the text. [Note: Two versions of the reading were provided, we are using the shorter one because we covered the other verses in a previous week.]

Second Reading:

1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any

fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (Philippians 2:1-5)

Paul is making a hypothetical and rhetorical argument by using four "ifs" in the first verse, the idea is "if then." It is rhetorical because the "if" is not really in question, it is assumed. So they "if" could be read as "because." Because there is 1. Encouragement in Christ, 2. Consolation of love, 3. Fellowship of the Spirit, and 4. Affection and compassion then do the following things. First, be unified for God's purpose (v.2). Second, act unselfishly and humbly (v. 4). Finally, as a means of accomplishing unselfish and humble behavior worthy of Jesus Christ, live with the mindset of regarding other's needs as more important than your own (v. 4). An attribute of a person that has been made spiritually alive by faith in God is that they look out for "the interests of others" (v. 4). The high ideals of this passage can only be lived out if we are in Christ. He is the One who empowers us to let go of selfishness and pride so that we can embrace the new life of humility that Christ lived and gives us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew Chapter 21. The context is just after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Matthew 20:7-8), the same way a king would enter a city. Next, Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple in order to purify it (v. 12), healed people (v. 14), and twice contended with the chief priests and scribes in the temple (vv. 15-16, vv. 23-27). An interesting thing happened between Jesus' two visits there. As Jesus was walking by a certain fig tree he saw that it was not bearing fruit so he said to it, "Let no fruit grow in you ever again" (v. 19c). Afterwards Matthew recorded, "And at once the fig tree withered" (v. 19d). The disciples, in response to what Jesus did to the tree said, "[H]ow did the fig tree wither all at once?" (v. 20c). Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (vv. 21-22). Clearly Jesus performed the "miracle" of the killing of the fig tree so that the religious leaders would either see it or hear about it. He was emphasizing the importance of faith that leads to good works. With this context in mind let's read the Gospel passage that Jesus directed squarely at the "chief priests and elders of the people (v. 23a) who had confronted Him while He was teaching.

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Gospel Reading:

28 But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' 29 "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him." (Matthew 21:28-32)

Jesus said that there are two groups of people, those who believe and do the work of the Father, and those who don't believe and don't accomplish the Father's work. Jesus told them that they did not follow John the Baptist's calling to repent and believe, as did the first son in the story.

This is a story of contrasts between two sons. First, the sons have different degrees of fruitfulness in accomplishing the works of their father. The first one bears fruit and the other one does not, like the fig tree in Jesus' previous story. Truly, both sons at first refused to work when directed to do so by their father. However, the first son repented and accomplished the will of his father. One son is a child of their Father God; the other son is shown through his works to be a child of a different father. Jesus explained this paternal relationship while addressing the Pharisees in John's Gospel. He told them, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Though these were harsh words, Jesus was telling them the truth in order for them to have an opportunity to repent of their sin and turn to Him in faith.

As was explained earlier, there are two roads. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). The narrow road is the one on which the godly son who repented of his sin traveled. The broad road is the one on which the ungodly son made his journey.

Finally, there are two ultimate destinations as well. Jesus said earlier in Matthew's Gospel, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of

My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21). Jesus points out that you can have the right theology and pay lip service, but that is not the criteria for being in the kingdom of heaven. The destination is heaven for the son that repents and becomes a child of Father God, and hell for the son that does not repent and turn to do the will of the Father. Proverbs 14 says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death" (v. 12). This is the broad road, and a person doesn't realize that they are on this pathway until they are confronted with the reality of their sin in light of the Holy Scriptures. God in His grace desires for everyone to repent of their sin and believe in Him for eternal life (2 Peter 3:9).

Let's summarize what we have studied so far this week. As we saw in the first reading, God places a high value upon repentance. In that reading, we saw the contrast between a wicked man that repented and another that continued in their sin to the point of death. In the second reading, we also saw a study of contrasts, that of a humble believer that looked out for the interests of others and an implied person that did not. In the Gospel lesson, we saw a contrast between two sons, one a child of God and the other a child of the world. There were two roads and ultimately two final destinations.

