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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 76: 02/15/2026



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we examine the deep truths found in 1 Corinthians and more truths about the kingdom of God and its characteristics as found in Matthew's Gospel in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach, chapter 15. This section deals with the topic of sin.

First Reading:

> *If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you;*
> *if you trust in God, you too shall live;*
> *he has set before you fire and water*
> *to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand.*
> *Before man are life and death, good and evil,*
> *whichever he chooses shall be given him.*
> *Immense is the wisdom of the Lord;*
> *he is mighty in power, and all-seeing.*
> *The eyes of God are on those who fear him;*
> *he understands man's every deed.*
> *No one does he command to act unjustly,*
> *to none does he give license to sin. Sir 15:15;*

The reading reminds us of the power and effects of our choices. A friend of mine refers to this as a fabric of cloth in which our decisions and those made by others affect everyone, not just ourselves. Chief among the choices we make is the one to follow the ways of God, which during the times of the Old Testament was the Jewish Law. In light of the New Testament, we see how obedience paved the way for the revelation of Jesus Christ. Obeying the Law pointed to the one and only way to God, through His Savior.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the second reading, St. Paul is contrasting the wisdom of this world with God's wisdom. The Greeks were concerned with human philosophies and persuasive words. The wisdom of God that Paul is referring to is His plan to bring fallen human beings back into right relationship with Himself through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

Second Reading:

> *6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have*

> *crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM." 10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:6-10)*

Here are some of the points that Paul uses to help us see the superiority of God's way that lies in sharp contrast to the world's way of doing things. God's wisdom:

- Is a mystery. No human philosophy or religious system holds that the deity pays the offending party's debt.

- Was hidden for many years. While it was hinted at in the Old Testament, it was finally revealed in the Person and work of Jesus Christ—specifically, in His redemptive role in bearing our penalty for sin when He died on the cross, and in His living His life through our surrendered lives with His resurrection power (Eph. 1:18-23).

- Was predestined—God the Father sovereignly orchestrated the events that would reveal His wise plan of sending His Son to live and die in our place. Jesus' death was ordained by God the Father for our benefit ("our glory"). We will eventually share in God's glory because of Christ's willingness to pay our penalty.

- Is different than the world's ways. Those in power (rulers of this age) do not operate according to God's wisdom, which is based on love, sacrifice, relationship, and trust. Instead, they operate according to the enemy's philosophy—which is based on deception, brute force and coercion. If the rulers had understood God's way, they would not have crucified Jesus.

- Goes beyond what any human could have devised or dreamed of. We have just touched the tip of the iceberg of all that a relationship with God entails. There's so much more to His love and provision than we are able to experience in this life.

- Is revealed through His Spirit. The Spirit opens our hearts to the depths of God, helping us to understand the goodness of God's ways.

As we think about God's wisdom, we may wonder what difference this makes in our daily lives. If God was wise enough to devise a plan for redemption through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, we can trust Him to be wise enough to work all things in our lives together for good in the lives of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). When we don't understand God's ways, we can rest in the fact that He is wise, he knows what He is doing and He will accomplish something good. As one preacher said, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!" So the fact that God could bring something good (our redemption) out of the death of His Son, gives us faith to walk in trust and ongoing surrender to His ways.

The counterintuitive nature of God's wisdom is evident in the Gospel passage, as Jesus teaches on the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' premise is that his disciples will be characterized by a different value system than that of those who live apart from God. Because Christians are now aware that we live in a God-saturated world, our lives will reflect heaven's realities. We must be careful not to reduce this perspective to a list of rules to follow. Instead, we need to see this as a new way of life characterized by these things that are impossible outside a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Before we return to our study from last week of the Sermon on the Mount, I would like to share a story about how circumstances can drive critical choices in the life of the believer who has been given a new heart from God (Romans 18:8-9). I was employed by (and am) one of the owners of a computer software and consulting company. One of my coworkers was responsible for sales, and during his employment, we had developed a friendly relationship. One afternoon, a day or two after he had returned from a tiring business trip, I called him at his home office to discuss how we would follow up with the clients we had met. During this call, he seemed tired and even paused a few times while speaking. I thought that this was unusual, but I brushed it off by thinking he was probably still tired from the trip. Two days later, I received an urgent call from his girlfriend that he had had a heart attack and was in the hospital in a coma. Because he was in the intensive care unit, I wasn't allowed to visit him right away. After a few days, I made the three-and-a-half-hour journey to the hospital and was able to visit him and his family and say my goodbyes. He never regained consciousness and passed away the following morning. After our CFO found out about his passing, we discussed the insurance provisions he had in place, as well as the fact that he was due a substantial sales commission check and reimbursement for his expenses from the previous trip. Although nobody would ever know if she didn't send it, she insisted upon sending his sales commission check to his estate. She said that, from her Christian perspective, it was the right thing

to do. Although this man had considerable investments, and the checks our company sent were small in comparison, our company officer was compelled by her sense of responsibility in the Kingdom of God to settle the amounts. As the years have passed, I have wondered how many employers would have taken advantage of this situation and simply "forgot" to send the funds that were due. Such is the nature of the "otherworldly," supernatural motivation that God provides to His obedient believers.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Now we will move on to the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. It is helpful to keep in mind that Matthew was what I would call "the most Jewish" of the Gospel writers. Matthew wrote with a uniquely Jewish perspective, with the overall purpose of showing that Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah. Matthew assumed that his audience was well-grounded in the Jewish culture and belief system. The Jews were well-grounded in the belief that the Kingdom of Heaven was to be "otherworldly" and supernatural. Now let's read the text while we imagine a yarmulke on our heads.

Gospel Reading:

> *17 Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 21 You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. 23 Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up*

> *the last cent. 27 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. 31 It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' 34 But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. 36 Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil. (Matthew 5:17-37)*

As you can see, this new way of life is "otherworldly" and "supernatural." This is not how the world operates, so it must come from above (John 3:3). As we encounter God's grace as shown in Christ's sacrifice, we are transformed into people who love Him and obey from the heart. Kingdom living is predicated upon surrendering the old way of life to Jesus in order to be tutored in a new way of life that is God-infused. This passage highlights what life in Jesus' Kingdom (when Jesus rules in our hearts) should look like.

- Honoring God by honoring the whole counsel of Scripture. His law will be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33), and we will obey because God has given us a new heart (2 Cor. 5:17). As we have seen in past readings, the scribes and Pharisees tried to have an appearance of righteousness (outwardly), but were not fully surrendered to God. Their motives were still selfish and evil.

- Instead of the grace and love of God giving us a license to sin, it motivates us to follow His commands and teach others God's ways.

- Life in the Kingdom is characterized by:
    - Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
    - Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
    - Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure

and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)

- Having integrity and following through one's commitments, even if it means personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

Life in the Kingdom of God, where Jesus rules and reigns in our hearts, is very different from the dog-eat-dog world in which we live. God is going to have to restructure our interpretive framework for life in order to transform us from low levels of living to His higher levels of living. This is not something we can manufacture, but it is a noble calling to which each person must respond. Instead, Life in the Kingdom is characterized by:

- Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
- Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
- Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)
- Having integrity and following through on one's commitments, even at personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

May the peace of God that comes only from God guard our hearts this week.

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Reflection Questions

1. Spend some time taking an inventory of your life by reflecting on the contrast between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom (as seen in the New Testament reading and the Gospel reading). Which way of thinking most characterizes your life? Which way of thinking would you like to most characterize your life?

2. The above list of Kingdom values characterizes people who are living a God-saturated life. How do you see these traits being lived out in your life? What traits would you like to see developed as you continue to grow in your relationship with God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 78 – 02-16-2025

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, and finally the Gospel from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the prophet Jeremiah, who was known as the weeping prophet, due to the devastation and grief he experienced with the exiled people of God in the days of the Old Testament. He makes a set of contrasting statements in this passage which provide a stark interpretive framework for the meaning of life on this planet. While there are many confusing and chaotic experiences in life, some things are very easily defined, based on Jeremiah's words here.

First Reading:

> *Jeremiah 17:5-8 NAS95 5 Thus says the LORD, "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind And makes flesh his strength, And whose heart turns away from the LORD. 6 For he will be like a bush in the desert And will not see when prosperity comes, But will live in stony wastes in the*

> *wilderness, A land of salt without inhabitant. 7 Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD. 8 For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream And will not fear when the heat comes; But its leaves will be green, And it will not be anxious in a year of drought Nor cease to yield fruit."*

First of all, Jeremiah delivers the bad news: cursed is the one who puts his/her trust in the wrong things. What are these false places of trust? The list includes: 1) mankind, 2) one's strength, and 3) anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. Then he provides a word picture to help the reader taste the severity of this misplaced trust. Putting our trust in the wrong things creates a desperate situation, likened to a bush in a desert where there is no water. The unquenching thirst becomes a wasting sort of lifestyle, where there is no hope for flourishing or true prosperity. The "bush" lives in a wasteland, where it is surrounded by unsatisfying and harsh conditions, incompatible with life. This is an excellent picture of the soul that is disconnected from the Lord. While there may be signs of life on the outside, the sentence of death is already pronounced on it and it cannot survive, let alone thrive in this world.

