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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-06-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn from Habakkuk how the people can God can persevere through suffering. We learn about the importance of using our spiritual gifts and the spreading the true doctrine of God in the second reading. In the Gospel lesson we study three short lessons from Jesus on discipleship.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Habakkuk, like Amos that we looked at last week, was a minor prophet, meaning his writings were shorter than the ones who are called the major prophets. The overall theme of the book is how the people of God are to persist during their suffering by focusing upon Him. He wrote a bit later than Amos, in the late seventh century BC (610 – 605 BC). This was after the Assyrians had already taken the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity in 722 BC and just before the Southern Kingdom first fell to the Babylonians in three waves beginning in 605 BC. The context is very important to understand because the Babylonian army was soon to begin their conquest of Jerusalem, the holy city of the southern kingdom of Judah. The prophet cried out to God, "How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save" (Habakkuk 1:2). The Book records God's answer to his plea.

First Reading:

> *Habakkuk 1:2-3 NAS95 2 How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out*

> *to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save. 3 Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises.*
>
> *2:2-4 2 Then the LORD answered me and said, "Record the vision And inscribe it on tablets, That the one who reads it may run. 3 For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. 4 Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith."*

In chapter 2 verse 4 of Habakkuk stated a very important principle for believers. "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith." Other versions state this more clearly, such as the NIV which reads, "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright– but the righteous will live by his faith." Here we see that one key characteristic of a disciple of God is having faith in Him. Righteous living depends upon faith, but faith must have an object. If our faith is placed in our perceived goodness, good works we do for the church, or anything other than God we are "puffed up and our desires are not upright."

Here is an illustration about the importance of placing our faith in the correct object, God. If our mother asked us to go to the store and buy a gallon, she may be very surprised if we returned with a gallon of cod liver oil when she actually desired skim milk! It is very important to have the correct object of faith.

Later in Habakkuk, we found the object of Habakkuk's faith. "The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights (Hab 3:19a,b NIV). Habakkuk's call was to the people of Israel to repent of their sin and return to God, the only true source of possible deliverance from their impending tragedy of invasion by Babylon. That calling is just as appropriate today as it was to Israel. The righteous shall live by faith in God and not by faith in anything else including money, success, or good works. For we are saved by grace through faith and not of ourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, less any person should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We are often not able to understand what God is up to during the times that He allows trouble in our lives. Habakkuk's call to God regarding why He allowed such terrible hardships to happen to the people of God is as important to his readers as it is to those in our day. When we suffer without seeing any obvious purpose or reason we too ask God, why? God answer to us is, "*But the righteous will live by his faith*" (Habakkuk 2:4c). We are called to live by faith in God's plan, faith that God will work out all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

As I write this I am preparing to travel to the Detroit area to the funeral of friend who died at middle age. Over and over I have asked what I could have done to have prevented his death. I pray that somehow God will use this experience to draw me and others closer to Him, and that I would have the boldness to share the love of Jesus Christ with others through this tragedy. The person who died is on that has been on my BLL (big long list) for many years. I carry an especially large burden with the passing of each on this list What helps me get through it is the half dozen or so people *formerly* on the list who are now walking with God in faith. Through it all the message of Habakkuk rings true, "the righteous will live by his faith."

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Second Timothy. The theme of this section is Paul's calling to young Timothy to continue his bold service of the Lord in spite of tribulation. This is similar to what we learned from the first reading in Habakkuk.

Second Reading:

> *6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. 8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life– not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. 12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. 13 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:6-13 NIV)*

Paul reminded Timothy to use the spiritual gifts given to him by God during his ordination service (v. 6, "laying on of my hands"). He said in verse 13, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus." The caution to adhere to a pattern of sound teaching is a frequent admonition made by Paul and other New Testament writers. Doctrine is important especially as we will see in the Gospel lesson today because teaching false doctrine leads others away from the true faith in Jesus. Such a practice, knowingly or not, will lead to a much greater condemnation for non-believers engaged in such practices. This leads us to the Gospel lesson for today from Saint Matthew.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Though the Gospel lesson today only covered chapter 17 verses 5 – 10 we will cover the entire section from verses 1 -10 in order to take into account the context.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 JESUS SAID TO his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. 2 It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. 3 So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." 5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. 7Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? 8 Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? 9 Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10 So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' " (Luke 17:1-10 NIV)*

This section of Luke contains teaching related to the topic of discipleship. It consists of three short lessons and concludes with a parable. In the first lesson, we see an admonition by Jesus about the seriousness of sin, especially for the person that *causes* people to sin. Jesus is saying that sin is serious enough that we should be willing to take drastic actions to overcome temptation. Any teenage boy can attest to the fact that girly magazines are an especially powerful attraction when hormones and raging. However, what Jesus is saying here is that the person that causes others to sin, in this case the publisher of the pornographic magazine, will receive greater condemnation. The parallel section in in Matthew adds this verse, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" (Mt 18:7 NIV). Next, Jesus continues with a second lesson. Here we find that having a willingness to forgive is a second key characteristic of being a disciple of Jesus. Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." That was a hard saying for His disciples because their answer is to ask Him to increase their faith. Forgiveness can be a hard thing to do. The call to forgiveness is evident in our Lord's Prayer recited every week in Mass found in Matthew Chapter 6. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14-15). Paul said in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in

Christ God forgave you." Jesus commands us to forgive others because he forgave us. The call to forgive others is a key characteristic of a believer and is a frequent topic throughout the New Testament.

Jesus third lesson is about faith, something that we found in the first reading from Habakkuk. After Jesus spoke about the need to forgive, the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus then said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." His use of a mustard seed is significant since it was one of the smallest seeds with which his disciples would have been familiar. Jesus' statement meant that even having the smallest faith was of extremely high value. If we plant a seed and water it this tiny object may sprout regardless of how much faith we put in this happening. The seed comes from God and His concern is about *how* we use it. God doesn't call everyone to be spiritual giants, He just asks us to use our small faith for His purposes. As we saw in Habakkuk, the just shall live even by their tiny amount of faith the size of a mustard seed. Even such a small faith may move mountains.

Next, Jesus moved onto a parable, as He has done throughout this section of Luke. This parable was about a master to whom he posed a hypothetical question about his servant. "Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" The message was clear. *As disciples of Jesus, we must serve without strings attached*. Our obedience is not a matter of merit but of responsive duty, though God does honor our Christian service. Although we will be rewarded in heaven for our obedience to God, He calls us to obey Him now, as a servant is called to obey his master. The servant will be rewarded, "after that you may eat and drink (v. 8)," but a servant's work is a duty that does not earn them special merit with their master. God is a faithful Master Who will honor us for our service. When we make "sacrifices" in order to obey God, we should not pat ourselves on the back or look for special paybacks from God. We are merely living in light of the new life He has given us in Christ.

Some years back something very interesting happened at a church dinner that helped me to gain some insights into these passages. For this event since our name fell in a certain range, we were supposed to bring a large dessert. My wife baked up one of her most amazing treats, peach berry cobbler with a dish of freshly made whipped cream. I dropped Christy off at the door of the church and she carried the still hot cobbler downstairs along with the dish of whipped cream. When we got inside the organizers told her to find a table that did already have a dessert and just place it there. Frankly, I was concerned that we would not get any of this lovely treat but began resigning myself to the fact that we would not be able to enjoy any of the delicious delicacy. My wife set out to find a table without a dessert but was unable to find a table that did not already have a dessert. Next, I told her to just place the dessert on *our* table and get on with the dinner as I turned away to speak to someone behind me. As we were milling about trying to decide what to do, I suddenly heard a loud crash. As I turned around, I saw that the delicious cobbler had splattered all over the floor! I was shocked and just stood there in disbelief for a minute as our hosts began rushing around trying to figure out how to clean up the mess on the floor. I didn't have any cobbler that night!

As we went through the dinner and the service that followed, I reflected on the intentions of my heart during this event. My wife's motives were pure; she wanted to bring the very best dessert possible for *whoever* received it. Mine were not so pure; I intended all along to save some for myself. God evidently had other intentions by showing me a lesson in allowing the eventual disaster. *Serve God with a pure heart without strings attached and He will honor you*.

Reflection Questions

1. The mustard seed, though it is one of the smallest seeds, can with proper soil and watering, sprout and grow into a large bush whether or not we have faith that it will grow or not. It's specially designed by God to do just that. Read Hebrews 12:2 and Ephesians 2:8-9 below.

   Eph 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith– and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God–not by works, so that no one can boast.

   Heb 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Who provides the seed of faith for which you are called to sow to produce God's fruit in the Kingdom?

2. Refer to your answer above. With the source or your faith determined, how can your faith be improved, enlarged or expanded? Considering its source, is it productive for us to feel guilty if we don't have "enough faith"? What would be a more appropriate response?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-29-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine a reading from Amos and learn about the dangers of luxurious living when it brings people further away from God. In the Gospel reading, we learn from Jesus through the story of Lazarus and the rich man. We see how important it is to trust in the Lord Jesus as the only source of our salvation before we die. Unless we do it while we are still alive it will be too late once we die.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Amos is in the Northern Kingdom (Israel) just before the invasion by the Assyrian Empire that occurred in 722 BC. This was a time of prosperity for the Israelites who had fallen into idolatry and oppression of the poor people among them. Just one verse before the opening of today's reading God warned them about the inevitable invasion that was to come upon them along with their exile to a land "beyond Damascus" (Amos 5:27). In the reading, God continues His warnings to them about the wrath that he was going to allow to come upon them through the reigning Gentile empire to their north. This invasion from enemies in the north prefigures the invasion that will occur in the last days just prior to the return of the Lord Jesus. These final events will culminate in the outpouring of God's wrath upon the unbelieving world after Jesus returns to gather His church. Interestingly, some "pharisaical" people during Amos time were calling for this Day of the Lord to come (Amos 5:18a,b). God responded to their plea by saying that this day of judgment was one of "darkness and not light (Amos 5:18c, 20). He also told them (through Amos) that it is "as if a man fled from a lion and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him" (Amos 5:19). During times of oppression of the poor and idolatry, God's judgment is *not* something for which anyone should pray for!

First Reading:

> *Amos 6:1-7 NAS95 1 Woe to those who are at ease in Zion And to those who feel secure in the mountain of Samaria, The distinguished men of the foremost of nations, To whom the house of Israel comes. 2 Go over to Calneh and look, And go from there to Hamath the great, Then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are they better than these kingdoms, Or is their territory greater than yours? 3 Do you put off the day of calamity, And would you bring near the seat of violence? 4 Those who recline on beds of ivory And sprawl on their couches, And eat lambs from the flock And calves from the midst of the stall, 5 Who improvise to the sound of the harp, And like David have composed songs for themselves, 6 Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls While they anoint themselves with the finest of oils, Yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. 7 Therefore, they will now go into exile at the head of the exiles, And the sprawlers' banqueting will pass away.*

God warned the Israelites, those Jews of the northern kingdom (v.1, "in the mountain of Samaria") that their self-satisfied living and sense of security was false for they "will now go into exile at the head of the exiles" (v. 7a). God compared them to various Gentile nations whom He had already judged to a certain extent by the prior invasion of the Jewish people into their homelands (v. 2). The mention of the other nations contains a note of sarcasm. The opulent lifestyle of the Israelites (vv. 4-6) would ultimately lead to their downfall.