I had an encounter at a funeral that helps to illustrate the two paths about which the Scriptures speak. I attended a funeral for a dear Christian woman and ran into a friend of mine from high school at the luncheon afterwards. I remembered that I had previously shared with her the plan of salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. As we talked she joyfully told me how she had recently acquired some sort of floating cooler gizmo for her pool so that she didn't have to leave the pool in order to get a new drink. As she was telling me the story I noticed that something clicked in her mind at which point she suddenly began backtracking and downplaying the importance of this new gadget. Even though I never objected to what she was saying I noticed that her conscience seemed to speak to her. I wrapped up my short visit at her table and wished her well as I left.

People everywhere are on one of two paths; one group knows their path and the other ones follow where the world leads them. The people who are on the narrow path through faith in Jesus Christ exude God's holiness as they go about living their lives. As we saw in my illustration, this has a certain repelling effect to the ones unknowingly on the other road. As believers, we can rejoice in the fact that our ultimate destination is heaven, even if we have to make the hard choices associated with walking along the narrow road. The Scripture is clear that God is "a rewarder of those that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Those people who honestly seek God **will** find Him. This is clear from a principle found in Jeremiah 29:13.

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May you continue to seek God as you journey this week.

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we talked about two sons, one a child of God and the other a child of the world. Read the following passages and then answer the questions that follow.

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Acts 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1 John 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Romans 10:9-10 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

A. What does God say about whether or not we are a sinner, regardless if we have faith in Jesus Christ?

B. What does God tell us about how we can be sure that we are on the narrow road since the Scripture said that you are a sinner?

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2. Each of the passages help to create a robust picture of true faith. True faith expresses itself in following the will of God out of a repented heart. Spend some time with the Lord asking Him if there are any packets of resistance in your heart about which you need to repent and turn towards God.

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_09-27-2020Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-20-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Isaiah in which God provides an evangelical calling to everyone in the world. Then we continue to study in Philippians by backing up to Chapter 1. Finally, we move to the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew on the parable of the workers in the vineyard in which we see a picture of God's marvelous grace.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The context is the section where God was telling of His free offer of salvation to everyone, not just the Jews to whom Isaiah was writing. God said, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1). God was clear that His calling was for everyone as we see in verse 5. "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you." As you read, keep in mind this universal offer of salvation that God made to the world some seven hundred years before Jesus was born.

First Reading:

6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)

The message is a general evangelistic calling that also gives us some insights into the nature of God. First, God is compassionate and forgiving of sin even though He is far above people in His ways and thoughts. Second, God calls everyone to repent of his or her sin and place their trust in Him. Third, people must not wait to place their faith in God as it may easily become too late when they become hardened by sin and the opportunity for them to believe passes. Finally, God reminds us that His ways are far above our own. In context, this means that the way that God brings sinners to repent of their sin and place their trust in Him is beyond our understanding, it is a mystery of God (John 3:8). This is what we discussed a few weeks ago when we studied Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John Chapter 3.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Philippians. Paul and Timothy (Philippians 1:1) opened the letter by

proclaiming to the believers in Philippi their confidence in God's work in their lives and in the lives of all believers. They said, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (v. 6). Paul then went on to testify how God had been working in his life in spite of and even through the hardships that he had endured in prison (Philippians 1:12-13). Note that we included all of the verses from 20 – 27 including the ones omitted from the reading in the lectionary.