Jeremiah describes this inhospitable environment as "a land of salt" where there are no people who can stand to live there. Again, this picture conjures up a truth about the soul, namely, that it is thirsty. But apart from God's provision, there is no satiation for our thirst. It is a land of salt. And though we may try and try to find water, we end up joining in the song that is sung by the world (in a myriad of different ways): "I can't get no satisfaction."

What hope is there for the thirsty soul? Jeremiah delivers the good news. There is a blessing for those who are tired of living under the curse. There is life for those who are feeling the sting of death. There is an abundance for those who are willing to give up their pursuit of false notions of satisfaction. The key to true blessing is to put your trust in the Lord. The result of putting your trust in the right place is likened to a tree that is planted where it can flourish, next to water. Even in a time of heat and drought, it still finds water, because the roots extend into the rich and fertile soil that has been saturated with the life-giving stream. The tree is not "anxious" because the water gives it stability and strength to weather storms and extreme conditions. The tree can give its energy to bear fruit, even if the immediate climate is not conducive to growth and flourishing. What a picture of contentment and satisfaction. Who would not want to experience the abundance of this second picture of the flourishing tree and avoid the forlornness of the first picture of the scroungy bush?

The problem is not that the tree is thirsty; the problem comes when the tree is not planted into the One who can satisfy the thirst. And there comes the rub. We all want an abundant and fruitful life,

but there are different philosophies on how to get there. Will we trust the Word of the Lord, or will we experiment with trying to find life outside of God's provision for us? Will we trust the Lord, who Is the One who created all things, knows all things, and provides us with all things? Or will we determine our path and put our confidence in our paths?

Trusting in the Lord. How simple, and yet how very difficult this is for us. The human soul has a tough time believing and trusting in the Lord, especially when life's circumstances are going poorly. We wonder where God is and why He is not doing more to protect and help us. Hardships and setbacks, like what the people of Israel experienced, mock us for being naïve enough to trust a God who seems impotent to save us from the difficulties of life. But is it possible that when God is not saving us from trials, He may be saving us from something more destructive and dangerous that is intangible? Is it possible that God is helping us, even when we hurt and He doesn't take the pain away?

Jeremiah had to live out of this type of crusty, determined faith in the LORD amid exile and physical oppression during the siege of Jerusalem. His roots had to extend very deep and far to find streams of living water, for God's chosen people were being brutally attacked, pillaged, and destroyed. If Jeremiah can trust in the LORD, then maybe we, too, can walk by faith in the One who is ultimately "faithful and true" (Revelation 19:11). The two ways are depicted in this passage. The question is, where will we plant ourselves and where will we place our trust?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading drops us in the middle of a heated discussion that was being tossed around in Paul's day and was affecting the Corinthian church. Some were heretically saying that resurrection from the dead was emphatically an impossibility. But instead of divorcing themselves totally from the message of Christianity, they were trying to syncretize this belief into the Gospel (Good News). Paul starts this chapter by clarifying the message of the Gospel. In verses 1-4 of chapter 15, he states the heart of the Gospel: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day. All of this happened according to what Scripture had predicted and what had been recorded by eyewitnesses. Paul himself was an eyewitness of the resurrected Lord Jesus. God's Word was trustworthy on this point, which meant it was trustworthy on other points as well.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:12-20 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*
> *Omitted: (vv. 13-15)*
> *13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. 20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.*

Paul continues to adamantly proclaim the importance of the resurrection of Christ from the dead as the linchpin that holds the Christian faith together. For if Christ did not rise from the dead, "your faith is worthless" (v. 17). Paul, a master orator, takes their logic to the final outcomes and shows how ludicrous it is to believe in a Christian message that is devoid of resurrection power. Some points of logic that he makes include:

- The resurrection of Christ and those who follow Him is a fundamental part of the Gospel (Good News). For if the resurrection is impossible, then Christ was not raised, and cannot raise us.

- IF the resurrection did not happen, then
    - Paul's preaching (and suffering) was in vain and he was a false witness,
    - their faith was in vain, worthless, and, in fact, they were still in their sins,
    - those who had already died in Christ were completely lost—without hope and never to rise again, and

    - Hoping in Christ for this life only is a fool's game—not at all a smart move.

Seeing the nature of the ridiculous conclusions that were stacked up on top of this heresy makes this position untenable to the Christian faith.

The definitive "But" comes into play in the last verse of this passage (v. 20a). "**But** now Christ *has* been raised from the dead" which makes all of the above obsolete. Paul in this sweeping way, underscores the importance of the resurrection of Christ, which has bearing on our lives today. For He was the line leader of what is to come for all who trust in Him. He was the first "fruit" and our resurrection from the dead will be a fruit that follows this inaugural event. Christ changed the trajectory of the human race by living a perfectly righteous life as a human being, which meant that death had no hold on Him. He bore the weight of the world's sin on His shoulders, even though He did not deserve the punishment of our sin, which is death. Therefore, His victory over the grave is our victory over the grave. And while we still experience physical death, we no longer are sentenced to spiritual death, if we will but entrust ourselves to His provision of grace. This is not just good news, it's the best news ever! May the resurrection life of Christ reorient our lives and become the most important organizing principle of our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The heavenly perspective of Jesus is often shocking to those of us who have been saturated in a worldview where there is no God and that operates according to the prince of this world. The Gospel passage for this week provides one of these experiences where the world's values are juxtaposed with God's value system. If we don't have eyes to see, it's not that God is out of step with reality, but more likely that we are blind to the power of an unseen world. Jesus came to shine light into our darkness.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 6:17-26 NAS95 17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon,*
> *Omitted: (vv. 18-19) 18 who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. 19 And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all.*
> *20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 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. 23 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. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. 25 Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry.*

> *Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.*

The setting of the Gospel reading finds Jesus gaining acclaim and recognition amongst not only the Jewish people but even those from more distant regions that were not particularly God-fearing (Tyre and Sidon). His acclaim, though, seemed to have more to do with what He could do to alleviate finite trials, than about what He could do to alleviate the infinite problem of sin and disconnection from the Father. So, while He was willing to demonstrate the power of God by healing people of diseases and delivering others from demon possession, He was not willing to further the bent of the human soul that seeks to "use God" for devilish purposes. This passage clarifies that God is not a genie in a bottle or a vending machine that can be formulaically approached for one's own desired ends.

Instead, Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Here is what He calls blessed:

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead, it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

Here is what He cautions us against by saying "Woe" to you who:

- Using your wealth as an end in itself; thinking that material goods can fill the cavernous hole in your soul.

- Satisfying your hunger now with finite things, leaving no room for spiritual hunger to drive you to pursue eternal satisfaction.

- Seek to always be amused, for there is a somber reality of this life that is designed to bring us to a place of contemplating the meaning and purpose of human existence.

- Find approval from others as the organizing principle of your life, for you will never find the truth. Instead, you will be willing to accept what is false to impress others and fit in with the crowd's worldview.

This teaching of Jesus is not popular, nor easy to incorporate into our lives. The very fact that we have a hard time with it is one of the authenticating proofs of its validity. If it meshed with our human value system, we could hardly believe it was representative of heavenly realities. So, before we try to domesticate what Jesus teaches, we must ask ourselves if we trust Him. If we do, then we will seek to understand and incorporate His perspective into our worldview and allow Him to reorient our value system, no matter how difficult or long this process may take. The good news is that we do not have to attain this perspective on our strength or through our striving. When we feel overwhelmed by these truths, we are in a good spot to look up and call out for help. A heartfelt acknowledgment of our weakness to live out of this heavenly mindset is the entry point for God to do a new work in our lives. The Spirit is willing to reshape us to have the mind of Christ—the question is are we willing to let Him do this work in us? Do we trust Him enough to let Him take us where we need to go, to become the type of people who have a counter-cultural mindset? If we do, then we will stand out as lights in a dark and decaying world.

Reflection Questions

1. The Prophet Jeremiah listed three false places of trust which were mankind, one's strength, and anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. It was perhaps easier for this man of God to

understand his weaknesses. Can you identify with any of these three false places of trust? In what ways does having faith in Jesus help to deliver you from any of these with which you identify?

2. In the Gospel reading we learned how Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Review the four points of blessing. With which of these can you identify and what spiritual circumstance brought (or is bringing) this about?

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead, it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.

- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.

- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.

- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-11-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Leviticus in which we see the procedure for dealing with the skin disease of leprosy. While this may not seem like a random passage to read, it becomes an important backdrop for the New Testament and Gospel reading where we learn that whole-hearted obedience to which Jesus calls His followers.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Leviticus, this provides some insight into the incident between Jesus and a man afflicted with leprosy that we will see later in the Gospel lesson.

First Reading:

> *(Leviticus 13:1-2) 1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 2 "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his*

> *sons the priests.*
>
> *(Leviticus 13:44-46) 44 he is a leprous man, he is unclean. The priest shall surely pronounce him unclean; his infection is on his head. 45 "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' 46 "He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.*

The Old Testament law gave specific regulations for the well-being of a community. One such regulation was about infectious diseases. The disease of leprosy could devastate a community, so God gave them instructions on how to deal with this problem. The person who had leprosy had to be inspected by the priest and separate himself from the rest of the people. This would be a dire diagnosis. The law also provided instructions for what a leprous person would do if they became healed. They must present themselves to the priest and offer a sacrifice (Lev. 14:1-32). This information will be important as we move toward the Gospel, since Jesus healed a man of leprosy. The priests would have had to dig out their law books to put this into practice, since being healed of leprosy was uncommon until Jesus came onto the scene.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In the context of this passage, Saint Paul addresses many issues that were perplexing the new believers in Corinth who had to make many decisions in a pagan culture. One of the decisions had to do with eating food that had been previously sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 10:18-19). He says that the food does not inherently have anything sacrilegious about it, but one's motive was really the determining factor in all decisions for a godly life.

Second Reading:

> *(1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1) 31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; 33 just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved. 1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.*

Paul teaches that the underlying motive of the heart needs to be God's glory, no matter what we do. It's hard for us to imagine how eating or drinking can even have religious connotations, but he affirms that all of life can be sacred if done with God and His glory in mind. Part of God's glory is when we surrender our wants and demands in order to bring others to know Him. Paul laid down his Jewish food purity laws to reach the Gentiles living in a pagan culture. We may not have this same backdrop, but we can still be challenged by this to consider how our lives lived for God can be useful for ministering to others who are different than us. That is how we can imitate Paul and so imitate Christ.

An example of this very thing happened a few summers ago when we were in France on a cultural discovery trip with some students from our local college. After church, we were invited over for a very culturally French tradition called "aperitif." This tradition is a rare invitation to foreigners, so we felt honored to be invited to a French person's home, and were glad that the students did not come along. We were not normally used to imbibing in strong drink in the middle of the day, especially right after church. We drank and enjoyed their hospitality with a clear conscience because of Paul's teaching. We were building bridges with people who needed to see the light of Christ in our lives and we met them on their turf for God's glory.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter one which continues from last week. The context is the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry in his adopted home town of Capernaum, where He first met Saint Peter. From there, He left and went to a secluded place to pray where Simon and his companions began looking for Him (Mark 1:35-36). Next, Jesus traveled to another city (see Luke 5:12) and continued His miraculous healing ministry there.

Gospel Reading:

> *(Mark 1:40-45) 40 And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and *said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." 42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. 43 And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, 44 and He said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news*

> *around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.*

We see in this story the fulfillment of the Old Testament passage on leprosy we studied in the first reading. In those days there was no known cure for leprosy, so you can imagine the desperation of anyone afflicted with the awful, skin eating disease. Several insights can be observed from this interaction. First, the leper knew he had a problem that he couldn't fix on his own. Second, he came humbly to Jesus, falling on his knees and asking him for healing. Even this early on in Jesus' ministry, the man knew that Jesus offered a potential cure for his disease. Third, we see that Jesus had compassion for this desperate man and was willing to heal him. Fourth, in all probability the priests had never in all of Jewish history ever had the need to exercise the provisions in the Law for the confirmation of a leper's healing. Jesus instructed the man to go to the priest as commanded in the Law of Moses (v. 44). Mark may have included this interaction in order to confirm the evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.

Unfortunately, the man failed to follow Jesus' order to not proclaim the source of his healing, but rather went and widely spread the news about this miraculous event. This story sets the tone for Jesus' subsequent ministry in which throngs of people came to him for healing but at the same time neglected the weightier matters of the heart (Matthew 23:23).

What does this mean for us today? Like the leprous man, we too can be tempted to turn to God in times of crisis to heal our temporal circumstances, without being willing to completely follow Him in trusting obedience. It is easy for us to think we know better than Jesus in other matters of our lives that don't seem to be so desperate or even "spiritual." But as we saw in 1 Cor. 10:31, everything can be considered spiritual and done for God's glory. Having a trusting obedience is what glorifies God. In Luke's Gospel we find a circumstance where Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one of them returned to Jesus and thanked Him (Luke 17:11-19). Although God stands ready to help deliver us from our temporary circumstance, we need to be willing to look beyond them to see what God could be doing through them, so that He can be glorified in our lives.

When I was a teenager, I used to go out and party with my friends, and then drag myself to Mass the next morning. This type of compartmentalization was a subtle way for me to justify doing my own thing and still trying to be in good with God. I felt that by going to Mass, I was earning points with Him to make up for the bad things that I did. Since then, I've come to understand that Jesus calls us to live an integrated life. I realized that I could not live an obedient life without God's help. I came to Jesus like the leper and fell on my knees and asked Jesus to heal me of the corruption and

discontinuity within my own heart. He was willing, just as with the leprous man. When we come to Him and ask Him to save us, He gives us His Spirit to help us live a unified life (John 14:16). We don't have to end up like the leprous man, who merely used Jesus to get his way. Instead, we can surrender to God and let Him have His way in and through us. This is the way of Christianity.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways can you relate to my story of how I lived during my teenage years? Are there still ways you are tempted to live a "compartmentalized" faith? What are the root issues that need to be confronted and confessed to Jesus, our one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)?

2. How can you see your life choices fall under the umbrella of God's glory? We may not be able to do "spiritual" things all day, but if we are surrendered to God, everything we do can be spiritual and give Him glory. Are there ways that you can have this mindset at your job, in your family responsibilities and even as you interact with people who are different from you? How might your week look different if you sacrificed your preferences to serve others so that others might see Christ in you?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-13-2022

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, and finally the Gospel from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the prophet Jeremiah, who was known as the weeping prophet, due to the devastation and grief he experienced with the exiled people of God in the days of the Old Testament. He makes a set of contrasting statements in this passage, that provide a stark interpretive framework for the meaning of life on this planet. While there are many confusing and chaotic experiences in life, some things are very easily defined, based on Jeremiah's words here.

First Reading:

Jeremiah 17:5-8 NAS95 5 Thus says the LORD, "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind And makes flesh his strength, And whose heart turns away from the LORD. 6 For he will be like a bush in the

desert And will not see when prosperity comes, But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, A land of salt without inhabitant. 7 Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD. 8 For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream And will not fear when the heat comes; But its leaves will be green, And it will not be anxious in a year of drought Nor cease to yield fruit."

First of all, Jeremiah delivers the bad news: cursed is the one who puts his/her trust in the wrong things. What are these false places of trust? The list includes: 1) mankind, 2) one's own strength, and 3) anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. Then he provides a word picture to help the reader taste the severity of this misplaced trust. Putting our trust in the wrong things creates a desperate situation, likened to a bush in a desert where there is no water. The unquenching thirst becomes a wasting sort of lifestyle, where there is no hope for flourishing or true prosperity. The "bush" lives in a wasteland, where it is surrounded by unsatisfying and harsh conditions, incompatible with life. This is an excellent picture of the soul that is disconnected from the Lord. While there may be signs of life on the outside, the sentence of death is already pronounced on it and it cannot survive, let alone thrive in this world.

Jeremiah describes this inhospitable environment as "a land of salt" where there are no people who can stand to live there. Again, this picture conjures up a truth about the soul, namely, that it is thirsty. But apart from God's provision, there is no satiation for our thirst. It is a land of salt. And though we may try and try to find water, we end up joining in the song that is sung by the world (in a myriad of different ways): "I can't get no satisfaction."

What hope is there for the thirsty soul? Jeremiah delivers the good news. There is a blessing for those who are tired of living under the curse. There is life for those who are feeling the sting of death. There is abundance for those who are willing to give up their pursuit of false notions of satisfaction. The key to true blessing is to put your trust in the Lord. The result of putting your trust in the right place is likened to a tree that is planted where it can flourish, next to water. Even in a time of heat and drought, it still finds water, because the roots extend into the rich and fertile soil that has been saturated with the life-giving stream. The tree is not "anxious" because the water gives it stability and strength to weather storms and extreme conditions. The tree can give its energy to bearing fruit, even if the immediate climate is not conducive to growth and flourishing. What a picture of contentment and satisfaction. Who would not want to experience the abundance of this second picture of the flourishing tree and avoid the forlornness of the first picture of the scroungy bush?