The people of Amos' day were no different than those who came after them, and those alive today. Jesus gave many warnings to the rich people during His day in order to turn their hearts to God, for example His discourse with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18 – 27). Riches aren't bad in and of themselves it is the *love of money* that is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). In the Gospel reading we will see Jesus teaching on the critical importance of focusing upon God during people's earthly lifetimes because afterwards it is too late to receive forgiveness of their sin. This forgiveness is only available through faith in Jesus Christ while a person is still alive, there is no second chance to earn a person's way into heaven.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from 1 Timothy coincidentally picks up just after the verse mentioned above regarding the love money. "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:10). This provides an important context into the teaching that follows.

Second Reading:

> *1 Timothy 6:11-16 NAS95 11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of*

> *faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, 14 that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which He will bring about at the proper time–He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.*

Paul told young Timothy some very important spiritual truths. Instead of focusing upon riches which leads many people to an eternal, spiritual death, believers are to focus upon the attributes of God. This includes things like "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness" (v. 11). Paul urged believers to live the Christian life seriously as if it were a battle (v. 12). He concluded the reading by reminding believers about the imminent return of the Lord Jesus, the only One who can give eternal life because he alone possesses it (v. 16). God's kingdom is one of light and immortality. In contrast, and as we will see in the Gospel reading, the kingdom of hell is one of darkness and eternal punishment.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel lesson this week we return to Luke chapter 16 and move forward to verses 19-31 in what has been called "The 'parable' of the rich man and Lazarus" by some commentators. However, from all evidences in the text this isn't a parable at all, rather it's a story about a true event in history.

In the text in Luke we covered the past several weeks Jesus addressed his teaching to the group of legalistic Jews known as the Pharisees. Notice that the readings passed over verses 14 to 18. Since it's always important to consider the context of any part of the Bible that we study let me point out some insights from these missing five verses. Luke stated explicitly that the Pharisees were "worshipers of money" and that this group ridiculed Jesus. This prompted Jesus to tell them that they are the ones "who justify themselves before men, but God knows their hearts." He said that what they exalt (money and status among other things) is an abomination in the sight of God. Jesus used strong words in an attempt to penetrate the hard hearts of the Pharisees. He said something very important which gives us an insight into God's kingdom that we will be discussing later in this Gospel lesson. Jesus said, "The Law and the Prophets were until John, since then the good news of the **kingdom of God** is preached, and everyone forces his way into it." How may someone attempt to "force themselves" into the kingdom of God? The better question would be, "How were the Pharisees attempting to force themselves into the kingdom of God?" Remember that John the Baptist's call was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:20). John's message

was one of repentance and belief in the "one who was to come," Jesus. This was a time of transition, from the Old Testament Law to the as yet unseen mystery of the age of grace we now know as the "church age." The Pharisees were not heeding John's call for repentance and were instead attempting to force themselves into the kingdom through the establishment of their own law. This is clear because Jesus went on to say in verse 17, "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void." Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament Law and usher in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven also referred to as the Kingdom of God is referred to many times in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Saint John Jesus addressed Nicodemus the one we know as "Nick at Night" because this interaction was in the evening outside the hearing of the rest of the religious leaders. John 3:3 gives a crucial insight into the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said, "You must be born from above to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." He then went on to explain to Nicodemus the meaning of the spiritual birth and how this comes about. Jesus said in verse 15, "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." He continued in verse 16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but has eternal life." Jesus said that we obtain entrance into the kingdom of heaven through belief in Him which results in our second birth, a spiritual birth. We must believe in Jesus in order to cross over from the kingdom of darkness that the Pharisees were in to the Kingdom of God. In summary we see from the teaching of the forerunner John the Baptist the call for repentance and from Jesus the means to find eternal life through being born again (or from above) through the Spirit of God which comes about through belief in Jesus' finished work of atonement for our sins on the cross at Calvary.

Let's read the text and learn what Jesus was teaching the Pharisees about how to obtain eternal life through their entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 16:19-31 NAS95 19 Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. 20 And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, 21 and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. 22 Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' 27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house– 28 for I have five brothers–in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let*

> *them hear them.' 30 But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' 31 But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'*

Here we see the study of two contrasts, the rich versus poor man in this world, and the kingdom of the dead versus the kingdom of God in the next. The rich man enjoyed God's gracious provisions while he was alive, but after he died, he not only didn't have these generous provisions but suffered in torment, while no longer even having a physical body. Yet this man soul still craved for water and for relief from the flames. In life, the rich man was prosperous enough to have a wall around his house which required a gate through which to enter. The walls protected him during his lifetime but after this rich man's life ended his soul was bare naked before God. In contrast, the poor man enjoyed none of the rich man's outlandish provisions while he was living in poverty on the earth. Yet this very same man that spent his years begging outside of the rich man's gate was in the comfort of "Abraham's bosom," a place of peace and security we call heaven. Clearly, Jesus' teaching in this section isn't a parable at all but is instead a rare glimpse into the next world, that shadowy place known in the Bible as Hades. Jesus reveals to us that Hades consists of two regions; one is a place of torment and outside the provision of God, the place that we know as hell. The other region is a place of peace that we know as heaven. Between these two regions is a "great chasm" which separates the two realms. The contrast is between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light.

Here is a bit of background that will help to explain the cultural milieu. In that culture a rich person was seen to carry more favor with God than a poor person. This was partly due to the agrarian nature of their society. If a rancher had a herd of cattle and over a period of time doubled the size of his heard he was believed to carry favor with God. This belief came in part because of the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant under which the people had been living. Remember that during the period of judges and later during kings the people's prosperity was directly proportional to their obedience with God. When they walked with God, He blessed them with material possessions as well as with a certain degree of peace and safety. However, when they walked away from God, he removed their material goods as well as their peace and safety. The rich man in this true story told by Jesus had all of the perceived blessings from God during his human life. He enjoyed material possessions (called a rich man and clothed in royal purple and fine linen) and safety (a house surrounded by walls). The Jewish people at this time would have viewed him as a man that carried much favor with God because of God's great provision for him. In contrast, Lazarus had none of these things and lived a miserable life. He would have been perceived as a terrible sinner in this culture. Once both of them died the tables turned upside down. God said in Matthew 20:16, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Look more closely at the text in Luke 16. The rich man is able to communicate directly with Abraham from within his new humble position in Hades, the place of the dead. But he is anything

but humble. He is still trying to order people around, even begging them to do his will. Jesus explained that Abraham was "far off." When he spoke to Abraham, he asked for mercy though God, the only One that can possible grant mercy, isn't mentioned. Abraham is what is known in literary circles as a "foil." He is present in this story for no other reason than to introduce information which they reader would otherwise have no other way of knowing. Abraham's response to the rich man's request to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his five brothers about hell is, "They have Moses and the Prophets, let them hear them." The rich man replied that if someone came back from the dead they would not be convinced. This is a remarkable request on the part of the rich man because now he was at the mercy of Lazarus to save his brothers from hell. The Scriptures are clear that when Jesus Himself did return from the dead many of the people did not believe in him.

Stepping back and looking at the audience of the Pharisees, we ask how can a religious person be sent to hell after they die when they truly believe that the merit heaven? This is the key point of today's lesson. The only way a person can merit heaven is through first repenting and then believing that only Jesus merited salvation for them by dying on the cross for their sins. Pharisees in any age are not willing to enter through the narrow door of belief in Jesus, instead they chose their own way and attempt to force their way into the kingdom of heaven. This type of thinking continues in the present day among anyone who believes they deserve heaven because of their good works or church attendance. The predictable end is what we see with the rich man in Hades.

Reflection Questions

1. Based upon what you learned in today's study in Luke, if you were Lazarus and were sent back from heaven to warn your brothers what would you tell them?
2. We saw in the Gospel reading how you can only cross the great chasm between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light while you are still alive. You may ask, why hasn't anyone ever told me about this? They have, they're doing it now. Do you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord to the Glory of God (Romans 10:9)? We have written a comprehensive analysis of where spiritual life comes from in an article by that name, located at *Where Does Spiritual Life Really Come From* on the Christians for Christ web site.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-22-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Last week we looked at the Gospel of Luke and discussed the famous parable of the prodigal son. We saw as in the previous section of this Gospel that Jesus addressed the parable to the Pharisees. Remember that these people were the religious group who believed in strict adherence to Jewish Law, at least as they interpreted it, and also in life after death. This week later in this lesson we will return to the Gospel of Luke and pick up where we left off last week and cover the parable of the unjust steward.

Introduction to the First Reading:

We cannot know God apart from His revelation. One form of this revelation is the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. The reading for today is from Amos who is known as a "minor prophet." This is not because he was inferior to the others but because his book is shorter than some of the other prophetic books like Isaiah who is referred to as a "major prophet." Read the opening verse of Amos to get an orientation to the text.

> *The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa– what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel (Amos 1:1).*

The text says that Amos was a shepherd prophet, and that he spoke about "what he saw concerning Israel" and this was "when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of

Israel." From this we know that Amos' prophecy occurred during the time after the division of the people into the kingdoms of Judah in the south and Israel in the north. The split was brought about by the arrogance of King Solomon's son Rehoboam and as a result the ten northern tribes formed their own kingdom. Scholars date the events in Amos to around 760BC. Tekoa is a village located 5 miles south of Bethlehem, in the Kingdom of Judah, and was set upon a hill. Cities set upon hills were easy to defend and also had the advantage of being able to signal adjacent cities like Jerusalem. What an appropriate place for a prophet of God to be from, a city which spoke to other cities, not through a smoke signal or lantern but by the Word of God through their own Amos.

First Reading:

> *Amos 8:4-7 NAS95 4 Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, 5 saying, "When will the new moon be over, So that we may sell grain, And the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market, To make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, And to cheat with dishonest scales, 6 So as to buy the helpless for money And the needy for a pair of sandals, And that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?" 7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob, "Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds.*

A frequent theme in the Book of Amos was the exploitation of the poor. This was a time of relative prosperity in the nations of Israel and Judah. The poor were evidently being taken advantage of by the rich. What was being pointed out here was that even during a holiday, which is what was meant by "when the new moon is over," and on the Sabbath day, the rich were plotting their future sleazy business deals. At a time when God called them to take time away from work to reflect upon Him they were plotting how to cheat the poor by "dimish(ing) the ephah" The ephah was the unit with which they measured grain. They were also plotting other ways such as cheating on the scales and adding to the value of their money. These people were the ultimate among unjust stewards. Even though everything that they ultimately came from God, including the holidays, the Sabbath day, and all that they owned, they even used their worship time to plot how they might defraud the poor. Their minds were not on God during their worship, but were instead focused upon their planning of how they were going to gain more wealth even at the cost of exploiting those less powerful than they. Even if their hearts were on God during their worship they would still have been guilty of defrauding the poor. These people were poor stewards of not only their physical resources but also their immaterial resources. This includes things like their intellect, influence, and power.