Second Reading:

20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. 27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . . (Philippians 1:20-27)

Paul spoke about the inner conflict that he was having on whether it was more important for him to stay in the world to minister there or to join God in heaven, although the choice would of course be up to God. Paul said that regardless of what happened to him, he realized his life found meaning only when it was connected to the purpose of exalting God, "for to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21). Paul undoubtedly suffered greatly in prison. Perhaps during the time he wrote these passages he was experiencing something very difficult. In spite of his hardship, Paul said that his choice was to remain doing his work (v.25). Next, he went on to state his overarching theme of the Book of Philippians, the call to become more Christ like. He said, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (v. 27a). Throughout this Epistle Paul urged the believers to become more and more like Christ in their behaviors and attitudes. Paul closed this section with a call for unity among the believers in the Philippian church (v. 26). He told the Philippian believers to "[stand] firm in **one** spirit, with **one** mind striving **togethe**r for the faith of the gospel (v. 27b-c, emphasis added). This too was a call for Christlikeness as Jesus also prayed for unity in the church (John 17:21).

When we stand back and look at what Paul said, which of us would have the strength to say what Paul did while he was sitting in prison? In spite of his circumstances, Paul continued to spread the Gospel, even when his life was in turmoil. Paul helps us to see that everything doesn't have to be perfect in our lives for us to minister to others and share the Gospel.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is a parable from the Gospel of Saint Matthew. The context is that Jesus was talking to the crowds that were following him in the region of Perea, known as "Galilee beyond the Jordan" (Matthew 19:1). Some Pharisees also came to "test" Jesus by asking him a question about the legality of divorce (v. 3). Next, Jesus had a conversation with a rich, young ruler during which Jesus made the statement, "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 24). The text says His disciples were "astonished" and asked Jesus, "Then who can be saved?" (v. 25). Jesus' answer helps to shed some light into the mystery on how anyone comes to believe in God. He said, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). With this introduction in mind let's read the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

Gospel Reading:

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first." 9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." 13 But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or

is your eye envious because I am generous?" 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last. (Matthew 20:1-16)

Many people who live in large cities such as Los Angeles know how to hire workers by going to their local building supply store in the morning and selecting from among the men that gather there to find work each day. This was a common practice in Jesus' day. The workers would gather in the marketplace with hopes of being hired for the rate or one denarius, which was a typical day's wage with the day lasting from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.

In this story about God's value system in the Kingdom of Heaven, the workers were all hired at different times, but in the end were given the same wage. Those who worked a full day were given the agreed upon wage for the day. Those who worked less than a full day didn't know what they would receive, but they figured it would be better than nothing. How surprised they all were when the last workers received the same wage as the first workers. The landowner provided for them all, even though their effort was different.

Jesus' point is clear: No matter when a person comes to be part of God's work in the world, God provides generously to all. The Jews thought that since they were God's chosen people since the time of Abraham, they should receive special "compensation" for their labor. After all, they reasoned, they had borne the brunt of the labor in the heat of the day. Why should they be lumped in with all the death-bed conversions and get the same eternal reward as the Gentiles? What incentive would there be to surrender your life early and follow God? Wouldn't God's radical grace encourage a sense of licentiousness and living for oneself?

Jesus' rationale, here, is interesting. We surrender our lives because the landowner is generous (we can trust Him) and it's actually good to be in His presence for as long as possible. The ones who had been away from the landowner for much of the day had suffered enough. While those who come to Christ late in life are given the same eternal destiny as those who committed their lives to Christ early on, Jesus reminds them that the reward of being with God in His presence is generous already. And those who labor for the Lord are not really "sacrificing" anything—they have the benefit of a longer history with the landowner. Can we not trust Him and be thankful that He provides for all who put their faith in Christ: Jew or Gentile, life-long Christian or death-bed conversion?