The problem is not that the tree is thirsty; the problem comes when the tree is not planted into the One who can satisfy the thirst. And there comes the rub. We all want an abundant and fruitful life, but there are different philosophies of how to get there. Will we trust the Word of the Lord, or will we experiment with trying to find life outside of God's provision for us? Will we trust the Lord, who Is the One who created all things, knows all things, and provides us with all things? Or will we determine our own path and put our confidence in our own paths?

Trusting in the Lord. How simple, and yet how very difficult this is for us. The human soul has a tough time believing and trusting in the Lord, especially when life's circumstances are going poorly. We wonder where God is and why He is not doing more to protect and help us. Hardships and setbacks, like what the people of Israel experienced, mock us for being naïve enough to trust a God who seems impotent to save us from the difficulties of life. But is it possible that when God is not saving us from trials, He may be saving us from something more destructive and dangerous that is intangible? Is it possible that God really is helping us, even when we hurt and He doesn't take the pain away?

Jeremiah had to live out of this type of crusty, determined faith in the LORD in the midst of the exile and physical oppression during the siege of Jerusalem. His roots had to extend very deep and far to find streams of living water, for God's chosen people were being brutally attacked, pillaged, and destroyed. If Jeremiah can trust in the LORD, then maybe we, too, can walk by faith in the One who is ultimately "faithful and true" (Revelation 19:11). The two ways are clearly depicted in this passage. The question is, where will we plant ourselves and where will we place our trust?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading drops us in the middle of a heated discussion that was being tossed around in Paul's day and was affecting the Corinthian church. Some were heretically saying that resurrection from the dead was emphatically an impossibility. But instead of divorcing themselves totally from the message of Christianity, they were trying to syncretize this belief into the Gospel (Good News). Paul starts out this chapter by clarifying the message of the Gospel. In verses 1-4 of chapter 15, he states the heart of the Gospel: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day. All of this happened according to what Scripture had predicted and what had been recorded by eyewitnesses. Paul himself was an eyewitness of the resurrected Lord Jesus. God's Word was trustworthy on this point, which meant it was trustworthy on other points as well.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Omitted: (vv. 13-15)

13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. 20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

Paul continues to adamantly proclaim the importance of the resurrection of Christ from the dead as the linchpin that holds the Christian faith together. For if Christ did not rise from the dead, "your faith is worthless" (v. 17). Paul, a master orator, takes their logic to the final outcomes and shows how ludicrous it is to believe in a Christian message that is devoid of resurrection power. Some points of logic that he makes include:

- The resurrection of Christ and those who follow Him is a fundamental part of the Gospel (Good News). For if the resurrection is impossible, then Christ was not raised, and cannot raise us.
- IF the resurrection did not happen, then
    - Paul's preaching (and suffering) was in vain and he was a false witness,
    - their faith was in vain, worthless, and, in fact, they were still in their sins,
    - those who had already died in Christ were completely lost—without hope and never to rise again, and
    - Hoping in Christ for this life only is a fool's game—not at all a smart move.

Seeing the nature of the ridiculous conclusions that were stacked up on top of this heresy makes this position untenable with the Christian faith.

The definitive "But" comes into play in the last verse of this passage (v. 20a). "**But** now Christ *has* been raised from the dead" which makes all of the above obsolete. Paul in this sweeping way, underscores the importance of the resurrection of Christ, which has bearing on our lives today. For He was the line leader of what is to come for all who trust in Him. He was the first "fruit" and our resurrection from the dead will be a fruit that follows this inaugural event. Christ changed the trajectory of the human race by living a perfectly righteous life as a human being, which meant that death had no hold on Him. He bore the weight of the world's sin on His shoulders, even though He did no deserve the punishment of our sin, which is death. Therefore, His victory over the grave is our victory over the grave. And while we still experience physical death, we no longer are sentenced to spiritual death, if we will but entrust ourselves to His provision of grace. This is not just good news, it's the best news ever! May the resurrection life of Christ reorient our lives and become the most important organizing principle of our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The heavenly perspective of Jesus is often shocking to those of us who have been saturated in a worldview where there is no God and that operates according to the prince of this world. The Gospel passage for this week provides one of these experiences where the world's values are juxtaposed to God's value system. If we don't have eyes to see, it's not that God is out of step with reality, but more likely that we are blind to the power of an unseen world. Jesus came to shine light into our darkness.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 6:17-26 NAS95 17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon,

Omitted: (vv. 18-19)

18 who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. 19 And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all.

20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 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. 23 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. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. 25 Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.

The setting of the Gospel reading finds Jesus gaining acclaim and recognition amongst not only the Jewish people, but even those from more distant regions that were not particularly God-fearing (Tyre and Sidon). His acclaim, though, seemed to have more to do with what He could do to alleviate finite trials, than about what He could to do to alleviate the infinite problem of sin and disconnection from the Father. So, while He was willing to demonstrate the power of God by healing people of diseases and delivering others from demon possession, He was not willing to further the bent of the human soul that seeks to "use God" for devilish purposes. This passage clarifies that God is not a genie in a bottle, or a vending machine that can be formulaically approached for one's own desired ends.

Instead, Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Here is what He calls blessed:

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead, it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

Here is what He cautions us against by saying "Woe" to you who:

- Using your wealth as an end in itself; thinking that material goods can fill the cavernous hole in your soul
- Satisfying your hunger now with finite things, leaving no room for spiritual hunger to drive you to pursue eternal satisfaction
- Seek to always be amused, for there is a somber reality of this life that is designed to bring us to a place of contemplating the meaning and purpose of human existence
- Find approval from others as the organizing principle of your life, for you will never find truth. Instead, you will be willing to accept what is false in order to impress others and fit in with the crowd's worldview.

This teaching of Jesus is not popular, nor easy to incorporate into our lives. The very fact that we have a hard time with it is one of the authenticating proofs of its validity. If it meshed with our human value system, we could hardly believe it as representative of heavenly realities. So, before we try to domesticate what Jesus teaches, we must ask ourselves if we trust Him. If we do, then we will seek to understand and incorporate His perspective into our worldview and allow Him to reorient our value system, no matter how difficult or long this process may take. The good news is that we do not have to attain this perspective on our own strength or through our own striving. When we feel overwhelmed by these truths, we are in a good spot to look up and call out for help. A heartfelt acknowledgment of our weakness to live out of this heavenly mindset is the entry point for God to do a new work in our lives. The Spirit is willing to reshape us to have the mind of Christ—the question is are we willing to let Him do this work in us? Do we trust Him enough to let Him take us where we need to go, to become the type of people who have a counter-cultural mindset? If we do, then we will stand out as lights in a dark and decaying world.

Reflection Questions

1. The Prophet Jeremiah listed three false places of trust which were mankind, one's own strength, and anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. It was perhaps easier for this man of God to understand his own weaknesses. Can you identify with any of these three false places of trust? In what ways does having faith in Jesus help to deliver you from any of these in which you identify?

2. In the Gospel reading we learned how Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable

if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Review the four points of blessing. With which of these can you identify with and what spiritual circumstance brought (or is bringing) this about?

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead, it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-14-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Leviticus in which we see the procedure for dealing with the skin disease of leprosy. While this may not seem like a random passage to read, it becomes an important back drop for the New Testament and Gospel reading where we learn that whole-hearted obedience to which Jesus calls His followers.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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The first reading is from the Book of Leviticus, this provides some insight into the incident between Jesus and a man afflicted with leprosy that we will see later in the Gospel lesson.

First Reading:

(Leviticus 13:1-2) 1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 2 "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.

(Leviticus 13:44-46) 44 he is a leprous man, he is unclean. The priest shall surely pronounce him unclean; his infection is on his head. 45 "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' 46 "He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

The Old Testament law gave specific regulations for the well-being of a community. One such regulation was that of infectious diseases. The disease of leprosy was could devastate a community, so God gave them instructions on how to deal with this problem. The person who had leprosy had to be inspected by the priest and separate himself from the rest of the people. This would be a dire diagnosis. The law also provided instructions for what a leprous person would do if they became healed. They must present themselves to the priest and offer a sacrifice (Lev. 14:1-32). This information will be important as we move toward the Gospel, since Jesus healed a man of leprosy. The priests would have had to dig out their law books to put this into practice, since being healed of leprosy was uncommon until Jesus came onto the scene.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In the context of this passage, Saint Paul addresses many issues that were perplexing the new believers in Corinth who had to make many decisions in a pagan culture. One of the decisions had to do with eating food that had been previously sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 10:18-19). He says that the food does not inherently have anything sacrilegious about it, but one's motive was really the determining factor in all decisions for a godly life.