I am a high energy person and have frequently had some difficulty in focusing upon one certain thing at a time. My behavior doesn't end when the work week finishes and I head off to church on Sunday. No, I am guilty of frequently bringing all of my worldly cares and concerns into church on Sunday. I have learned that I need to begin to prepare my heart for worshiping God many hours before I actually arrive at church. For me this means limiting my consumption of coffee that morning along with consciously focusing upon God to the exclusion of outside thoughts. I have also

discovered that praying before church tends to improve my concentration level for spiritual things before I come to church. God knows what is going on in our hearts when we go to church. Part of being a good steward of our time, talents, and treasures involves the stewardship of our mind.

Often we feel burned out on Sunday morning. Sometimes when we show up at church on Sunday we have given all we have to our employer during the week and we really need that time to rest, just as God designed that day. But what about the rest of the week, do the pressures of life wear us down so much that we never get around to doing much to build God's kingdom? Have you ever felt like you really needed to do some certain thing for God, but you just never got around to doing it?

When we consider the stewardship of our mind, meaning the responsible planning and management of our mental resources, we need to consider a common fallacy that has come upon the people of America. The fallacy is that we can compartmentalize one activity in a part of our life while thinking that it doesn't affect the other areas. Back when I was teaching business classes inside the walls at several state prisons, I used to use an illustration to explain this delusion. I drew on the board a circle and divided it into compartments each holding a little square. The geniuses in the class soon recognized that my crude drawing was a waffle. Next, I started writing in each compartment of the waffle common activities with which the men may be engaged during any given week. I wrote things like "Go to class," "Go to lunch in the mess hall," "Read my Bible," and "Go to church on Sunday," all things that the men did while in prison. Then I wrote some other phrases, like "Look at a dirty magazine," and "Gossip about a classmate." Do we honestly believe that we can put sin into a little compartment and not have it affect the other activities in our life? Compartmentalization is nothing new, we can see that this was going on during the time of Amos the prophet.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First Timothy. This is the first of what is called the Pastoral Epistles consisting of this Book along with Second Timothy and Titus. In the Letter, Paul is ministering to his spiritual son Timothy by advising him on spiritual matters in the church that was plagued with false teaching. This is evidenced by the opening of the letter in which Paul warns against false teaching in verse 3 of the first chapter. Paul said, "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines" (1 Timothy 1:3). Today's reading in the second chapter address the subject of prayer but also reveals some timeless spiritual truths.

Second Reading:

> *1 Timothy 2:1-8 NAS95 1 First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. 7 For this*

> *I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. 8 Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.*

Paul urged the young Pastor Timothy to pray for everyone, not just believers including the government officials "so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (v. 2). Paul had taught earlier in Romans how God had ordained civil leaders. There he 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). Paul's admonition to pray for them in this Letter with his saying "so that we may lead a quiet life" accords with what Paul said just two verses later in Romans. "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil" (Romans 13:3a). Paul affirms that prayer on behalf of civil leaders is ordained by God in verse 3, then transitions to some timeless, spiritual truths.

Paul begins this section with saying how God wishes all people to be saved (v. 4). Next, he affirms that God is the only mediator between Himself and man, something that contradicted the teachings of the false teachers who placed mediators as intermediaries between themselves and God. This was because the Gnostics, among others who held to these false beliefs, taught that matter was bad and spirit was good. Therefore, there had to be another mediator other than Jesus because Jesus was a man in the flesh. Alternatively, they taught that Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh because since the Spirit of God is good and the flesh is evil then Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh. This necessitated various mediators including angels or ministers that intervened between God and man. This is a key point that Paul addressed with Timothy because another of the heresies being confronted was the Galatian heresy which held Christians bound not only to uphold the Jewish Law but also the continuance of a form of Levitical priesthood that interviewed between God and man. The emergence of this priesthood directly contradicted God's clear teaching on the priesthood of all believers as evidenced in 1 Peter 2:5-9. Paul closes this section by affirming his status as a leader of the church and especially to the Gentile believers (v. 7). Finally, he again calls upon the church to pray together in peace (v. 8).

There are two key points of application that arise from the reading. First, we are called to pray for all people including our civil leaders. "All me" means everyone, even our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and those with whom we don't agree. Second, we are to come to God directly and not through any intermediary because as believers there is no one who stands between God and us. The Holy Spirit said in the Book of Hebrews, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). God teaches us to come boldly to Him in prayer through the one mediator, Jesus Christ who died for us (v. 5).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke is the parable of the unjust manager. As in all of the parables, we seek to determine the main central truth that Jesus is teaching in light of the surrounding context. In this case the audience included the Pharisees who typified unjust managers and who were themselves lovers of money (Luke 16:14).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 16:1-13 NAS95 1 Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 2 And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' 3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 4 I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes. 5 "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 7 "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8 "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. 9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings. 10 "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. 11 "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? 12 "And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

This parable has been puzzling to many, but the interpretation is really quite simple. Had we read the next two verses we would have found that the Pharisees to whom this was addressed understood the parable quite well.

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.

He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. (Luke 16:14-15)

The rich man in the story is God who is the provider of all things, both to believers and also non-believers. The unjust steward is a lazy but creative, non-believer who used his God-given creativity

to achieve his worldly self-satisfying purposes. The children of light represent all believers. The big idea is quite simple. God calls believers to use everything that he has given us to build up His kingdom. If non-believers are creative for worldly purposes then believers are called to a higher standard of stewardship for the kingdom of heaven. The parable also address the trap which the Pharisees fell into, for they were lovers of money (see Luke 16:14). As believers we are to use our money to worship God and not worship money and use God. This was where the Pharisees went wrong, the used God and worshipped money. Again, we are to use money to worship God, not worship money and use God.

I remember an occasion while teaching in the prison during which I caught a student cheating on an exam. He had completed the exam using a pencil. When I handed back the paper the following week showing the errors, he came to me after class and said that I had made a mistake. He said that I had marked several answers wrong when really he had entered the correct choice on the multiple choice questions. I could see that he had neatly erased his answer and circled the correct one. He showed great ingenuity in his cheating. I didn't think that anyone would try this again but just to be sure the next time I gave an exam I ran copies of all of the exams. Sure enough the same student approached me with the same complaint. Imagine his surprise when I pulled out the copy of his original exam and compared it to the one that he had just handed back to me! Some people are creative for worldly, sinful purposes. In contrast imagine God's joy when we use the talents that He gave us for the greatness of His Kingdom.

God calls us to use the ingenuity that He granted to us in the same measure that was given to us. He also calls us to use our talents to further His kingdom. The business people mentioned in the Book of Amos evidently believed they could compartmentalize their thinking and succeed in using their creativity to steal from the poor. God condemned them not only for their actions but also for their thoughts. These "unjust stewards" were creative in the use of their God-given resources but used their creativity to steal from the poor rather than in doing what God commanded them by helping those less fortunate. This NT parable gives an example to challenge how we approach our own stewardship of the resources God has given to us. If ungodly people are motivated to use their resources for their own selfish benefit, how much more should Christ followers use their resources (material and immaterial) for higher purposes and God's glory?

Examine some insights that I put together as well as insights mu business students shared when we talked about this particular parable.

- The manager was willing to go to great, very creative and insightful lengths to secure his position in some future job or living situation. As spiritual people are we willing to go to these great lengths to grow the kingdom of God?
- As believers in Christ we must be aware of the struggle between God and money, we can't worship two gods, only the True God. Money can become our god, and compromise our way of life.
- As Americans we struggle with compartmentalized thinking. We may practice the things of God on Sunday but not give them much thought the rest of the week. How many of us read

some devotional materials this morning? We put the things in God in several compartments but they don't "flavor" or run over into the others like work, school, driving to work, working out, relating to our family members, and how we spend our free time and money.

- Often times when we look at a church website we will find something of grade-school quality, when unbeknown to us we have a half-dozen web developers that attend our church and would never let something like this get posted on the web while at their workplace.
- We should not be surprised to find out that our boss was a Christian, this should already be evident to us. If we ran into him at a church event we should not be surprised. The same should be true in reverse about us, do others KNOW that we are a Christian?
- We should be willing to go to great lengths to grow the kingdom of God using whatever worldly resources are available.
- We should evaluate how compartmentalized our lives are, and where do we fall on a scale of worshiping God vs. money? The worship of money is very subtle, so asking this so directly is not helpful because we defend ourselves and say, "of course we don't do that."
- These changes come about through God, we must pray and ask Him to deliver us from our false thinking. We are new creations in Christ, and old things have passed away. Any empowerment that we have towards true change will only come from God.
- Jesus gave us two metaphors – salt and light, that teach us that Christianity is designed not to just be a minor part of the society, but the defining part. Salt permeates! It flavors! It arrests corruption! Similarly, Christianity should influence everything it touches and arrest the decay of a society that is tending toward corruption.

In closing let me tell a story about a special person in my life. After I moved to Indiana, I met a man that worked in the cafeteria at the local college. He was a gently and unassuming kind of man and he had a certain unusual look about him. I struck up a conversation with him one day and over a period of years built a relationship with him. Dean had a learning disorder but continued to be a very diligent employee at the college and is one of the longest serving members of the school. As I got to know Dean, I realized many valuable lessons. Dean was man that although wasn't given very many talents or treasures used everything that he had to serve God. He worked hard in the cafeteria and was a friend to many students. He volunteered to film every basketball game and served the team in other ways. He worked at his church on Wednesday night and Sunday morning in the children's ministry. Dean began volunteering for the local jail ministry and used his excellent singing voice to praise God to the men in the county jail. This requires his attendance at an early morning meeting on both Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday he goes to the local retirement community to sing at their afternoon church service. Dean also offers his house for a very nominal rent for students to stay. These are just the things about which I am aware, the list goes on.

Well, one day we were at an evening church service and a lady gave a moving testimony about some difficulties she was having in her life. All of us sat there listening with what we thought was deep compassion, but Dean got up and walked out. Everyone wondered why he would interrupt the focus at that critical time by leaving. He came back a minute later and walked up to the woman and handed her a couple of tissues with which to dry her tears. That says it all about Dean. Dean uses his time, talent, and treasure in serving God. If anyone in the community tried even half as hard as Dean

they could change the world. I tell my wife that, "It doesn't really matter because when we get to heaven we will all be working for Dean anyway."

Dean passed away on November 15, 2017. I was blessed to be able to attend his funeral where I was able to share this memory.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw how in the reading from Amos some teaching on honest stewardship. This dovetailed nicely with the Gospel lesson on the parable of the unjust manager. What are some ways in which people cheat in our modern society? How does knowing understanding God's high regard for "honest scales" and proper treatment of the poor enable you to counter these modern ways of cheating?
2. God has provided our time, talents, and treasures. With your answer to the first question in mind, pray that Jesus would show you what He would have you do for His Kingdom as a steward of those three areas. After you pray record your thoughts in your journal. What are some things towards which God may be calling you to action? Here are some thought starters:

Time: Where are you spending your time each day? What are the largest time wasters in your life?