Let's highlight some of the key insights this parable implies about the nature of God. First, God is persistent in calling people to Himself. The landowner went out no less than five different times to

call workers including early in the morning (v. 1), about the third hour (v. 2), about the sixth hour and ninth hours (v. 5), and finally about the eleventh hour (v. 6). Second, God is very generous. The landowner gave the exact same wage to those that had started working much later in the day. Man, who was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), has a strong sense of judgment that was violated when all of the workers received the same wage regardless of how many hours they worked that day. The wages that the landholder paid to the workers that worked less than a full day is what we call "grace," which means unmerited favor. Third, God is sovereign (v. 15). The landowner said, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?" (v. 15a). Finally, God calls the workers His friend (v. 13), though we see that this is conditional upon believing. Jesus said in John's Gospel, "You are My friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

In summary, God is persistent in calling people to Him, is generous, is sovereign, and calls believers His friend. Although His ways are above understanding, He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. It is there that we discover that He is full of grace and patient in calling sinners to repent and believe in Him. Saint Paul said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The parable of the workers in the vineyard clearly illustrates the grace that God provides in calling each person in the world to trust in the finished work of His Son Jesus Christ. As we saw in the first reading, God calls everyone to believe in Him. And we saw in the second reading that God calls us to minister and spread the Good News even when our circumstances aren't perfect. Let us worship our wonderful, generous, persistent God with our whole lives.

Reflection Questions

1. A strong theme in this week's reading was on God's abundant grace which is able to forgive all of our sin. If you have received God's saving grace, what sins are you still trying to "pay" for by your good works? How might the truth of God's compassion and abundant pardon (Isaiah 55:7) and His provision of grace (from the parable of the generous landowner) help you to embrace the fact that you don't have to pay for your sins?

2. Another strong message in the reading was the surrender that happens in us when we realize who God is. Each of the readings called for life-change to happen as a result of realizing:

God's ways are not our ways

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To live is Christ

The last shall be first, and the first last

Where do you need to integrate these realities into your own life, surrendering to our trustworthy and generous God?

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_09-20-2020Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-13-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn from Paul in dealing with Christians holding beliefs that differ from our own. Then we learn much about forgiveness in the Gospel lesson through the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

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First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

SIR 27:30—28:7

Wrath and anger are hateful things,

yet the sinner hugs them tight.

The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,

for he remembers their sins in detail.

Forgive your neighbor's injustice;

then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.

Could anyone nourish anger against another

and expect healing from the LORD?

Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,

can he seek pardon for his own sins?

If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,

who will forgive his sins?

Remember your last days, set enmity aside;

remember death and decay, and cease from sin!

Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;

remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

The reading points out how sinners love their sin. However, it is easy for us to view ourselves as somehow outside of sin. Saint Paul reminds us that "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). The reading goes on to remind us about God's clear call for us to forgive others (Ephesians 4:32), because as Paul said, "*God in Christ forgave us*." The reading closes with a reminder on how God (through Christ), forgives us. We have forgiveness only through our faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. "*Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them*" (Hebrews 7:25).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from Romans 14 follows a section in which Paul teaches about the godly calling to show grace to others with differing beliefs related to Christian practices such as the honoring of a holy day or a person's choice to abstain from meat. Paul said, "He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:6).

Second Reading:

Romans 14:7-9 NAS95 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Paul continued his explanation by providing the reason why we as Christians should show grace to others with differing practices driven by their beliefs in such debatable matters as what we eat or when we worship. As fellow believers holding diverging views on the negotiable topics we are to remember that our souls and wholly given over to the Lord. When we place our trust in the Lord he came into us and regenerated our previously dead souls. Jesus spoke about this reality in the Gospel of John when He emphasized the reality of the spiritual birth with Nicodemus. Jesus said that "you must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). As believers in the Lord Jesus, ones who testify with our voices that God has raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9), our hearts are spiritually born again. As such, God has placed a seal upon us dedicating us to Himself. That is the whole reason that God has called us to Himself (Acts 2:39). The reading closes with, "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (v. 9). Jesus' rulership is over both the living and the dead, in the sense that He is Lord over everyone including believers who are alive, believers who have died, and unbelievers both living (but spiritually dead) and dead (as those who suffer the second death).