Second Reading:

(1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1) 31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; 33 just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved. 1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

Paul teaches that the underlying motive of the heart needs to be God's glory, no matter what we do. It's hard for us to imagine how eating or drinking can even have religious connotations, but he affirms that all of life can be sacred if done with God and His glory in mind. Part of God's glory is when we surrender our wants and demands in order to bring others to know Him. Paul laid down his Jewish food purity laws to reach the Gentiles living in a pagan culture. We may not have this same backdrop, but we can still be challenged by this to consider how our lives lived for God can be useful for ministering to others who are different than us. That is how we can imitate Paul and so imitate Christ.

An example of this very thing happened a few summers ago when we were in France on a cultural discovery trip for our local college. After church, we were invited over for a very culturally French tradition called "aperitif." This tradition is a rare invitation to foreigners, so we felt honored to be invited to a French person's home, and were glad that the students did not come along. We were not normally used to imbibing in strong drink in the middle of the day, especially right after church. We drank and enjoyed their hospitality with a clear conscience because of Paul's teaching. We were building bridges with people who needed to see the light of Christ in our lives and we met them on their turf for God's glory.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter one which continues from last week. The context is the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry in his adopted home town of Capernaum, where He first met Saint Peter. From there He left and went to a secluded place to pray where Simon and his companions began looking for Him (Mark 1:35-36). Next, Jesus traveled to another city (see Luke 5:12) and continued His miraculous healing ministry there.

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Gospel Reading:

*(Mark 1:40-45) 40 And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and *said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." 42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. 43 And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, 44 and He said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.*

We see in this story the fulfillment of the Old Testament passage on leprosy we studied in the first reading. In those days there was no known cure for leprosy so you can imagine the desperation of anyone afflicted with the awful, skin eating disease. Several insights can be observed from this interaction. First, the leper knew he had a problem that he couldn't fix on his own. Second, he came humbly to Jesus, falling on his knees and asking him for healing. Even this early on in Jesus' ministry the man knew that Jesus offered a potential cure for his disease. Third, we see that Jesus had compassion on this desperate man and was willing to heal him. Fourth, in all probability the priests had never in all of Jewish history ever had the need to exercise the provisions in the Law for the confirmation of a leper's healing. Jesus instructed the man to go to the priest as commanded in the Law of Moses (v. 44). Mark may have included this interaction in order to confirm the evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.

Unfortunately, the man failed to follow Jesus' order to not proclaim the source of his healing, but rather went and widely spread the news about this miraculous event. This story set the tone for Jesus' subsequent ministry in which throngs of people came to him for healing but at the same time neglected the weightier matters of the heart (Matthew 23:23).

What does this mean for us today? Like the leprous man, we too can be tempted to turn to God in times of crisis to heal our temporal circumstances, without being willing to completely follow Him in trusting obedience. It is easy for us to think we know better than Jesus in other matters of our lives that don't seem to be so desperate or even "spiritual." But as we saw in 1 Cor. 10:31, everything can be considered spiritual and done for God's glory. Having a trusting obedience is what glorifies God. In Luke's Gospel we find a circumstance where Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one of them returned to Jesus and thanked Him (Luke 17:11-19). Although God stands ready to help deliver us

from our temporary circumstance, we need to be willing to look beyond them to see what God could be doing through them, so that He can be glorified in our lives.

When I was a teenager, I used to go out and party with my friends, and then drag myself to Mass the next morning. This type of compartmentalization was a subtle way for me to justify doing my own thing and still trying to be in good with God. I felt that by going to Mass I was earning points with Him to make up for the bad things that I did. Since then, I've come to understand that Jesus calls us to live an integrated life. I realized that I could not live an obedient life without God's help. I came to Jesus like the leper and fell on my knees and asked Jesus to heal me of the corruption and discontinuity within my own heart. He was willing, just as with the leprous man. When we come to Him and ask Him to save us, He gives us His Spirit to help us live a unified life (John 14:16). We don't have to end up like the leprous man, who merely used Jesus to get his way. Instead, we can surrender to God and let Him have His way in and through us. This is the way of Christianity.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways can you relate to my story of how I lived during my teenage years? Are there still ways you are tempted to live a "compartmentalized" faith? What are the root issues that need to be confronted and confessed to Jesus, our one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)?

2. How can you see your life choices fall under the umbrella of God's glory? We may not be able to do "spiritual" things all day, but if we are surrendered to God, everything we do can be spiritual and give Him glory. Are there ways that you can have this mindset at your job, in your family responsibilities and even as you interact with people who are different from you? How might your week look different if you sacrificed your preferences to serve others so that others might see Christ in you?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 02-16-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the deep truths found in 1 Corinthians and more truths about the kingdom of God and its characteristics as found in Matthew's Gospel in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach, chapter 15. This section deals with the topic of sin.

First Reading:

> *If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you;*
>
> *if you trust in God, you too shall live;*
>
> *he has set before you fire and water*
>
> *to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand.*
>
> *Before man are life and death, good and evil,*

whichever he chooses shall be given him.

Immense is the wisdom of the Lord;

he is mighty in power, and all-seeing.

The eyes of God are on those who fear him;

he understands man's every deed.

No one does he command to act unjustly,

to none does he give license to sin.

The reading reminds us of the power and effects of the choices we make. A friend of mine refers to this as a like a fabric of cloth where our decision and those decisions made by others affect everyone, not just ourselves. Chief among the choices we make is the one to follow the ways of God, which during the times of the Old Testament was the Jewish Law. In the light of the New Testament, we see how obedience to the led the way to the revelation of Jesus Christ. Obeying the Law pointed the one and only way to God, through His Savior.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the second reading, St. Paul is contrasting the wisdom of this world with God's wisdom. The Greeks were concerned with human philosophies and persuasive words. The wisdom of God that Paul is referring to is His plan to bring fallen human beings back into right relationship with Himself through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

Second Reading:

6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM." 10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:6-10)

Here are some of the points that Paul uses to help us see the superiority of God's way that lies in sharp contrast to the world's way of doing things. God's wisdom . . .

- Is a mystery. No human philosophy or religious system has the deity paying for the debt of the offending party.
- Was hidden for many years. While it was hinted at in the Old Testament, it was finally revealed in the Person and work of Jesus Christ—specifically His redemptive role in taking our penalty for sin when He died on the cross, then living His life through our surrendered lives with His resurrection power (Eph. 1:18-23).
- Was predestined—God the Father sovereignly orchestrated the events that would reveal His wise plan of sending His Son to live and die in our place. Jesus' death was ordained by God the Father for our benefit ("our glory"). We will eventually share in God's glory because of Christ's willingness to pay our penalty.
- Is different than the world's ways. Those in power (rulers of this age) do not operate according to God's wisdom, which is based on love, sacrifice, relationship and trust. Instead, they operate according to the enemy's philosophy—which is based on deception, brute force and coercion. If the rulers had understood God's way, they would not have crucified Jesus.
- Goes beyond what any human could have devised or dreamed of. We have just touched the tip of the iceberg of all that a relationship with God entails. There's so much more to His love and provision than we are able to experience in this life.
- Is revealed through His Spirit. The Spirit opens our hearts to the depths of God, helping us to understand the goodness of God's ways.

As we think about God's wisdom, we may wonder what difference this makes in our daily lives. If God was wise enough to devise a plan for redemption through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, we can trust Him to be wise enough to work all things in our lives together for good in the lives of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). When we don't understand God's ways, we can rest in the fact that He is wise, he knows what He is doing and He will accomplish something good. As one preacher said, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!" So the fact that God could bring something good (our redemption) out of the death of His Son, gives us faith to walk in trust and on-going surrender to His ways.