Talents: What talents has God given you?

Treasures: Where are you spending your money or using the things you have or inherited?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-15-2019

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week in the first two readings we find some very important insights into the nature of God. This then helps us to come to a proper understanding of the Gospel lesson.

Last week we looked at the Gospel of Luke and gave some insights into what it meant to carry our cross for Jesus. We mentioned that God says, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). One aspect of what Jesus meant when he said in this context to "keep his commandments" is related to the First Commandment. This can be found Exodus 20 which says, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . ." (Exodus 20:3-5a). God through his great love and foreknowledge cautions us regarding the risks in even creating an image of a spiritual nature because this could lead us to attribute special powers to that purely physical object. This is exactly what we will see in the first reading when during the time that Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Law from God the people built a golden calf idol to worship.

Introduction to the First Reading:

This reading is from Exodus and the context is during that 40 days that Moses spent on the mountain when God was giving him the Law. Since Moses was gone for such a long time the people returned to their former pagan worship practices that they had learned during their last four centuries in Egypt.

First Reading:

Exodus 32:7-14 NAS95 7 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people,

> *whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" 9 The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. 10 Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.*

In the introduction we mentioned how the First Commandment comes into view with the people building a molten calf and worshiping it. From my study of archeology, it is very possible that this was what was known as a "pedestal god" which featured a platform on the top of the icon onto which the god supposedly alighted. Giving them the benefit of a doubt along this line of thinking it's at least possible that their motives were to worship the true God Yahweh. However, we learn from the reading that God knew otherwise for He said the people have "quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them" (v. 8). Regardless of the people's motives their actions were a clear violation of the Commandment previously given to them. God's response was to ask Moses to move away so that "My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them" (v. 10). But Moses pleaded with the Lord on the basis of His special covenantal relationship with them and He relented. The people were those "whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt" and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom God "swore by [Him]self [saying], "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever" (vv. 11b, 13).

Moses' plea for mercy, brought about because of the people's violation of the First Commandment, gives us some insight into the nature of God. Moses reminded God of what he did for the Hebrews by bringing them out of Egypt. He asked God to remember his faithful servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then recounted God's promise to make them a people as "numerous as the starts in the sky" and to give them the Promised Land. God's dialogue with Moses showed that the Father is longsuffering (patient), forgiving of sin, and will never forget his promises (mark this for later in the study). God cannot act against His nature.

The purpose of Moses' reminder wasn't of course for God, but for us! Moses' insights about the

nature of God help us to understand our Father God and this understanding guides us in interpreting the rest of the Scripture. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 regarding the church there, "and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the **wrath** to come " (emphasis added). God forgives our sin and placates His wrath only through what Jesus did for us in dying for our trespasses. Our sins are many and include our worship of *contemporary* idols like money, sports, and etc. Perhaps we don't fall down before a golden calf but we do fall down when circumstances arise in our finances or our health.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Paul's First Letter to Timothy. The context is just after Paul's mention of the dangerous teaching of the false teachers who had made inroads in the church. Paul said, "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith" (1 Timothy 1:3-4).

Second Reading:

> *1 Timothy 1:12-17 NAS95 12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Saint Paul said in the reading, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I was the foremost. But for that reason I was mercifully treated" (emphasis added). Then, "so that in me, as the foremost [of sinners], Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in Him for everlasting life" (emphasis added). We can see in the reading wo insights into the nature of God. God is merciful. God saves sinners, even the worst of them – as Paul expressed about himself. Why did Paul think that he was the worst of sinners? This was because he persecuted believers in the church to the point of death until his conversion. He understood God's mercy. Finally, God is patient. He goes to great lengths to deliver people from the consequences of their sin.

In the Gospel reading we will see these attributes of God beautifully illustrated, with His patience and mercy displayed through three parables.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel for today consists of three parables, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (prodigal son). Our emphasis today will be on the last one although one can easily see that the three parables share a common theme. Remember that all three parables in this section were addressed to the Pharisees, the group that we saw this past two Sundays. The Pharisees were a group of Jews that held to a strict interpretation of the Law of Moses. They were legalistic, false teachers who more concerned with outside appearances than with having a heart for pleasing God through faith. They loved money more than they love people (Luke 16:4).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." 11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the*

> *best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"*

The first two parables concern the celebration that occurs when something that is lost is found. The meaning of these parables is the same and is revealed in verse 7. "[T]here will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Human souls are of tremendous value and all are born into a lost state of sinfulness at birth (Romans 3:23). It is only when souls are "found" by being "born from above" (John 3:3) that they are then transferred into the kingdom of God. Paul said about this, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).

The third parable of the prodigal son begins with the younger son approaching his father and asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive. Though he was the younger son he could still could plan on receiving some inheritance but not as much as the firstborn son, and then only *after* his father died. So we could say that in some way when he asked his father for his inheritance he was wishing that he was already dead. The fact that his father went ahead and gave him the reward shows the father's great generosity. Then his father let his son go off and "find himself" through wild living in a strange nation, evidently not a Jewish nation because they raised pigs. The father's act of letting his son go shows that the father also allows freedom to his son. Soon enough the son had squandered all of his money and became a slave by "hiring himself out." In today's terms we would call this an indentured servant, but the New Testament would use the term "slave." After squandering his money as a slave to sin the prodigal son became a slave on a hog farm. Even the touching of a hog would have been forbidden back in his home city under Jewish Law. Then the son reached a turning point, something that is known by the theological term "repentance." Since he was already a slave and wasn't being treated even with the basic necessity of food he figured that he would return to his father and become a slave for him so that at least he would have enough to eat. Also he knew the character of his father and that he could trust him as he worked there in contrast

to the swine farm owner who didn't even provide him with any food. So the son began his return to his father and this opened the next chapter of the story.

When the son returned his father saw him in the distance and embraced him. But the son evidently had been rehearsing what he was going to say and quickly offered his heartfelt confession. Certainly the father heard this but went on with the festivities of welcoming home his lost son. Just like in the other parable the lost sheep was found, the lost coin was located and this was cause for celebration! In the midst of the festivities a wrinkle developed when the older son heard the commotion. This elder one expressed deep resentment for his younger brother, and told his father that he had always done the right thing. It seemed unfair to him that his brother should receive a party for returning after blowing his inheritance while he had diligently sacrificed all of these years. The father's reply sheds light on the depth of God's love, mercy, and patience. "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

The key players in the parable are obvious only to a person whose heart has been enlightened to the truths of God. The father is God the Father. Earlier in the study we found that the Father is longsuffering (patient), forgiving of sin, and will never forget his promises (to care for his family). The older son represents the Pharisees. The Pharisee like son didn't trust God's heart and instead saw God as miserly and not generous. The older son missed out on relationship with God yet he was living under the umbrella of His provision. This eldest son believed he was righteous through his good works and sacrifice. As a result of all of his false beliefs he built a heart of resentment and entitlement against his father as well as his younger brother. The youngest son represents a believer in Jesus Christ who trusts in the provision of his Father. He, like all true believers before and after him, express a heart of brokenness, desperation for God and humility.

The big idea in this parable is God is a lavishly forgiving God who goes to great lengths to save people. God gives people freedom to make mistakes but continues to reach out with his grace ready to bring repentant people back to his kingdom. In contrast the Pharisees have self-righteousness at the root of their beliefs. This leads to legalism in which they focus upon the letter of the law but not on the spirit of the law, thus missing relationship with the father. Legalism looks at outward standards of behavior without addressing the heart's motivation. Jesus warns that we can have all of the right religious terminology without the right heart attitude towards him when he said in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Which son are you more like? Where have you placed your faith? Have you stopped depending upon your own righteousness and confessed your need to the Father of His mercy? Or do you identify with the older brother, the Pharisee, who always did everything "right" in this life and yet distanced himself from needing the mercy of the Father? Saint John said in 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." If you are in the former category praise God for what He has done for you. If you are not sure then reach out to God for He is a longsuffering God, patient, wishes that none would perish but all would

come to the knowledge of the truth. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reflection Questions

1. This week's readings from the Bible highlighted God's heart of mercy, patience and forgiveness. How have you experienced these attributes in your own relationship with God?
2. Do you have a prodigal son in your family or know of one among your friends or relatives? Is their story one of redemption or are they still working as a slave for a pig farmer as in the Gospel lesson today? What can you learn from this prodigal person?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-08-2019



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about forgiveness from Paul's Letter to Philemon. Then we study Jesus' teaching on the cost of being His disciple. Have you ever acted like an idiot? We are going to talk about that today in the context of forgiveness.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom.

WIS 9:13-18B Who can know God's counsel,

or who can conceive what the LORD intends?

For the deliberations of mortals are timid,

and unsure are our plans.

For the corruptible body burdens the soul

and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.

And scarce do we guess the things on earth,

and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty;

but when things are in heaven, who can search them out?

Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given wisdom

and sent your holy spirit from on high?

And thus were the paths of those on earth made straight.

This reading confirms some things that we know in the Bible such as the fact that as people we are imperfect and need God's Holy Spirit to guide us. God enables us to follow His wisdom and learn His ways through the study of His word in the Bible. Praise God for His provision in granting us this provision.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The Book of Philemon is a story about a servant named Onesimus who having stolen from his master

Philemon met up with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. Upon meeting with Paul, Onesimus' heart was changed by God and he repented of his former sins. The Book opens with Paul's address to Onesimus who was obviously a fellow believer and church leader and whom he called "our beloved brother and fellow worker" (Philemon 1). Today's reading is a portion of Paul's appeal to Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus back.

Second Reading:

> Note: Includes verses 11-12 that were omitted from the reading.
>
> *Philemon 1:9-17 NAS95 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you –since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus– 10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, 11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.*

Paul made a heartfelt appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a "beloved brother" (v. 16) for the sake of love (v. 9). Paul told of how useful Onesimus' ministry had been to him in prison and appealed to Philemon to accept his former servant back because during the time Onesimus had been gone he had become a brother in the Lord. Paul asked Philemon to do so willingly if he "regard[ed] [him] as a partner" and to "accept him as you would me" (v. 17). We know that as a function of Paul's leadership position in the church he could have commanded Philemon to forgive his servant, but rather he asked him to do so without compulsion. We also know from looking past today's reading that Paul promised to pay back anything that Onesimus owed (Philemon 18-19).

Each week in mass when the Lord's prayer is recited you say these very important words from the Lord Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6:12, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." With this in mind, the big idea in the reading is God's calling to forgive people of their trespasses against them, and especially their Christian brothers and sisters because of their positions relative to the Lord. Paul's appeal to Philemon provided an excellent illustration of forgiveness in action. Although he appealed to Philemon on the basis of grace (unmerited favor), he also recognized the physical debts incurred by Onesimus and offered to pay for these expenses. Sin has consequences, and although they can be forgiven there still may be consequences that have to

be taken care of.