Paul's message serves as a reminder to us about recognizing in serving God as our ultimate goal instead of debating about relatively frivolous issues. Does one choose to go to church on a Saturday night instead of Sunday morning? Does one choose not to eat meat on Friday? Let us not disparage others because of their beliefs but let us instead remember through these debates that our reason for existing is to serve the Lord. It is hard to argue with someone about such issues while serving the Lord with our whole heart. People are dying every day without the knowledge of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus who gave Himself for their sins. Let's get on with fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) making disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Holy Trinity, and teaching them to obey all that the Scriptures teach.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Matthew continues from last week in the section of Jesus' final, detailed

teachings to His disciples before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem before He gave His life for the payment of our sin debt. Last week's reading covered Jesus' teaching on church discipline including the general procedure one Christian "brother" is to use in confronting another. Here the term "brother" means a fellow believer. This week's reading continues Jesus' teaching about the godly behaviors of a Christian in forgiving others.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 18:21-35 NAS95 21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' 27 And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' 29 So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Peter asked Jesus a question about how often he should forgive another believer (brother, v. 21). Should I, Peter asked, forgive him even "up to seven times?" (v. 21c). Jesus answered him with a call to radical forgiveness, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (v. 23). Jesus then provided a parable in order to illustrate this high standard of forgiveness. We know that it is a parable because He introduces it by saying "For this reason the kingdom of heaven **may be compared to**" (v. 23, emphasis added).

The parable of the unforgiving servant begins with a certain servant who owed the king a sum that

was impossible to repay, "ten thousand talents" (v. 24b). In biblical times, a talent amounted to about 20 years of wages for an average worker, bringing the debt to some 200,000 years of work. In our day we would say that the servant owed the king something like a zillion dollars, a sum which would clearly be impossible for anyone to repay not the least of which a lowly servant. Next, through an act of unbelievable grace, and clearly foreshadowing God the Father's forgiveness of us through faith in Jesus, the servant humbly fell upon his knees and begged for mercy (v. 26). Upon seeing the servant's heart, the king felt compassion and completely forgave his servant of the debt that he could never repay. The king provided a means for forgiveness knowing that the repayment of the debt was impossible by the man's works. As the story continues, we should expect the servant to leave the judgment hall with a sense of great peace and generosity, but that is not what happened.

As the servant left the encounter with the king-judge, he went out and found a fellow slaved who owed him a substantial sum, equivalent to about one hundred days wages (one denarii was about one day's wage). In contrast to the "zillion dollars" the first servant had owed to the king this was a relatively insignificant amount. Additionally, since this first servant's debts would have most likely included the sum total of all that was owed to him by all of the other servants who had made borrowed from him, in all probability all of the debts had been erased. Though we have to be careful not to make a parable walk on all fours and instead to seek the central principle our Lord is getting at, all the members of this "loan pyramid" we will call it were forgiven, including the first servant and all of the servants who owed money to him. Therefore, the act of the first servant in asking for repayment of the 100 denarii debt was pure greed. This calls into question the honesty of the servants "impassioned plea" before the king in the first place. As a result of his greed and unrepentant heart, the king ordered the debts of the servant reinstated, something which was impossible for him to ever repay.

Jesus parable closes with the central point of Jesus teaching, something which is worthy of repeating here and every day that we live. "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (v. 35). Lord, help us, without you we are powerless.

Jesus' teaching in the parable gets at some very important truths. First, unbelievers are separated from God the Father by a debt that they can never repay, even in 200,000 years or working to earn their salvation. The Scripture make it clear that nobody can earn their way into heaven, regardless of how "good" they are and how hard they work. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). God's standard of righteousness in order to enter heaven is perfection. Perfection cannot be granted by our doing of good works but rather by faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross. The scripture says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast"

(Ephesians 2:8-9).

Second, as believers we are called to forgive other believers, seventy times seven times, that is a whole lot! However, this principle of forgiveness also extends beyond believers, as is clear from the whole canon of Scripture. We as believers are to forgive others regardless of their spiritual condition. God has placed upon believers the unique ability to exercise forgiveness, something which the lost world has a hard time understanding. We have to exercise a degree of common sense here as repeated, unrepentant attacks against us may warrant the separation of ourselves from these circumstances. In other cases, such as the treatment of believers by nonbelievers in certain parts of the world (and even in increasing frequency in the western world) we should expect continuing mistreatment.