The counterintuitive nature of God's wisdom shows up in the Gospel passage as Jesus is teaching on the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' premise is that those who are his disciples will be characterized by a different value system than those who live apart from God. Because Christians are now aware that we live in a God-saturated world, our lives will reflect heaven's realities. We must be careful not to reduce this perspective to a list of rules to follow. Instead, we need to see this as a new way of life that is characterized by these things that are impossible to do outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Before we return to our study from last week of the Sermon on the Mount I would like to share a story about how circumstances can drive critical choices in the life of believer who has been given a new heart from God (Romans 18:8-9). I was employed by (and am) one of the owners of a computer software and consulting company. One of my coworkers was responsible for sales and during the course of his employment we had made a friendly relationship with each other. One afternoon a day or two after he had returned from a tiring business trip, I called him at his home office to discuss how we were going to follow up on the clients with whom we had met. During this call, he seemed tired and even paused a few times between his words. I thought that this was unusual but brushed it off by thinking he was probably still tired from the trip. Two days later I received an urgent call from his girlfriend that he had had a heart attack and was in the hospital in a coma. Because he was in the intensive care unit, I wasn't allowed to visit him right away. After a few days, I made the three- and half-hour journey to the hospital and was able to visit him and his family and say my goodbyes. He never regained consciousness and passed away the following morning. After our CFO found out about his passing, we discussed the insurance provisions that he had in place as well as the fact that he was due some a substantial sales commission check as well as reimbursement for his expenses from the previous trip. Although nobody ever know if she didn't send it, she insisted upon sending his sales commission check to his estate. She said that it was from her Christian perspective the right thing to do. Although this man had considerable investments, and the checks our company sent were small in comparison, our company officer was compelled by her sense of responsibility in the Kingdom of God to settle the amounts. As the years have passed, I have wondered how many employers would have taken advantage of this situation and simply "forgot" to send the funds that were due. Such is the nature of the "other worldly," supernatural motivation that God provides to His obedient believers.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Now we will move onto the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. It is helpful to keep in mind that Matthew was what I would call "the most Jewish" of the writer of the Gospels. Matthew wrote with a uniquely Jewish perspective with his overall purpose being to show that Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah. Matthew assumed that his audience was well grounded in the Jewish culture and belief system. The Jews were well grounded in the belief that the Kingdom of Heaven was to be "other-worldly" and supernatural. Now let's read the text while we imagine a yarmulke on our heads.

Gospel Reading:

> *17 Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 21 You have heard that the*

ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. 23 Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent. 27 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. 31 It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' 34 But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. 36 Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil. (Matthew 5:17-37)

As you can see, this new way of life is "other-worldly" and "supernatural." This is not how the world operates, so it must come from above (John 3:3). As we encounter God's grace as shown in Christ's sacrifice, we are transformed into people who love Him and obey from the heart. Kingdom living is predicated upon surrendering the old way of life to Jesus in order to be tutored in a new way of life that is God-infused. This passage highlights what life in Jesus' Kingdom (when Jesus rules in our hearts) should look like.

- Honoring God by honoring the whole counsel of Scripture. His law will be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) and we will obey because God has given us a new heart (2 Cor. 5:17). As we have seen in past readings, the scribes and Pharisees tried to have an appearance of righteousness (outwardly), but were not fully surrendered to God. Their motives were still selfish and evil.
- Instead of the grace and love of God giving us a license to sin, it motivates us to follow His

commands and teach others God's ways.

Life in the Kingdom is characterized by:

- Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
- Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
- Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)
- Having integrity and following through with one's commitments, even if it means personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

Life in the Kingdom of God, where Jesus rules and reigns in our hearts is very different from the dog-eat-dog world in which we live. God is going to have to restructure our interpretive framework for life in order to transform us from low levels of living to His higher levels of living. This is not something that we can manufacture, but it is a noble calling to which each person has to decide to respond. Instead, Life in the Kingdom is characterized by:

- Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
- Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
- Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)
- Having integrity and following through with one's commitments, even if it means personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

May the peace of God that comes only from God guard our hearts this week.

Reflection Questions

1. Spend some time taking an inventory of your life by reflecting on the contrast between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom (as seen in the New Testament reading and the Gospel reading). Which way of thinking most characterizes your life? Which way of thinking would you like to most characterize your life?

2. The above list of Kingdom values characterizes people who are living a God-saturated life. How do you see these traits being lived out in your life? What traits would you like to see be developed as you continue to grow in your relationship with God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 02-17-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, and finally the Gospel from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the prophet Jeremiah, who was known as the weeping prophet, due to the devastation and grief he experienced with the exiled people of God in the days of the Old Testament. He makes a set of contrasting statements in this passage, that provide a stark interpretive framework for the meaning of life on this planet. While there are many confusing and chaotic experiences in life, some things are very easily defined, based on Jeremiah's words here.

First Reading:

> *Jeremiah 17:5-8 NAS95 5 Thus says the LORD, "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind And*

> *makes flesh his strength, And whose heart turns away from the LORD. 6 For he will be like a bush in the desert And will not see when prosperity comes, But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, A land of salt without inhabitant. 7 Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD. 8 For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream And will not fear when the heat comes; But its leaves will be green, And it will not be anxious in a year of drought Nor cease to yield fruit."*

First of all, Jeremiah delivers the bad news: cursed is the one who puts his/her trust in the wrong things. What are these false places of trust? The list includes: 1) mankind, 2) one's own strength, and 3) anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. Then he provides a word picture to help the reader taste the severity of this misplaced trust. Putting our trust in the wrong things creates a desperate situation, likened to a bush in a desert where there is no water. The unquenching thirst becomes a wasting sort of lifestyle, where there is no hope for flourishing or true prosperity. The "bush" lives in a wasteland, where it is surrounded by unsatisfying and harsh conditions, incompatible with life. This is an excellent picture of the soul that is disconnected from the Lord. While there may be signs of life on the outside, the sentence of death is already pronounced on it and it cannot survive, let alone thrive in this world.

Jeremiah describes this inhospitable environment as "a land of salt" where there are no people who can stand to live there. Again, this picture conjures up a truth about the soul, namely, that it is thirsty. But apart from God's provision, there is no satiation for our thirst. It is a land of salt. And though we may try and try to find water, we end up joining into the song that is sung by the world (in a myriad of different ways): "I can't get no satisfaction."

What hope is there for the thirsty soul? Jeremiah delivers the good news. There is blessing for those who are tired of living under the curse. There is life for those who are feeling the sting of death. There is abundance for those who are willing to give up their pursuit of false notions of satisfaction. The key to true blessing is to put your trust in the Lord. The result of putting your trust in the right place is likened to a tree that is planted where it can flourish, next to water. Even in a time of heat and drought, it still finds water, because the roots extend into the rich and fertile soil that has been saturated with the life-giving stream. The tree is not "anxious" because the water gives it stability and strength to weather storms and extreme conditions. The tree can give its energy to bearing fruit, even if the immediate climate is not conducive to growth and flourishing. What a picture of contentment and satisfaction. Who would not want to experience the abundance of this second picture of the flourishing tree and avoid the forlornness of the first picture of the scroungy bush?

The problem is not that the tree is thirsty; the problem comes when the tree is not planted into the One who can satisfy the thirst. And there comes the rub. We all want an abundant and fruitful life, but there are different philosophies of how to get there. Will we trust the Word of the Lord, or will we experiment with trying to find life outside of God's provision for us? Will we trust the Lord, who Is the One who created all things, knows all things, and provides us with all things? Or will we determine our own path and put our confidence in our own paths?

Trusting in the Lord. How simple, and yet how very difficult this is for us. The human soul has a tough time believing and trusting in the Lord, especially when life's circumstances are going poorly. We wonder where God is and why He is not doing more to protect and help us. Hardships and setbacks, like what the people of Israel experienced, mock us for being naïve enough to trust a God who seems impotent to save us from the difficulties of life. But is it possible that when God is not saving us from trials, He may be saving us from something more destructive and dangerous that is intangible? Is it possible that God really is helping us, even when we hurt and He doesn't take the pain away?

Jeremiah had to live out of this type of crusty, determined faith in the LORD in the midst of the exile and physical oppression during the siege of Jerusalem. His roots had to extend very deep and far to find streams of living water, for God's chosen people were being brutally attacked, pillaged, and destroyed. If Jeremiah can trust in the LORD, then maybe we, too, can walk by faith in the One who is ultimately "faithful and true" (Revelation 19:11). The two ways are clearly depicted in this passage. The question is, where will we plant ourselves and where will we place our trust?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading drops us in the middle of a heated discussion that was being tossed around in Paul's day and was affecting the Corinthian church. Some were heretically saying that resurrection from the dead was emphatically an impossibility. But instead of divorcing themselves totally from the message of Christianity, they were trying to syncretize this belief into the Gospel (Good News). Paul starts out this chapter by clarifying the message of the Gospel. In verses 1-4 of chapter 15, he states the heart of the Gospel: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day. All of this happened according to what Scripture had predicted and what had been recorded by eyewitnesses. Paul himself was an eyewitness of the resurrected Lord Jesus. God's Word was trustworthy on this point, which meant it was trustworthy on other points as well.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:12-20 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*
>
> *Omitted: (vv. 13-15)*
>
> *13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.*

> *16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. 20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.*

Paul continues to adamantly proclaim the importance of the resurrection of Christ from the dead as the linchpin that holds the Christian faith together. For if Christ did not rise from the dead, "your faith is worthless" (v. 17). Paul, a master orator, takes their logic to the final outcomes and shows how ludicrous it is to believe in a Christian message that is devoid of resurrection power. Some points of logic that he makes include:

- The resurrection of Christ and those who follow Him is a fundamental part of the Gospel (Good News). For if resurrection is impossible, then Christ was not raised, and cannot raise us.
- IF the resurrection did not happen, then
    - Paul's preaching (and suffering) was in vain and he was a false witness,
    - their faith was in vain, worthless, and, in fact, they were still in their sins,
    - those who had already died in Christ were completely lost—without hope and never to rise again, and
    - hoping in Christ for this life only is a fool's game—not at all a smart move.