I remember one after when I was visiting a friend in Florida to escape the cold up north I took advantage of a windy day to load up my windsurfing equipment in my friend's very large van to go sailing on the ocean. After we pulled into a parking spot next to a nice retired couple parked there in a nice but older four door sedan. As I began to open the door the wind was much stronger than I anticipated and as it was coming from directly behind the van the door became a giant sail which then propelled itself into this nice couple's very clean looking car. As I got out to survey the damage by friend called me something like an idiot and I got control of the door and spoke to the man about the damage. The door from our van had placed a small dent in his door. I told him how sorry I was and explained after a short while to please give me his name and address so I could pay for the repairs. I also left him with my name and address and tried not to let this occasion ruin both of our days. He was very gracious and although he did give me his address seemed quite pleasant about the whole thing. The moment I got home I sat down and wrote an apology to him and asked him to send me the repair bill. Some weeks later I got a nice note back from him thanking me and saying that he did not want me to cover any of the repair costs. I was deeply moved by his compassion and have always remembered what happened and how gracious he was to me even though I acted as my friend said, "as an idiot."!

As I have reflected upon the parking lot incident over the years, it has caused me to be more compassionate with other people's mistakes. Jesus said, "forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37e), foreshadowing the ultimate forgiveness that would come through His offering of Himself on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. The is one of the main "take aways" that we can walk away with from Paul's message. The more we grow as Christians the more that we learn to forgive others in the same way that our Father in heaven as forgiven us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week we continue in the Gospel of Luke and come to some more difficult passages. Often times we may assume that Jesus' teaching are good moral messages. But again this week we move into teachings by God which demand a response in how we live out our daily lives. The title above this section in my Bible is "The Cost of Discipleship."

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 14:25-33 NAS95 25 Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, 26 "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. 28 For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit*

> *down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32 Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."*

It's obvious from examining the whole of Scripture that we should not literally hate our father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even ourselves as this says if taken literally. What Jesus means is that we are called to love him above everyone else, even ourselves. Love plays out through our thoughts and also our actions. Our love for Jesus plays out in a myriad of ways through our daily making of decisions grounded in scriptural principles. The most basic of all scriptural principles which God calls us to keep are the Ten Commandments, even the hard ones from that short list. We can find the entire list of commandments in Exodus chapter 20 in the Old Testament. Turn there yourself and read them as a refresher. Verses 3-5 read, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord God am a jealous God." How many times are we tempted to rely upon some physical representation of God to help us feel His presence? But we are commanded not to even make such an object. God in His wisdom knows that we are weak and to create such a thing would quickly become a stumbling stone to us. How far any of us can push this commandment is unknown at least until we begin to go past a point of no return. Yes, we reflect upon the cross in our churches, but we don't worship the cross.

In the next section of Jesus' teaching he brings up the concept of carrying our own cross. The Scripture is clear in Matthew 11:30 that "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus said outright that the burden of being a disciple wasn't a heavy one, so is he contradicting Himself? Clearly not. What Jesus is saying is explained in the subsequent section where He tells of the wisdom of a builder to make a plan before he builds a tower and a king planning a battle. Jesus disciples didn't understand that he would be crucified on a cross, even if He had already told them about this prophesy. When we read this section and hear the word "cross" our mind jumps to Jesus on dying on the cross. But in context Jesus was referring to what the disciples would have understood about the cross. They would have understood that the cross beam was something which was carried on the way to a person's own execution. The cost of the cross for that person was their own death, and Jesus was foreshadowing the fact that for many of His disciples the cost of their cross would be their lives. This remains true in many parts of the world, and especially in the Middle East. In light of the recent unrest in Syria and Egypt many Christians are proving Jesus' prophesy to be true. It's likely that for most of us we won't have to give our lives for our faith in Jesus. Carrying the cross for Jesus in our lives is a bit more complicated as to what God calls us to do for Him through our daily thoughts and actions.

Here is the bottom line, what Jesus is saying is this. **Consider the cost of being a disciple in various circumstances in advance of them happening so that when these conditions do arise you will be ready with a well-reasoned response especially in terms when you will have to answer in an instant.** You may wonder how it could be possible to consider every possible circumstance that might happen. It's not, and the Scripture says in 1 Timothy 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The message again is to be prepared in advance so when it happens, we are ready. Consider the most common situations that **could** arise. In today's age that means confronting the issue of homosexuality, same sex marriage, gay rights, single moms, and divorce – such issues as we should expect to find around us on a given day.

I was managing a computer consulting company and one of my clients was a multi-national telephone company. The manager of a certain department with whom we did about a half a million dollars of business a year came to me and asked if I would make a donation to a certain charity called the Triangle Foundation. This organization is an advocate for the gay, lesbian and transgender community. He never implied that by not making this donation our business relationship would be harmed, but there was of course a strong chance that this would happen. What did I do? I searched the Bible and found that it treated homosexuality as a sin, but not necessarily as any greater sin than the other ones listed including drunkenness, lust, and pride. I liked this particular customer and he had always been fair with me, but making a donation to a group which advocated a certain sin greatly troubled me. In a sense I could have been asked to send a donation to a group which supported rights for men who chose to view pornography. I prayed about the situation for a long time and after much discussion with one of the other managers decided that we would not make the donation. I decided to tell our customer that we were choosing not to make the donation but did not give a reason for our decision. To his credit the customer did not push the point and dropped the whole matter. A few months later the employee left the company and that was the end of the matter. Was this some sort of test that God allowed for me?

As Christians, there will undoubtedly be times during which God will require us to count the cost. Sometimes it may be obvious to us, like if confronted by an Islamic terrorist asking us to deny the Lord Jesus. At other times it may be less obvious, like paying the repair costs to a car you hit because the wind caught your door even though it wasn't explicitly your fault. Perhaps you will run into an ethical situation at work. To use an illustration from one of our readers (we are praying for you sir), maybe you would receive inside information about the price of your competitors bid before you making your own. Or, using an illustration from my world of pay per click advertising, using a competitors trademarked name in your online ad in order to draw them away from that competitive product to your own.

Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets" (Luke 6:22-23). Jesus went before us as the extreme example of divine forgiveness. Jesus not only sinned those who sinned against Him but also bore the penalty for our sins. Through His example,

we can persevere in our Christian lives to forgive those who sin against us.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of a time when you graciously and boldly forgave an "idiot" in your life? In what ways does knowing how God forgave you of your sins (past, present, and future) help you to forgive others?
2. When was a time that you encountered a situation in which you had to count the cost of being a Christian? How does what you learned from Jesus today help to inform you about your past choice? In light of what you learned, what would you have done differently?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-01-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the Book of Hebrews where we see the difference between the Old and New Covenants. We close with Jesus' teaching the Pharisees about humility, a message that all of us need to hear.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

SIR 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

My child, conduct your affairs with humility,

and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts.

Humble yourself the more, the greater you are,

and you will find favor with God.

What is too sublime for you, seek not,

into things beyond your strength search not.

The mind of a sage appreciates proverbs,

and an attentive ear is the joy of the wise.

Water quenches a flaming fire,

> *and alms atone for sins.*

The opening verses are a call to be humble, which is a frequent theme throughout the Bible. It is reminiscent of Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destructions, and a proud spirit before the fall." The writer not only calls the lowly people of society to be humble, but also those in the high social and political strata, something which was surely countercultural back then and as much so today. The closing verses of the reading echo this same theme, however they add the insight that wise people listen to the sayings of other wise, but humble people.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study from last week in the Book of Hebrews. The context of the reading is following the author's teaching on the necessity of a believer to pursue peace and sanctification, "without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14b). The writer provided the counter example of ungodly Esau, "who sold his own birthright for a single meal" (v. 16b). Today's reading moves to the subject of the ways in which God deals with believers in the Old versus New Covenants.

Second Reading:

Note: The text below includes verses 20-21 and 24b-ff that were omitted from the reading.

> *Hebrews 12:18-24 NAS95 18 For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, 19 and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. 20 For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.*

The author expressed the great contrast that exists between God's covenantal relationship with believers in the Old and New Covenants. The idea expressed is the difference between the terrors of God revealed on Mount Sinai versus the peace found on Mount Zion. Believers in the Lord Jesus as a

part of the New Covenant can approach the throne of God with boldness in contrast to the fearful manner in which the Jews experienced God at Mount Sinai in the Old (see also Hebrews 4:16). The writer expressed how as New Testament believers we come not to a mountain burning with fire but rather Mount Zion, the holy city of God (v. 22a). This spiritual city consists of "myriads of angels" (v. 22c), "the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (v. 23a), God the Judge of all (v. 23b), "the spirits of the righteous made perfect" (v. 23d), and "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (v. 24a). The New Covenant provides a qualitatively different relationship between God and man through the "mediatorship" of Jesus Christ. This covenant is much better than the old one because through the blood of Jesus Christ believers are made perfect without the consciousness of sin that perpetually existed in the Old Covenant. We find this stated earlier in the Book. "For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?" (Hebrews 10:1-2).

The reading shows us how our changeless God revealed Himself through two different covenants. The Mosaic Covenant was delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai through "blazing fire, "darkness," "gloom," a "whirlwind," "trumpet and the sounds of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them" (v. 18). This contrast is nowhere more evident in that of the blood of Abel versus the blood of Jesus in verse 24. Although God accepted Abel's sacrifice because it was offered by faith, the blood of Jesus Christ is infinitely greater than that of Abel because Christ's blood atoned for the sins of the whole world. As New Testament believers, we look forward to seeing Mount Zion, the holy city.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week we return to Hebrews and the Gospel of Luke that we saw last week. And again we see some more about the group called the Pharisees in the Gospel teaching, just like the last week. Perhaps what may be helpful here is a bit of background about this group of Jewish people. The Pharisees were middle-class common men that were not necessarily educated like the other group known as the Sadducees. The Pharisees differed in their beliefs from the Sadducees in that they believed in life after death, in miracles, and also in angelic beings. They believed that the word of God was inspired and sought to hold very strictly to the tradition of the Law as given by Moses in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch. However, they taught falsely that their oral traditions held equal authority to Scripture. Jesus warned the Pharisees about these and other false teachings in His message of the seven woes found in Matthew 23:1-36. In our day, we must endeavor to always measure and test our own religious traditions and beliefs against the unchanging Scriptures.

Now we will examine the context of today's reading from Saint Luke. Here we find Jesus dining at the home of a certain famous Pharisee, likely a member of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin. Could it have been someone like Saint Paul, who was a Pharisee himself? Anyway the Scripture says that the "people" were observing him carefully. It would seem that they were trying to find some

fault in Jesus, to trip him up, to find a reason for which they could bring him to trial. It would also seem that other Pharisees were present. So as Jesus often did he told a parable. When you hear the word "parable" I suggest you think of it this way. The word means quite literally "to throw alongside." So think of a parable as a story is thrown alongside to show you some certain spiritual truth. Be careful not to try and make a parable walk on all fours, but just try to get out of it the single spiritual truth. Also, be careful to not take it literally if it isn't meant to be taken that way, and we can determine if that is the case by looking at the context.