Finally, the principle that we learned about showing grace to others holding differing spiritual beliefs brings with it a need to forgive, in an ongoing manner, those who hold these views. Unless God changes their hearts, we must recognize that their beliefs will likely never change. No matter how much this offends us we must turn our hearts to the Higher Judge, the King before whom we will stand to receive rewards for the things that we did with the gifts that He gave us during our lifetimes.

When we talk to others we can find many stories of forgiveness, or the lack thereof. I think of someone I know whose daughter was abused by a man. She told me that she would never forgive that man. I think that in her mind the act of not forgiving him provided her with a certain sense of power and control over the abuser of her daughter. This brings me to a much deeper story about personal forgiveness, one that I have chronicled at length in my personal journey to finding true faith in God and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It was my struggle to understand and later to forgive someone who greatly harmed me during my childhood years that led me to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ.

The bottom line is this. Because God has forgiven us from the payment of an impossibly huge debt brought about by our sin, we should likewise forgive others.

If you have a testimony about forgiveness please share it with us on the place provided for that purpose on the web site.

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Reflection Questions

1. Think long and hard about this question, and pray about it before you answer. Who is someone for which you have heretofore refused to forgive? In what ways has your unforgiveness given you a sense of power over them? In light of what you learned today, will you grant forgiveness to the person that harmed you?

2. When was a time when you encountered another Christian who held different beliefs than your own. How do you classify this difference in belief according to a major or minor difference? If the difference was one that upon further reflection you could classify as something rather minor, how does today's second reading help you to place this in perspective? What if the difference was more major, say concerning whether Jesus really did rise from the dead. Is there any principle that arises from the reading that could help you to relate with a person holding this belief? How does that principle relate to your calling to fulfill the Great Commission?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-06-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a comprehensive introduction to Ezekiel from the first reading. Then move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans and conclude with Matthew 18 where we discuss the procedure given to us from God regarding the resolution of disputes between believers. We would like to think that we would never need this but conflict is one inevitable consequence of the fall of mankind (Genesis 3).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. He was an animated prophet who sometimes acted out the message that God gave him in very peculiar ways. For example one time he dug a hole in the side of his house (Ezekiel 12), cooked his food using human waste for fuel (Ez 4:9), and laid on his right side for 390 days and then 40 days more only on his left! Ezekiel was among about ten thousand in the second group of Jews that were carried off to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar's invading forces in 597 BC. He ministered after the tragic death of godly King Josiah in 609 who had enacted broad reforms in Judah. However, the people were so entrenched in their idolatry that they quickly returned to their tragic way of living after the king's death at the hands of the Egyptian army. Ezekiel's message, like many, if not most of the prophets, is easier to understand after it has been fulfilled versus interpreting it in the predictive sense. For example, chapter 38 of his book contains a frightful prophecy about something that will come upon Israel at some future date. We

know from the description of the events in that section that nothing like this has ever come upon them up until now, but interpreting Ezekiel's message is extremely difficult without the benefit of hindsight. Such was the case even for Jesus's own disciples in interpreting relatively straightforward messages from Isaiah regarding the Lord Jesus himself. Interestingly enough, the meaning of today's reading is very clear.

The context of today's reading is clearly illustrated in the first six verses that precede it:

1 And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 "Son of man, speak to the sons of your people and say to them, 'If I bring a sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman, 3 and he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows on the trumpet and warns the people, 4 then he who hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, and a sword comes and takes him away, his blood will be on his own head. 5 He heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning; his blood will be on himself. But had he taken warning, he would have delivered his life. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand.'" (Ezekiel 33:1-6)

Ezekiel provided an illustration of the responsibility for the people to warn each other regarding their sin by relating it to the necessity of a person appointed in a military position to warn his superiors of an approaching army. It is common sense that a person appointed as a military guard would quickly report an approaching army, yet the people didn't warn each other about the sin that was approaching and even inside of their own souls.