Seeing the nature of the ridiculous conclusions that were stacked up on top of this heresy makes this position untenable with the Christian faith.

The definitive "But" comes into play in the last verse of this passage (v. 20a). "**But** now Christ *has* been raised from the dead" which makes all of the above obsolete. Paul in this sweeping way, underscores the importance of the resurrection of Christ, which has bearing on our lives today. For He was the line leader of what is to come for all who trust in Him. He was the first "fruit" and our resurrection from the dead will be a fruit that follows this inaugural event. Christ changed the trajectory of the human race by living a perfectly righteous life as a human being, which meant that death had no hold on Him. He bore the weight of the world's sin on His shoulders, even though He did no deserve the punishment of our sin, which is death. Therefore, His victory over the grave is our victory over the grave. And while we still experience physical death, we no longer are sentenced to spiritual death, if we will but entrust ourselves to His provision of grace. This is not just good news, it's the best news ever! May the resurrection life of Christ reorient our lives and become the most important organizing principle of our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The heavenly perspective of Jesus is often shocking to those of us who have been saturated in a worldview where there is no God and that operates according to the prince of this world. The Gospel passage for this week provides one of these experiences where the world's values are juxtaposed to God's value system. If we don't have eyes to see, it's not that God is out of step with reality, but

more likely that we are blind to the power of an unseen world. Jesus came to shine light into our darkness.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 6:17-26 NAS95 17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon,*
>
> *Omitted: (vv. 18-19)*
>
> *18 who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. 19 And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all.*
>
> *20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 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. 23 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. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. 25 Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.*

The setting of the Gospel reading finds Jesus gaining acclaim and recognition amongst not only the Jewish people, but even those from more distant regions that were not particularly God-fearing (Tyre and Sidon). His acclaim, though, seemed to have more to do with what He could do to alleviate finite trials, than about what He could to do to alleviate the infinite problem of sin and disconnection from the Father. So, while He was willing to demonstrate the power of God by healing people of diseases and delivering others from demon possession, He was not willing to further the bent of the human soul that seeks to "use God" for devilish purposes. This passage clarifies that God is not a genie in a bottle, or a vending machine that can be formulaically approached for one's own desired ends.

Instead, Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Here is what He calls blessed:

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.

- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

Here is what He cautions us against by saying "Woe" to you who:

- Using your wealth as an end in itself; thinking that material goods can fill the cavernous whole in your soul
- Satisfying your hunger now with finite things, leaving no room for spiritual hunger to drive you to pursue eternal satisfaction
- Seek to always be amused, for there is a somber reality of this life that is designed to bring us to a place of contemplating the meaning and purpose of human existence
- Find approval from others as the organizing principle of your life, for you will never find truth. Instead, you will be willing to accept what is false in order to impress others and fit in with the crowd's worldview.

This teaching of Jesus is not popular, nor easy to incorporate into our lives. The very fact that we have a hard time with it is one of the authenticating proofs of its validity. If it meshed with our human value system, we could hardly believe it as representative of heavenly realities. So, before we try to domesticate what Jesus teaches, we must ask ourselves if we trust Him. If we do, then we will seek to understand and incorporate His perspective into our worldview and allow Him to reorient our value system, no matter how difficult or long this process may take. The good news is that we do not have to attain this perspective on our own strength or through our own striving. When we feel overwhelmed by these truths, we are in a good spot to look up and call out for help. A heartfelt acknowledgment of our weakness to live out of this heavenly mindset is the entry point for God to do a new work in our lives. The Spirit is willing to reshape us to have the mind of Christ—the question is are we willing to let Him do this work in us? Do we trust Him enough to let Him take us where we need to go, to become the type of people who have a counter-cultural mindset? If we do, then we will stand out as lights in a dark and decaying world.

Reflection Questions

1. The Prophet Jeremiah listed three false places of trust which were mankind, one's own strength, and anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. It was perhaps easier for this man of God to understand his own weaknesses. Can you identify with any of these three false places of trust? In what ways does having faith in Jesus help to deliver you from any of these in which you identify?

2. In the Gospel reading we learned how Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Review the four points of blessing. With which of these can you identify with and what spiritual circumstance brought

(or is bringing) this about?

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 02-11-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Leviticus in which we see the procedure for dealing with the skin disease of leprosy. While this may not seem like a random passage to read, it becomes an important back drop for the New Testament and Gospel reading where we learn that whole-hearted obedience to which Jesus calls His followers.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Leviticus, this provides some insight into the incident between Jesus and a man afflicted with leprosy that we will see later in the Gospel lesson.

First Reading:

(Leviticus 13:1-2) 1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 2 "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.

(Leviticus 13:44-46) 44 he is a leprous man, he is unclean. The priest shall surely pronounce him unclean; his infection is on his head. 45 "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' 46 "He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

The Old Testament law gave specific regulations for the well-being of a community. One such regulation was that of infectious diseases. The disease of leprosy was could devastate a community, so God gave them instructions on how to deal with this problem. The person who had leprosy had to be inspected by the priest and separate himself from the rest of the people. This would be a dire diagnosis. The law also provided instructions for what a leprous person would do if they became healed. They must present themselves to the priest and offer a sacrifice (Lev. 14:1-32). This information will be important as we move toward the Gospel, since Jesus healed a man of leprosy. The priests would have had to dig out their law books to put this into practice, since being healed of leprosy was uncommon until Jesus came onto the scene.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In the context of this passage, Saint Paul addresses many issues that were perplexing the new believers in Corinth who had to make many decisions in a pagan culture. One of the decisions had to do with eating food that had been previously sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 10:18-19). He says that the food does not inherently have anything sacrilegious about it, but one's motive was really the determining factor in all decisions for a godly life.

Second Reading:

(1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1) 31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; 33 just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved. 1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

Paul teaches that the underlying motive of the heart needs to be God's glory, no matter what we do.

It's hard for us to imagine how eating or drinking can even have religious connotations, but he affirms that all of life can be sacred if done with God and His glory in mind. Part of God's glory is when we surrender our wants and demands in order to bring others to know Him. Paul laid down his Jewish food purity laws to reach the Gentiles living in a pagan culture. We may not have this same backdrop, but we can still be challenged by this to consider how our lives lived for God can be useful for ministering to others who are different than us. That is how we can imitate Paul and so imitate Christ.

An example of this very thing happened a few summers ago when we were in France on a cultural discovery trip for our local college. After church, we were invited over for a very culturally French tradition called "aperitif." This tradition is a rare invitation to foreigners, so we felt honored to be invited to a French person's home, and were glad that the students did not come along. We were not normally used to imbibing in strong drink in the middle of the day, especially right after church. We drank and enjoyed their hospitality with a clear conscience because of Paul's teaching. We were building bridges with people who needed to see the light of Christ in our lives and we met them on their turf for God's glory.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter one which continues from last week. The context is the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry in his adopted home town of Capernaum, where He first met Saint Peter. From there He left and went to a secluded place to pray where Simon and his companions began looking for Him (Mark 1:35-36). Next, Jesus traveled to another city (see Luke 5:12) and continued His miraculous healing ministry there.

Gospel Reading:

*(Mark 1:40-45) 40 And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and *said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." 42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. 43 And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, 44 and He said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.*

We see in this story the fulfillment of the Old Testament passage on leprosy we studied in the first reading. In those days there was no known cure for leprosy so you can imagine the desperation of anyone afflicted with the awful, skin eating disease. Several insights can be observed from this interaction. First, the leper knew he had a problem that he couldn't fix on his own. Second, he came humbly to Jesus, falling on his knees and asking him for healing. Even this early on in Jesus' ministry the man knew that Jesus offered a potential cure for his disease. Third, we see that Jesus had

compassion on this desperate man and was willing to heal him. Fourth, in all probability the priests had never in all of Jewish history ever had the need to exercise the provisions in the Law for the confirmation of a leper's healing. Jesus instructed the man to go to the priest as commanded in the Law of Moses (v. 44). Mark may have included this interaction in order to confirm the evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.

Unfortunately, the man failed to follow Jesus' order to not proclaim the source of his healing, but rather went and widely spread the news about this miraculous event. This story set the tone for Jesus' subsequent ministry in which throngs of people came to him for healing but at the same time neglected the weightier matters of the heart (Matthew 23:23).