Consider this parable that Jesus gave directly to the Pharisees and also the context as you read it. Imagine yourself sitting with the Jesus among the Pharisees, a group who strived to please God through their observance of the Law and holding to *their* oral traditions. We need to also carefully consider that the reading for this week omitted verses 2-6 in Luke chapter 14. This is unfortunate because these verses very clearly describe the context of Jesus' teaching. Looking at the missing five verses, we find that the audience also included a man suffering from some abnormal swelling of his body. The Pharisees proceed to ask Jesus whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath which was the day all of this took place, Saturday (the Jews' Sabbath was always the last day of the week not on Sunday as is celebrated by Christians). Jesus responded to their question with a question (as Jesus' often did!). He asked the Pharisees what would they do if their child or ox fell into a hole on the Sabbath, would they pull them out immediately? The implied answer is of course **yes**. Anyone knows through pure common sense that you would pull your child or ox out of hole on the Sabbath Day. Jesus then took a hold of the man and healed him on the spot, something which no doubt caused great anger to the Pharisees. They were likely thinking something like, "You just broke the Sabbath Law, and for this lowly scum of a man with a bloated face and who is ceremonially unclean." The question is, what was this man with dropsy even doing there at the prominent Pharisee's house? According to the Law he would be ruled unclean and unable to enter the temple, but here he was at the home of the prominent Pharisee. Were the Pharisees not already bending their rules to allow this unclean man to be there at the meal? Or were they being hypocritical, or was the man able to wander in because of the typically open configuration of the ancient near eastern home? The text does not say. Now with this context in mind let's look at the parable.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 14:1 NAS95 1 It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely.*
>
> *Omitted Verses:*
>
> *Luke 14:2-6 NAS95 2 And there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. 3 And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" 4 But they kept silent. And He took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away. 5 And He said to them, "Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" 6 And they could make no reply to this.*

> *Luke 14:7-14 NAS95 7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. 10 But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. 12 And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. 13 But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"*

Jesus' parable was a frontal attack upon the Pharisees who "love[d] the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places" (Luke 11:43). Because the Pharisees were exalting themselves over everyone else, their problem was one of pride. The central taught by Jesus in this passage was God's calling to be humble. By humbling yourself to help those that cannot help themselves you will be repaid in heaven, but the reward may not be obvious in this life. Jesus was upsetting the apple cart of the Pharisees' world by suggesting that the lowly people in this world, like the man with the terrible dropsy, would be exalted in the coming kingdom of heaven. Jesus demonstrated His own humility through the healing of the man with dropsy (Luke 14:3) in spite of the fact that He knew it would anger the Pharisees with whom He would soon be dining. He then went on to give them teaching about why being humble was so important.

Read again the section in the reading regarding this upside down world that Jesus is teaching regarding His kingdom. "For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 11). God is the only one we may exalt any of us, although the Pharisees exalted themselves above everyone else, even above their sick brother.

To apply today's reading in our lives we can pray to God to help us to see ourselves as servants to those people that don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We can ask God to show us how to see ourselves "washing their dirty feet," helping to heal their sickness, and serving them by praying for them. We can ask God to give us the courage to speak to them about the forgiveness of sins that is given only through believing that Jesus Christ died one single time on the cross for their sins, through a sacrifice than can never be repeated.

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Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of a time this past week when I considered myself as better than someone else? What was the circumstance? In what ways does Jesus speak to you from what you learned in the Gospel message?
2. What is one thing that you can change in regards to this teaching of Jesus on the necessity of being humble?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 08-25-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week our first reading is from the final chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah. The passage is prophetic in nature, that is, it touches on events in the last days of God's plan for redemption. The second reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews deals with the very difficult subject of discipline and how God uses it in the lives of His children. Finally, we read more about Jesus' teaching ministry as He traveled through Israel. In this passage He includes some very hard lessons that are important for us to understand.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The book of Isaiah is like a small Bible. Chapters 1-39 speak of Israel in the midst of the nations (like the Old Testament, consisting of 39 books in many versions). Chapters 40-66 speak of comfort in the revelation of Christ (like the New Testament's 26 books). This last section begins with John the Baptist, climaxes in chapter 53 about the sacrifice of Christ, and ends with the Millennial Kingdom. Today's portion was written, perhaps, to educate Israel concerning the distant future with respect to the Messianic Kingdom of God and ultimate restoration of the nation.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 66:18-21 NAS95 18 "For I know their works and their thoughts; the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory. 19 I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Rosh, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. 20 Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the LORD, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. 21 I will also take some of them*

for priests and for Levites," says the LORD.

In these verses Isaiah moves from speaking of God's judgment upon those who are unfaithful to Him to announce a future gathering of all nations. Representatives will come into God's presence and be introduced to His great glory. Then, they will be sent out to the nations of the world who have not known God. Someone has called this the Great Commission for Israel (similar to the Great Commission to the Church in Matthew 28). These "missionaries" will declare the glory of God to the nations.

The result will be a great migration, multitudes coming to Jerusalem, described as "My holy mountain." The text tells us that they will come in a variety of ways: "on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels." Notably, God will choose some of these new believers to be priests and to be used in serving capacities for God.

One might well ask, "When will these things come to pass?" The answer would require a very careful study of prophetic Scriptures—both Old and New Testament texts—to be definitive. The Bible often speaks of a great tribulation in the end times, and many believe it is the saints (believers) who come out of that tribulation period who will be the messengers to bring to God those who had not yet heard of His love and grace and who, as a result of this witness, come into a relationship of faith in God.

No matter the timing of this prophecy, the recurring theme in this passage is God's glory. What is God's glory? "Glory" is a very difficult word to define because it does not represent a concrete object. It represents a quality or essence, much like the word "beauty." God's glory is the reflection of His beautiful and perfect essence, the manifestation of His unique and sought after presence. Glory is the positive reference to His attractive reputation, which is manifested in who He is and displayed in what He does. We get a sense of God's glory by the loving dynamic within the three persons of the Godhead, with His generous and gracious interaction with humankind (as recorded in Scripture), and in His display of exotic beauty and intricate design in nature (general revelation). God's glory has been on display for all to see in creation, so that Saint Paul says: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse . . . Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man . . . " (Romans 1:20,22-23).

Responding to God's glory and living in light of this reality is an important part of a life well-lived, a life that has eternal qualities to it. In the passage of Isaiah, it is the distinct privilege of people to declare His fame and reflect His glory to those who do not know. In our lives, we have the privilege to live for God's fame, and not our own on a daily basis. We can choose to order our lives around

giving glory to God, or we can choose to exchange this opportunity in order to glorify self, honor the finite things of this world, or value what was created over the Creator Himself. Though the results are not always immediate, this passage reminds us that God's glory is worth pursuing.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The major theme of Hebrews is the pre-eminence of Christ. It involves some very important and deep theology, but it also includes very practical ideas about Christian living. In fact, the last three chapters give valuable teaching about walking in faith (ch. 11), walking with hope (ch. 12), and walking in love (ch. 13). Today's reading gives a helpful lesson about the value and necessity of discipline, which often may be painful but always serves God's good purpose.

Second Reading:

Note: Includes verses 8-10 omitted from the reading.

> *Hebrews 12:5-13 NAS95 5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; 6 FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. 12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

The section begins with a reminder that discipline comes from God, and it happens in the lives of all Christians ("every son," v. 6). In fact, the very reality that God disciplines someone proves that person's sonship; he indeed belongs to God, because parents don't discipline someone else's children. It should be noted here that the words in the text express discipline and chastisement, not judgment and punishment. There is a difference.

Most people do not like pain and suffering, and we pray fervently to be rid of them. But, whatever the reason for the pain—whether it's the discipline of God or the consequences of natural infirmities, God can use the suffering for His good purposes. One writer, who has suffered a debilitating disease

for many years, wrote: "If my parents could have stopped me from being afflicted by this disease, they would have. But God didn't, and He's the perfect Father, knowing what will make me a better person. Because of their love, my parents would more likely have insulated me from some of the greatest lessons of life that I could learn only through my suffering. Because of God's love for me, He dare not withhold the pain and suffering."

But why is it necessary for God to discipline His children? What are God's motives? Unfortunately, many of us have been disciplined by an earthly parent out of impatience, sometimes to show us who's boss, or to get us to cooperate with their plan with no interest in our nurture. Some of the tactics that earthly parents wrongly use are guilt and shame, producing in us a fear of punishment and a surface compliance to the desires of the one with authority. If we view God like we view our earthly parents, then we have some soul work to do in order to trust God in the midst of His discipline.

God does not discipline His children in order to get begrudging compliance or in order to get even with wrongs we have done. God lovingly disciplines His children to help shape a worldview in our hearts that pries our fingers off of self-reliance, independence, and autonomous pride; and in exchange, opens our arms to embrace a God-reliant walk with Him. Saint Paul wrote of a time in his life where he was under so much affliction that he even despaired of life itself. As a result of this time of discipline, Paul internalized a deep reliance on God, saying: "we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

In our immaturity (just like a child), we do not know how much we need our Father. We often live as if we are in charge and give a quick nod to God when we want to do well on an exam, need a new job, or feel like we are in a bind. But God, in His kindness, knows that this is low-level living in Him. Through having the proverbial rug pulled out from underneath us, He helps us to live in light of reality and recognize that we cannot do life on our own. In our disorientation and desolation, we desperately reach out for God's abiding presence and find our consolation in Him (not in our sense of control or carefully arranged circumstances). We begin to internalize His value system in our soul by living in dependence on Him, which is a "severe mercy" on God's part. God's motive is to bring life that is truly life (John 10:10) to us in the midst of His strategic and loving discipline.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

We hear a lot today about intolerance. We are urged to be tolerant of almost everyone and everything that someone might believe or do. Moral standards of right and wrong seem to have evaporated in modern society, and common sense has been replaced with personal preference. But, there is a standard; there is a right way, and everything contrary to that must be wrong. Jesus and Christianity are often criticized because of their claim that there is only one way to God. Today's reading emphasizes that truth in the teaching of Jesus Himself, who claimed to be that one way (John 14:6).

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Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 13:22-30 NAS95 22 And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem. 23 And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.' 26 Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; 27 and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.' 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out. 29 And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. 30 And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last."*

Luke records important lessons from Jesus' teaching as the Lord makes His way to Jerusalem, where He is to suffer and die. He had told His disciples about His destiny, although they did not fully understand His plan of salvation until after the promised resurrection. Apparently, some had understood His teaching about the necessity to come to God through Him, and one asks Him specifically about it. Are there, he wonders, only a few that will be saved? Jesus answers by describing the entrance to faith as being "the narrow door." His further comments can leave no doubt about the exclusiveness of the way to God.

Not all who feel entitled to enter can do so. The "head of the house," no doubt a reference to God the Father, surely has the right to open and close the door to His own house, and knocking on the door will not achieve entrance if you are unknown to the householder. He makes it clear that past physical association with Him (eating and drinking, for example) is not sufficient. People also claim that they listened to Him teaching in their streets, but this is still not sufficient. Those who are actually entitled to enter are those who enter through the "narrow door." What is this narrow door that Jesus is referring to?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus answers the question by metaphorically referring to himself as the door to the sheepfold. Inside the sheepfold, the sheep are safe and find refuge. He said, "Truly, truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:7-10). It is clear from this and other parts of Scripture (John 14:6, Acts 4:12) that Jesus is the only entry point to eternal life.