With this context in mind let's continue reading the text of the first reading.

First Reading:

7 Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. 9 But if you on your part

warn a wicked man to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your life.(Ezekiel 33:7-9)

Part of Ezekiel's role as a prophet was to vindicate the theocratic kingdom rule that God had ordained through the Law. This message was very specifically directed towards Ezekiel. Notice that the word "you" (and your) appeared no less than seven times in reference to Ezekiel. Verse one provided a good summary of the big idea of the reading. "Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me." This message was not, as some have said, in the context of evangelism. This admonition was made specifically to the Prophet Ezekiel in the context of warning his fellow Israelites about God's strong admonition for them to live according to the terms of their covenant. Ezekiel's role was to call them back to their covenant relationship with God. Not only was Ezekiel a watchman for the house of Israel, but all of the prophets, including the New Testament prophet John the Baptist acted in that role.

We can draw a theological principle from the text. Sometimes love is tough, we don't always want to hear what the authorities are saying when we are stepping out of line with God's plan for our lives. God in His kindness warns us when we are moving into destructive ways, but we are responsible to heed the warning. God warns us not only through His Word in the Bible but also through other people who embrace and then speak the truth of His Word. He also warns us through allowing certain difficult circumstances to intervene. Sometimes our first instinct is to attack the person that brought us the information about which we felt convicted. Later when we study the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus provided a procedure for dealing with conflicts between believers.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is just after Paul finished explaining his compelling desire for all of Israel to come to faith in the Lord Jesus including those before his time (Romans 9), those during his time (Romans 10), and those that will come after him (Romans 11). Next in Chapter 12, he explained how Christians were called to live transformed lives and present their bodies as living sacrifices. This is in contrast to what the author of Hebrews said about the Jewish Law, "Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Hebrews 10:11) since Jesus offered his body not as a victim but willingly on the cross once for all (Hebrews 10:10).

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The reading today is from Chapter 13 which opens with an admonition for believers in the Lord Jesus to submit to their government authorities. Paul said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). He continued:

Second Reading:

Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (Romans 13:2-7)

It's important to remember that God commands us to obey our government authorities. As we will see in the reading he puts this admonition on the same level as our need to obey the Commandments. With this context in mind let's proceed with the second reading.

8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Paul quoted from the Old Testament and provided the seventh, sixth, eighth, and ninth commandments (Exodus 20:13-17). Paul also included Jesus' statement from Mark 12:31 that summed up the last five commandments. Christians are called to be careful stewards of their resources and to obey the commandments given by Him and which God has already placed on their hearts (Romans 2:15). As you can see, the heart of what God wants for us is to love one another. We fulfill this "law" by treating others with dignity and respect, the way we ourselves would want to be treated. Instead of trying to take advantage of people for our own gain, we should "owe" them nothing except love. What an amazing contrast Christians would be if we lived according to this

passage.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The context was just after the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:2) when Jesus began to teach the disciples about God's kingdom values. The disciples asked who was the greatest in the kingdom. They evidently were alluding to the argument recording in Luke regarding who of **them** was the greatest (Luke 22:24). Jesus settled the matter by setting a child before Himself and saying, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). Jesus continued to teach them that the kingdom of heaven lies in sharp contrast to the kingdom of this world.

Gospel Reading:

15 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20 For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18:15-20)

Today's Gospel lesson can be applied in two contexts, first for the resolution of an issue between two Christians (whether or not they attend the same church), and second, as a procedure set forth by God for handling issues related to church discipline. The process for resolving either type of dispute is similar. In the reading, Jesus provided a four-step process for resolving conflict. First, Jesus taught that the offended person should talk to the offender privately, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother (v. 15)." The Greek word translated "show him his fault" is elegchō, which in this context might better read, "to convince and turn them away from their sin." In Galatians, Paul directed that this must be done "in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Second, Jesus stated that if the private meeting did not result in repentance and satisfaction, the offender was to be approached by a small group, "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with

you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED" (Matt 18:16). The second meeting provided the offender with another opportunity to repent, albeit more forceful than a private meeting. Paul affirmed this doctrine as applicable to the church: "Reject a factious man after a first and second warning" (Titus 3:10).