What does this mean for us today? Like the leprous man, we too can be tempted to turn to God in times of crisis to heal our temporal circumstances, without being willing to completely follow Him in trusting obedience. It is easy for us to think we know better than Jesus in other matters of our lives that don't seem to be so desperate or even "spiritual." But as we saw in 1 Cor. 10:31, everything can be considered spiritual and done for God's glory. Having a trusting obedience is what glorifies God. In Luke's Gospel we find a circumstance where Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one of them returned to Jesus and thanked Him (Luke 17:11-19). Although God stands ready to help deliver us from our temporary circumstance, we need to be willing to look beyond them to see what God could be doing through them, so that He can be glorified in our lives.

When I was a teenager, I used to go out and party with my friends, and then drag myself to Mass the next morning. This type of compartmentalization was a subtle way for me to justify doing my own thing and still trying to be in good with God. I felt that by going to Mass I was earning points with Him to make up for the bad things that I did. Since then, I've come to understand that Jesus calls us to live an integrated life. I realized that I could not live an obedient life without God's help. I came to Jesus like the leper and fell on my knees and asked Jesus to heal me of the corruption and discontinuity within my own heart. He was willing, just as with the leprous man. When we come to Him and ask Him to save us, He gives us His Spirit to help us live a unified life (John 14:16). We don't have to end up like the leprous man, who merely used Jesus to get his way. Instead, we can surrender to God and let Him have His way in and through us. This is the way of Christianity.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways can you relate to my story of how I lived during my teenage years? Are there still ways you are tempted to live a "compartmentalized" faith? What are the root issues that need to be confronted and confessed to Jesus, our one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)?

2. How can you see your life choices fall under the umbrella of God's glory? We may not be able to do "spiritual" things all day, but if we are surrendered to God, everything we do can be spiritual and

give Him glory. Are there ways that you can have this mindset at your job, in your family responsibilities and even as you interact with people who are different from you? How might your week look different if you sacrificed your preferences to serve others so that others might see Christ in you?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 2-12-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Study Notes. This week we continue our study of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians just past where we left off last week. Finally, we will also continue with our study from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Saint Matthew's Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha and won't be covered in Mass Notes today. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context

leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the second reading, St. Paul is contrasting the wisdom of this world with God's wisdom. The Greeks were concerned with human philosophies and persuasive words. The wisdom of God that Paul is referring to is His plan to bring fallen human beings back into right relationship with Himself through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

Second Reading:

6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM." 10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (1 Corinthians 2:6-10)

Here are some of the points that Paul uses to help us see the superiority of God's way that lies in sharp contrast to the world's way of doing things. God's wisdom . . .

- Is a mystery. No human philosophy or religious system has the deity paying for the debt of the offending party.
- Was hidden for many years. While it was hinted at in the Old Testament, it was finally revealed in the Person and work of Jesus Christ—specifically His redemptive role in taking our penalty for sin when He died on the cross, then living His life through our surrendered lives with His resurrection power (Eph. 1:18-23).
- Was predestined—God the Father sovereignly orchestrated the events that would reveal His wise plan of sending His Son to live and die in our place. Jesus' death was ordained by God the Father for our benefit ("our glory"). We will eventually share in God's glory because of Christ's willingness to pay our penalty.
- Is different than the world's ways. Those in power (rulers of this age) do not operate according to God's wisdom, which is based on love, sacrifice, relationship and trust. Instead, they operate according to the enemy's philosophy—which is based on deception, brute force and coercion. If the rulers had understood God's way, they would not have crucified Jesus.
- Goes beyond what any human could have devised or dreamed of. We have just touched the tip of the iceberg of all that a relationship with God entails. There's so much more to His love and provision than we are able to experience in this life.
- Is revealed through His Spirit. The Spirit opens our hearts to the depths of God, helping us to understand the goodness of God's ways.

As we think about God's wisdom, we may wonder what difference this makes in our daily lives. If

God was wise enough to devise a plan for redemption through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, we can trust Him to be wise enough to work all things in our lives together for good in the lives of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). When we don't understand God's ways, we can rest in the fact that He is wise, he knows what He is doing and He will accomplish something good. As one preacher said, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!" So the fact that God could bring something good (our redemption) out of the death of His Son, gives us faith to walk in trust and on-going surrender to His ways.

The counterintuitive nature of God's wisdom shows up in the Gospel passage as Jesus is teaching on the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' premise is that those who are his disciples will be characterized by a different value system than those who live apart from God. Because Christians are now aware that we live in a God-saturated world, our lives will reflect heaven's realities. We must be careful not to reduce this perspective to a list of rules to follow. Instead, we need to see this as a new way of life that is characterized by these things that are impossible to do outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Before we return to our study from last week of the Sermon on the Mount I would like to share a story about how circumstances can drive critical choices in the life of believer who has been given a new heart from God (Romans 18:8-9). I was employed by (and am) one of the owners of a computer software and consulting company. One of my coworkers was responsible for sales and during the course of his employment we had made a friendly relationship with each other. One afternoon a day or two after he had returned from a tiring business trip I called him at his home office to discuss how we were going to follow up on the clients with whom we had met. During this call, he seemed tired and even paused a few times between his words. I thought that this was unusual but brushed it off by thinking he was probably still tired from the trip. Two days later I received an urgent call from his girlfriend that he had had a heart attack and was in the hospital in a coma. Because he was in the intensive care unit, I wasn't allowed to visit him right away. After a few days, I made the three and half hour journey to the hospital and was able to visit him and his family and say my goodbyes. He never regained consciousness and passed away the following morning. After our CFO found out about his passing we discussed the insurance provisions that he had in place as well as the fact that he was due some a substantial sales commission check as well as reimbursement for his expenses from the previous trip. Although nobody ever know if we didn't send it, she insisted upon sending his sales commission check to his estate. She said that it was from her Christian perspective the right thing to do. Although this man had considerable investments, and the checks our company sent were small in comparison, our company officer was compelled by her sense of responsibility in the Kingdom of God to settle the amounts. As the years have passed I have wondered how many employers would have taken advantage of this situation and simply "forgot" to send the funds that were due. Such is the nature of the "other worldly," supernatural motivation that God provides to His obedient believers.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Now we will move onto the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. It is

helpful to keep in mind that Matthew was what I would call "the most Jewish" of the writer of the Gospels. Matthew wrote with a uniquely Jewish perspective with his overall purpose being to show that Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah. Matthew assumed that his audience was well grounded in the Jewish culture and belief system. The Jews were well grounded in the belief that the Kingdom of Heaven was to be "other-worldly" and supernatural. Now let's read the text while we imagine a yarmulke on our heads.

Gospel Reading:

17 Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 21 You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. 23 Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent. 27 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. 31 It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' 34 But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. 36 Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil. (Matthew 5:17-37)

As you can see, this new way of life is "other-worldly" and "supernatural." This is not how the world operates, so it must come from above (John 3:3). As we encounter God's grace as shown in Christ's

sacrifice, we are transformed into people who love Him and obey from the heart. Kingdom living is predicated upon surrendering the old way of life to Jesus in order to be tutored in a new way of life that is God-infused. This passage highlights what life in Jesus' Kingdom (when Jesus rules in our hearts) should look like.

- Honoring God by honoring the whole counsel of Scripture. His law will be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) and we will obey because God has given us a new heart (2 Cor. 5:17). As we have seen in past readings, the scribes and Pharisees tried to have an appearance of righteousness (outwardly), but were not fully surrendered to God. Their motives were still selfish and evil.
- Instead of the grace and love of God giving us a license to sin, it motivates us to follow His commands and teach others God's ways.
- Life in the Kingdom is characterized by :
    - Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
    - Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
    - Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)
    - Having integrity and following through with one's commitments, even if it means personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

Life in the Kingdom of God, where Jesus rules and reigns in our hearts is very different from the dog-eat-dog world we live in. God is going to have to restructure our interpretive framework for life in order to transform us from low levels of living to His higher levels of living. This is not something that we can manufacture, but it is a noble calling to which each person has to decide to respond. Instead, Life in the Kingdom is characterized by:

- Love, not disgust and disregard for human life (verses 21-22)
- Being enthusiastic and proactive about peace-making (verses 23-26)
- Treating the opposite sex as a treasure, not an object to be used for our selfish pleasure and thrown away when no longer useful (verses 27-32)
- Having integrity and following through with one's commitments, even if it means personal sacrifice. Instead of looking for loopholes, we look for how to honor our word (verses 33-37).

May the peace of God that comes only from God guard our hearts this week.

Reflection Questions

1. Spend some time taking an inventory of your life by reflecting on the contrast between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom (as seen in the New Testament reading and the Gospel reading).

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Which way of thinking most characterizes your life? Which way of thinking would you like to most characterize your life?

2. The above list of Kingdom values characterizes people who are living a God-saturated life. How do you see these traits being lived out in your life? What traits would you like to see be developed as you continue to grow in your relationship with God?

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