It is clear, then, that apart from genuine trust in the grace of Jesus and His finished work at the cross, evidenced by His resurrection, there is no salvation. He indeed is the only way to God. Those who reject the opportunity to trust Him will weep and gnash their teeth when they see Israel's fathers and prophets in the kingdom and they themselves are left out. These words should bring them to repentance so they will be able to "recline at the table in the kingdom of God." The last—the down-and-outers, the ones who do not feel entitled—will be first in the kingdom because they have accepted the lordship of Jesus in their lives.

Reflection Questions

1. The pinnacle of God's glory is displayed in His work of salvation accomplished through Christ's perfect life, His death and His resurrection. How has God's glory changed you from pursuing the corruptible things of this finite world to orienting your life around the incorruptible beauty of God's nature? Where do you see God's glory being displayed in your life's choices, attitudes, and values? Where would you like to see God's continued work in your life and through your life to reflect His glory?
2. How did your parents discipline you as a child? What tactics/motives reflected the heart of God and what tactics/motives did not reflect the heart of God? What parts of that experience do you need to exchange in order to embrace the loving discipline of God in your life? What seasons of discipline do you need to revisit in your mind and mentally process with this new perspective of God's heart for internalizing His value system in you? How can this perspective on God's discipline being part of our sonship be an encouragement for you and those you love to stay faithful to God in the midst of suffering?
3. Since Jesus was speaking metaphorically of entering through the narrow door, what does it mean to do this spiritually? How does this metaphor get lived out in your life? It might require a first-time decision to follow Him if you have never articulated your allegiance to Christ or it might require daily moments of trust to show your allegiance to Him as Lord. What would it be worth to you to recline at the table in the kingdom of God and be with the Old Testament saints for eternity? How might you grow in valuing this eternal reward over short-term gratification that gets in the way of reflecting God's glory.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 08-18-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week the three readings follow the theme of persecution of believers and the need for us to assess our allegiances and alliances with those other than God. As believers we should expect persecution in light of the fact that others who walked with God before us experienced these things.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading is the harsh imprisonment of Jeremiah, for the second time. This was as a result of the administration's "kill the messenger" approach as God brought the truth to southern kingdom of Judah about their certain destruction at the hands of the Chaldeans unless they repented. After he had been held in the dungeon (Jeremiah 37:15-16), King Zedekiah sent for him there and spoke with him before releasing him to the "court of the guardhouse" (v. 21). In the reading we will learn about the increasingly harsh treatment given to God's prophet Jeremiah. In reading the text we can begin to understand why Jeremiah became to be known as the "weeping prophet."

First Reading:

> *Jeremiah 38:4-10 NAS95 4 Then the officials said to the king, "Now let this man be put to death, inasmuch as he is discouraging the men of war who are left in this city and all the people, by speaking such words to them; for this man is not seeking the well-being of this people but rather*

> *their harm." 5 So King Zedekiah said, "Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you." 6 Then they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchijah the king's son, which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud. 7 But Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, while he was in the king's palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. Now the king was sitting in the Gate of Benjamin; 8 and Ebed-melech went out from the king's palace and spoke to the king, saying, 9 "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet whom they have cast into the cistern; and he will die right where he is because of the famine, for there is no more bread in the city." 10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, "Take thirty men from here under your authority and bring up Jeremiah the prophet from the cistern before he dies."*

Zedekiah's ungodly officials advised the king to put Jeremiah to death because of his discouraging words (v. 4). In their wicked eyes Jeremiah committed treason by supposedly weakening the war against the invading Chaldeans by calling for them to surrender rather than to resist. At this point the king surrendered Jeremiah into the custody of the "officials," using the term loosely. Once King Zedekiah surrendered his authority over God's prophet the people then took drastic actions against Jeremiah by lowering him into a cistern, an action obviously intended to bring about his death. It took the actions of a Gentile, Ebed-melech (whose name means "servant of the king") to bring about Jeremiah's rescue.

There are many parallels between the suffering that Jeremiah endured to that of Jesus during His earthly ministry. Jeremiah, a type of Christ, pointed the way to the future suffering of our Lord Jesus as the hands of the officials of His day. Because they persecuted God and His prophets, we should also expect persecution in our lives when we act against the ungodly officials in our day. Stephen said just before his own death, "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become" (Acts 7:52).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study in the Book of Hebrews and picks up after the section known as the "Hall of Faith." Today's reading relates to what we read about in Jeremiah concerning hostility against believers of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 12:1-4 NAS95 1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding*

> *us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. 4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;*

Taking into account what we learned from chapter 11 ("therefore," v. 1a), we are called to focus upon the ultimate goal of Jesus Christ and forsake our sinful ways (vv. 1-2). We are to do this through using Jesus as our example. By focusing upon Jesus' illustration of resisting sin we too can be faithful in accomplishing the purpose that God has for us. However, in the same way that Jesus and the prophets were persecuted we too should expect to experience trials when we stand up for the things of God. The author of Hebrews makes it abundantly clear that by taking the testimony of Jesus along with the great cloud of witnesses into account we can persist through the inevitable trials that will come upon us. The reading closes by saying that we haven't taken outrageous measures to eliminate sin in our lives (v. 4). This points the way to the subsequent teaching where the author explains how God brings chastening into the lives of believers because as sons of God this correction is for our ultimate good (Hebrews 12:5-11). In the same way that God allowed persecution in the life of Jeremiah, He may also allow it in our lives. As we move to the Gospel reading we will see some similar teaching from Jesus on the need to assess our personal alliances in light of God's plans for us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke follows a theme I will call "Forsaking allegiances and alliances for Jesus." Jesus was clear that His ministry would be one of division. For John said in the infamous verse regarding the division of the people over Jesus, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). In today's reading we see another of Jesus' 6-6-6 moments, this time in the teaching to His disciples after Peter drew near to him amongst the crowds to ask Him a question. Peter had asked Jesus regarding His telling of the Parable of the Wedding Feast whether this parable was addressed to just His disciples or to the crowd as a whole. As Jesus was fond of doing he didn't answer Peter's question directly but did so by asking another question, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?" (Luke 12:42). Jesus then provided yet another parable about the absent master and the behavior of the slaves while he was away (Luke 12:43-48). Jesus' teaching at this point culminated with an extremely important principle. The punishment of the wicked will be according the degree of knowledge that the person possessed (v. 48). This was obviously addressed to the Pharisees among the crowd, and Judas the betrayer who would have been among the twelve disciples. By application the teaching leading up to today's

reading brings with the idea of everyone's call to exercise godly stewardship of the resources which they have been given. The call to godly stewardship may even involve the forsaking of friends and family for the sake of the Gospel.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 12:49-53 NAS95 49 "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished! 51 Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; 52 for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

In the very first season of the television series *Survivor*, Richard Hatch orchestrated the idea of a voting alliance. The "Tagi Alliance" as it was called, was a brilliant strategy that paved the way for future seasons of the program and showed the necessity of working together to accomplish the impossible in dire conditions. One of the most notable things about an alliance in general and this one in particular is that it excludes members outside of it. As viewers saw in the series, the Tagi Alliance resulted in considerable controversy with non-members as the show played out. In this case the issue that comes into play is that as the season winds down the ultimate conclusion requires the banishment of alliance members from the island. In today's reading we see how Jesus warned about the dangers of stubbornly clinging to an alliance which in effect makes a pledge of allegiance to someone other than God.

Jesus told His disciples along with large crowd how from now on families would be divided because of Him. By application, true followers of Jesus are called to examine their alliances and allegiances and be willing to forsake anything that leads them away from following God's plan for their lives. This may include stepping back from any relationship in which the other person attempts to lead you astray spiritually while praying for the opening of that person's eyes to the light of the Gospel.

Muslim background believers (MBB's) are one shining example of a group whom would readily identify with Jesus' teaching as well as what we learned about persecution in the first reading. Many MBB's have been forced to forsake their mother and father and even their own lives in order to follow the true teaching found only in the God of the Bible. Other readers of Mass Notes will also be able to identify with Jesus' teaching when they too found themselves marginalized or even outright reject by family members (and others) for their faith in Jesus. All three of today's readings point to a single verse from the second reading in Hebrews. "For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3). God

calls us to focus upon Him to the extent that we are willing to assess any alliances or allegiances we may have that call us away from His plan. This may mean leaving the fellowship of a certain church or losing a relationship with a loved one. Through it all God calls us to never lose our focus upon Him.

Would you be willing to share your testimony with us for posting on the web site about the particular alliance or allegiance you were forced to break?

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways does the things that happened to Jeremiah in today's reading mirror the Lord Jesus Christ?
2. What is a particular situation in your life in which you felt called by God to break an alliance or allegiance in order to accomplish God's purpose?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 08-11-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about the Hall of Faith in the Book of Hebrews and about Jesus' call to serve Him while He is away in Heaven.

Introduction to the First Reading:

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom. During the time when this was written, the Intertestamental period (or silent period as no prophets were active), the Jewish people faced unprecedented opposition from their enemies including one called Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This evil ruler attempted much like Adolph Hitler to annihilate the Nation.

> *Wisdom 18:6-9 The night of the passover was known beforehand to our fathers, that, with sure knowledge of the oaths in which they put their faith, they might have courage. Your people awaited the salvation of the just and the destruction of their foes. For when you punished our adversaries, in this you glorified us whom you had summoned. For in secret the holy children of the good were offering sacrifice and putting into effect with one accord the divine institution.*

The Passover was a momentous event in the early life of the nation of Israel for many reasons. The writer of this reading recorded how the Jews looked back to God's miraculous deliverance of their people from the death angel who "passed over" the Hebrews homes that were marked by the blood of the lamb slain among the families as a sacrificial offering (Exodus 11:4-7, 12:23). During this time

of great persecution, the writer looked upon the destruction of their enemies as a way that God showed favor to them, while they were forced to practice the worship of God through the one true religion in secret.

We know from looking back how the blood of the lamb slain during the Passover represented the Ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ who have Himself for our sins. Although we are called by God to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), if we are honest many of us will agree that we don't wish our enemies well. This is higher calling which we are only able to achieve through God's power, and that in light of the fact that Jesus has ultimately already delivered us from our enemies. We have the power of the Holy Sprit of God Who dwells inside of us, something to which the Jews during the time the Book of Wisdom was written could only look forward to (see Exodus 36:27).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The reading from the Book of Hebrews is from the section referred to as the "Hall of Faith" or "Faith Hall of Fame." The reading records the faith-filled events of some very important men and women of the faith. After reading the definition of faith in the first verse, look for repeating patterns in the second section.