The third step that Jesus outlined in Matthew was a "public corrective summons." In this announcement Jesus said, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (ekklesia in the original)" (Matt 18:17a). The word ekklēsia means, "a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation.

The fourth and final step that Jesus outlined regarding corrective discipline in the Jewish assembly was a "public corrective exclusion." Jesus continued his discourse in verse 17 and said, "and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17b).

Should this four-step process outlined by Jesus for correction within the Jewish assembly be utilized in the church at large? Yes. It would seem that Jesus intended this four-step process for all believers. In Matthew 18:17 this is the second and last occurrence of the word "church" in the gospels. It is used in a different sense here from that in Matthew 16:18. In the earlier occurrence it has reference to the body of Christ composed of those who are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Here it speaks of the local assembly, a body of believers gathered together as a fellowship. Both times the Lord uses the term He is anticipating in the future when the church age would begin after His resurrection from the dead. Second, Paul evidently believed that Jesus' teaching applied to the church since he provided similar advice. In 2 Thess 3:6 and 1 Corin 5:5, Paul said, "deliver such a one to Satan," which is very similar to Jesus' teaching in the fourth step in Matthew 18:17b. In 1 Tim 5:20, Paul's advice was very similar to Jesus' third step (Matt 18:17a), "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." Paul's advice in 2 Thess 3:15b to "admonish him as a brother" was very similar to Jesus' first step of restoration with a sinning brother in Matt 18:15. Paul in describing the process of discipline against an elder used very similar language to Jesus in 1 Tim 5:19-20. It is evident from the biblical evidence that Paul and the apostles relied upon Jesus' teaching on discipline within the Jewish assembly, and that this teaching was relevant to the yet to exist church.

What does this mean for our lives? First, the goal of church discipline is restoration as well as the secondary purpose of restraining sin in the church. Paul said, "(W)ith gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held

captive by him to do his will." Church discipline was also for the purpose of restraining sin, as is evident in 1 Timothy, "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning" (5:20). The same theme is evident in the narrative of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 with the conclusion of the account by Luke, "And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things" (v. 11).

Second, Paul and Peter made it clear that a secondary purpose of church discipline was to preserve the Christ-like reputation of the church among the gentiles. Paul spoke to the Philippians, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world" (2:14-15). Peter made a similar statement in 1 Peter 2:12.

Finally, an additional insight from the Epistles is that Paul intended church discipline to keep false teachings from the church. In Galatians 5:7-9 Paul stated the principle that a little bit of sin in the church spoiled the whole assembly. In 2 Thessalonians Paul stated the principle explicitly, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (3:6). A final insight offered in the Epistles is the restorative goal of church discipline. In 2 Timothy, Paul stated, "with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will" (2:25-26). The insights from the Acts and Epistles help to clarify both the process and purposes of church discipline.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you handle conflict? What steps of this four-step process could you begin to practice this week?

2. When Christians live under God's kingdom values, our lives should look very different from those who are still ruled by worldly values. This week's Scripture focused on the following themes. Which of these do you already practice? Which do you want to see increased in your life? Use this to guide your prayer life with God this week:

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A. Because God tells the truth and warns humans of impending danger connected to sin, we likewise are called to tell the truth and warns others. We saw this in the first reading from Ezekiel.

B. Because God loves us, we too ought to love others. Instead of exploiting people or moving toward them in selfish ways, we move toward them in love. We saw this in the second reading from Romans.

C. Because God's heart is one of restoration, we can become peacemakers in the midst of conflict and sin.

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