> ***Second Reading: The verses (3 – 7) omitted from the reading are set apart below.***
>
> *Hebrews 11:1-2 NAS95 1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the men of old gained approval.*
>
> *Omitted:*
>
> *Heb 11:3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.*
>
> *Heb 11:4 ¶ By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.*
>
> *Heb 11:5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.*
>
> *Heb 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*
>
> *Heb 11:7 By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.*

> *Hebrews 11:8-19 NAS95 8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. 13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18 it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19 He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.*

Prior to launching into the Hall of Faith, the author provided the definition of this very important term, one that we may easily take for granted during the reading of the Bible. They say, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (v. 1). Read this definition again, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." As Christians, we understand intuitively that the context of faith is God. However, faith isn't an object in itself, rather the object of faith is God, for having spiritual faith in anyone but God is vain. For nonbelievers may make statements like, "I have faith that I will get through this" and then rather be guided by their circumstances than God, although God is sovereign over all people and events in the world.

The second section of today's reading begins with, "For by it the men of old gained approval" and then moves to using the repeated phrase, "by faith [name]" followed by a commendation of the person's faith-filled actions. In the omitted verses we see that this follows the general chronology of the Bible beginning first with Abel (v. 4), then Enoch (v. 5) and Noah (v. 7). The reading then moves to person known as the "father of faith," Abraham in verse 8. Saint Paul affirmed this commendation of Abraham in Romans 4:16. Although we see that Abraham certainly wasn't the first to walk by faith in God, he along with his wife, was the one to whom God dedicated a substantial section for commendation in the Hall of Faith. The first portion of verse 8 reads, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by . . ." The subsequent verses chronicle his and Sarah's faithful actions including leaving his known land to go to an unknown place. In verse 17, we see how Abraham

passed perhaps the ultimate test of his faith by his willingness to offer up his one and only son as a sacrifice to God. This example of faith lived out by Abraham closely parallels God's willingness to offer His Son Jesus on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. In Abraham's case God stopped short of requiring the ultimate sacrifice of Isaac by providing the lamb himself for the sacrifice. However, we know that in the case of Jesus God provided the ultimate sacrifice through the sacrifice of His one and only Son. We read in the Book of John, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

So much can be said about the reading that concludes with, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises" (v. 13a). How faithful were the men and women of God by following what He told them to do but without them ever receiving the promises that He made to them! The "Hall of Faith" stands as a testimony as to how we as men and women of the faith are also called to walk by faith in God's promises without expecting to see the ultimate answers during our natural lives. God calls us to walk in faith the same way as the biblical examples did, not only just the ones listed in today's reading. We do this through understanding God's promises made to us and walk by taking both baby steps and even giant steps of faith along the way as we sense God's calling. God may call us to leave our known land and proceed to a place with which we are not familiar. Or He may call us to lesser steps such as caring for the needy, or praying for others. During those times when we are doubting our faith we can turn to this section of the Book of Hebrews to see how those before us obeyed God and were commended for doing so. We can expect that if we obey God we too will one day be commended by God in our own "Hall of Faith."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The second reading from Luke concerns the subject of readiness. Here we will see how Jesus calls us disciples of Him to be ready for His imminent return by accomplishing the works which He has given us.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 12:32-48 NAS95 32 Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 35 Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. 36 Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. 38 Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 39 But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 40 You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect." 41 Peter said, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as*

> *well?" 42 And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. 44 Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 45 But if that slave says in his heart, 'My master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; 46 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers. 47 And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, 48 but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.*

Jesus called His disciples to fulfil the greater kingdom purposes for their lives by seeking first the kingdom of God as reflected in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:33). He told the disciples that the place on which they focus their investment reveals the true condition of their hearts (v. 34). Next, He provides them with a parable concerning a master who left his servants in charge while he was away (vv. 36 – 40). In the case of this parable, the Lord Jesus uniquely provides the interpretation of it before and after the giving of the parable itself. His disciples are to be ready for the imminent return of their master even though they do not know when he will return. By application this means that as believers, we are to be accomplishing the works of our Father God even though we do not know when Jesus will return.

The second section of the reading proceeds along the same line of reasoning but using an example with a contrast between a godly servant waiting for the return of his master (vv. 42 – 43) contrasted with that of an ungodly one who beat his slaves and got drunk while waiting (vv. 45 – 48). The application of these verses is that nonbelievers who commit great sins will be punished less than nonbelievers who commit great ones. For all believers are totally forgiven of their sins through the finished work of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:14). However, the application of the reading as a whole doesn't just apply to nonbelievers as we see in the concluding verse. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (v. 48d-ff). The big idea is that God calls all people to exercise godly stewardship of the gifts that He has given them. As people in the unique small set of believers (Matthew 7:13), we are to live with patient expectation that God could return at any instant while going about accomplishing the things that God has asked us to do. First and foremost, this means accomplish the Great Commission, making disciples and teaching them all things (Matthew 28: 16-20).

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Reflection Questions

1. In what ways would memorizing the author of Hebrew's definition of faith in God help you to combat future weaknesses in your own faith? "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." How does reading the Hall of Faith help you through these same weaknesses?
2. How does understanding the gifts which God has given you help you to exercise better stewardship of the things in your life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 08-04-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with a reading from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, written by Solomon, king of Israel, and the wisest man of his time. Although it is inspired by God—as is all Scripture–it is written from the perspective of a frustrated man who is seeking for answers to life's hard questions. The second reading is from Paul's epistle to the early church in Colossae. Its theme is the Christian life that is centered in Jesus Christ and how that is lived out in everyday life. Finally, we look once again at the Gospel of Luke and hear Jesus speak about the dangers of human greed.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Ecclesiastes is a hard book for many readers to understand, because at times it seems to support ideas that are contrary to other biblical teachings. For example, "There is a time to kill" (3:3). Of course, context is all important in interpreting Scripture, so we have to remember that the author, though the wisest of all men, is looking at life from a purely secular perspective. He uses the expression, "under the sun" more than two dozen times in the book.

First Reading:

> *Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 NAS95 1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."*
>
> *Ecclesiastes 2:21-23 NAS95 21 When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. 22 For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors*

> *under the sun? 23 Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.*

The authorship of this book is made perfectly clear from the very beginning. He is the third king of Israel, under whose reign the nation reaches the pinnacle of its world prominence, especially in terms of wealth. God had spoken to Solomon on at least two occasions and had asked him what he wanted above all else. Solomon asked not for riches or fame, but for wisdom, and God granted his request (1 Kings 3:5-12). And it was Solomon who built the temple for God to dwell in by His Shekinah Glory.

To read the exploits of Solomon is to discover a man of great talent, having written three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs (1 Kings 4:32). He failed to keep his promises to God, however, and he took numerous foreign wives and accumulated thousands of horses in direct disobedience to God's commands. As a result, Solomon questions life's realities. What is life all about? What is its purpose? What good is it for man to work hard when he gains little and cannot rest?

Today's reading records those questions and the completely unsatisfactory answers in Solomon's judgment. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity," he writes. Another translation of this conclusion is "Completely meaningless! Everything is meaningless." We must remember, however, that this is not the end of all things. Solomon concludes this writing by acknowledging that his search "under the sun" has produced nothing, but there is a lesson to be learned. He writes, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind (12:13). Today, then, in spite of the apparent hopelessness of life sometimes, we are to keep God's commandments. That will give us the peace that Solomon was searching for.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Whenever a paragraph begins with the word "therefore," you have to ask what has preceded and how is it related to what is to follow. As a consequence to what Paul has taught in chapters 1 and 2, the believer should follow the instructions he is about to give. In other words, because the Christian recognizes that Jesus is God in the flesh (2:9), has "received Jesus as Lord" (2:6), and has been "made alive with Christ (2:13), he or she does not need to submit to the rules of the world that is controlled by Satan and his evil system (2:20).

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 6 – 8 which were omitted from the reading are included below.

> *Colossians 3:1-11 NAS95 1 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the*

> *things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. 5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. 6 For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, 7 and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, 10 and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him– 11 a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.*

Instead of following the worldly way, the believer is to have a different motivation. The Christian has been raised up with Christ and is to "keep seeking the things above" (3:1). That is, his incentives should be spiritual, inspired from above, not worldly. Believers are to focus on "things above not on the things … on the earth (v. 2). The apostle uses the phrase, "set your mind," which reminds us of what he wrote in Romans 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters . . . Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (verses 1-2). It's a matter of the mind—what we think. Instructions like this have less to do with emotion and more to do with sound thinking and proper conduct as a result.

How is all this possible? Paul makes it clear; the believer "has died" (to sin), his life is "hidden with Christ in God," and one day Christians will be "revealed with Him in glory." It all begins with acknowledging these facts as true, considering our bodies as being dead to the evils that the writer lists (v. 5). Paul recognizes, as the Christian will, also, that we once walked in such sinful behavior, but now we are to put off all those sinful traits.

Since the Christian is part of the body of Christ, the church, he must put off sinful behavior and put on the new characteristics of the believer who is born again of God and has a new nature. Paul concludes this portion of the reading by reminding us that when men and women come into a relationship with Jesus Christ by faith, they join a host of believers whose prior differences are of no significance now. The family of God is distinct in itself but it no longer involves ethnic origins, religious distinctions, social positions, or any such differences. We are all in Christ and He is the center of all things and the head of the body.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Jesus was speaking to a large crowd, "many thousands," the text says (Luke 12:1). He speaks first to

His disciples, warning them about dangers to come. Even though there will be some who will try to kill them, they are not to fear, because they belong to God. He encourages them to realize that God cares for every sparrow, and they are much more precious to Him than the birds. As Jesus was telling them about what would occur, He is interrupted by a request from the crowd. It's a personal concern that Jesus addresses and uses to teach important principles about possessions and greed.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 12:13-21 NAS95 13 Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." 14 But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." 16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. 17 And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' 21 So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."*

The request: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Without responding to the specific request, Jesus uses it as a springboard to reveal real-life principles that are not widely recognized or practiced (either in His day or today). Good teachers, by the way, will wisely take such opportunities to launch a lesson that has much broader application than the personal request or question of an individual inquirer.

Jesus begins by saying, "Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." Then, as He often did, Jesus tells a parable, a story, to illustrate His point. He tells about a rich man who could think only of how to accumulate more riches and how to hoard them. He thought that he would then be able to enjoy a life of ease and plenty. The rich man's plight sounds a lot like many of our 21st century citizens in more affluent countries. To look at the size of people's houses and their overflowing garages, one might think that Jesus was wrong. "Stuff" does seem to be of great importance. Yet, as the Broadway play says, "You Can't Take It With You." So, we should consider our spiritual condition more than the abundance of things we own.

Jesus went on to share the climax of the story. God intervenes in the rich man's life and enlightens him—and us—of the insignificance of life if it is all wrapped up in what we have. There are two dire consequences of the rich man's plan. First, he has not thought of the future in eternal terms. His soul is lost forever. Second, he has not thought of his possessions in terms of their true value. What

happens to them when he's gone? Perhaps we should also recognize that he gave no consideration to how those possessions could be used for wider benefit than his own personal enjoyment.

Jesus concludes, applying the lesson to all his hearers (and readers of the text today): "The man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" is doomed as was the rich fool. So, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21).

Reflection Questions

1. What are one or two ways in which you are storing up for yourself treasure on earth? In what ways does Jesus' teaching inform you heart as a defense against this?
2. What are one or two ways in which you are actively storing up treasure in heaven?

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