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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 130: 09/13/2026



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

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

> SIR 27:30—28:7 *Wrath and anger are hateful things,*
> *yet the sinner hugs them tight.*
> *The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,*
> *for he remembers their sins in detail.*

> *Forgive your neighbor's injustice;*
> *then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.*
> *Could anyone nourish anger against another*
> *and expect healing from the LORD?*
> *Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,*
> *can he seek pardon for his own sins?*
> *If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,*
> *who will forgive his sins?*
> *Remember your last days, set enmity aside;*
> *remember death and decay, and cease from sin!*
> *Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;*
> *remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.*

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

both of the dead and of the living.

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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Gospel Reading:

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

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

The parable of the unforgiving servant begins with a certain servant who owed the king a sum that was impossible to repay, "ten thousand talents" (v. 24b). In biblical times, a talent amounted to about 20 years of wages for an average worker, bringing the debt to some 200,000 years of work. In our day we would say that the servant owed the king something like a zillion dollars, a sum which would clearly be impossible for anyone to repay not the least of which a lowly servant. Next, through an act of unbelievable grace, and clearly foreshadowing God the Father's forgiveness of us through faith in Jesus, the servant humbly fell upon his knees and begged for mercy (v. 26). Upon seeing the

servant's heart, the king felt compassion and completely forgave his servant of the debt that he could never repay. The king provided a means for forgiveness knowing that the repayment of the debt was impossible by the man's works. As the story continues, we should expect the servant to leave the judgment hall with a sense of great peace and generosity, but that is not what happened.

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

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

Jesus' teaching in the parable gets at some very important truths. First, unbelievers are separated from God the Father by a debt that they can never repay, even in 200,000 years or working to earn their salvation. The Scripture makes it clear that nobody can earn their way into heaven, regardless of how "good" they are and how hard they work. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). God's standard of righteousness in order to enter heaven is perfection. Perfection cannot be granted by our doing of good works, but rather by faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross. The scripture says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Second, as believers we are called to forgive other believers, seventy times seven times, that is a

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

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

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

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

If you have a testimony about forgiveness, please share it with us in the designated space on the website.

Reflection Questions

1. Think long and hard about this question, and pray about it before you answer. Who is someone

for whom you have heretofore refused to forgive? In what ways has your unforgiveness given you a sense of power over them? In light of what you learned today, will you grant forgiveness to the person who harmed you?

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-15-2024



One time while I was studying the first reading from Isaiah Chapter 50, I came across an interesting commentary on a web site. This supposedly Christian pastor wrote about the identity of the servant

figure in the reading either as the Nation of Israel as a whole, or perhaps as he said, "an individual person." Then he gave an analysis of verses 4 – 9a in which he never once identified the "servant" mentioned there with the Person of Jesus Christ. This contradicts the Gospel narrative who very clearly ascribed these exact events in describing the Passion of Jesus Christ (for example Matthew 26:67). This week we will study that reading from Isaiah and learn about what Jesus had to say in the Gospel reading about those who like the pastor I mentioned, deny or ignore that Jesus is the Christ of God presented by Isaiah. This week we will also learn from James about two types of faith, one that saves and one that does not. The key idea that runs throughout the three readings today is the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of God's servants.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 50 and is one of what is known as Isaiah's "Servant Songs." The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long-awaited Messiah. As we mentioned in the introduction, some present-day scholars (especially including Jewish writers) identify the servant in these songs as the entire Nation of Israel. This is true in a certain sense and especially about the one spoken of in the opening verses of Chapter 50 just prior to today's reading. Verse one reads, "*Thus says the LORD: Where is your mother's bill of divorce with which I put her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? No, because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away*" (Isaiah 50:1). Clearly, the Lord is using a figure of speech in referring to the Nation who went astray from Him and was sold into captivity for their sins. However, in contrast to the servant we will read in the subsequent verses, the servant figure implied in this verse is an unfaithful one. As we will see in the reading below, the Servant beginning in verse 5 is undeniably the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The overall preceding context of today's reading is the preparation of Judah's return from captivity at Babylon, something we know happened during the times of Nehemiah. Isaiah had also just introduced the prophecy of the future captivity under a yet to be born ruler named Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:1). This future Persian King would be responsible for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and is also called a servant or shepherd of God (Isaiah 44:28). Isaiah prophesies about both faithful and unfaithful servants, be they Jews or Gentiles like Cyrus. This same idea of faithfulness carries into the second reading today as well as the Gospel lesson in which Jesus is the faithful Servant of God. As you read, take careful note of the characteristics of the faithful Servant.

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First Reading:

> *Isaiah 50:5-9 NAS95 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them.*

Although the Nation of Israel sinned, God was obedient in fulfilling His promises of redemption through His Servant Son Jesus Christ. The Servant (whom we know as Jesus) was obedient in doing all that God had for Him to accomplish (v. 5). Although Jesus was condemned by the then leaders of the world, He was obedient to God and looked to His Father for His ultimate vindication. In a similar way, we too are called to obey our Father God in accomplishing all the things He has for us to do and we will ultimately be vindicated when we meet the Lord.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James we read last week, but moving ahead to verse 14. The content of his teaching is the quality of true faith. Throughout the Bible, there are many examples of people possessing different qualities of faith, one that saves and one that does not. Rahab was commended for her saving faith by the author of Hebrews when he said, "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Hebrews 11:31). Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who received the two spies sent by Joshua and hid them in defiance of the King (Joshua 2:1-6). Had she not taken this bold step of faith she would have perished at the hands of the Israelites when they toppled the city. As we read from James, we will see both kinds of faith, the kind that saves and expresses itself in godly actions (Ephesians 2:10), and the kind that cannot save. It is this latter kind about which we will read later in the Gospel lesson about which Jesus said, "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (*Matthew 8:38).

Second Reading:

> *James 2:14-18 NAS95 14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*

James asks a hypothetical question, essentially, "What good is a dead faith because a dead faith doesn't result in the salvation of one's soul" (v. 14). He then went on to illustrate the works that proceed from a person possessing such a dead faith. This person could say something like, "be warmed and filled" (v. 16b) to a person that is cold and hungry. There are two types of faith, that which can save and that which cannot. The faithful servant is one whose works manifest themselves into acts of service. This is a type of faith that can save, and does save a person (1 John 5:13). Although they are saved by God's grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9) this faith manifests itself in good works (Ephesians 2:10).

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, remember how in the first reading we saw how Isaiah portrayed Jesus as the faithful Servant Who willingly surrendered Himself to the vile treatment of His tormentors. In contrast, we also saw how Isaiah in the earlier verses spoke of the unfaithfulness of the implied servant figure, the Nation of Israel who was sold into captivity for their sin. In the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus is the faithful Servant of God and how Saint Peter boldly proclaims this message even though he misunderstood the nature of God's Servant Son.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Saint Mark begins Jesus' inevitable and irreversible journey to the cross. As we saw in the pleas of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, in today's Gospel reading Jesus testifies about the difficult plan that His Father has for Him (Mark 8:31). The context of the reading is in Caesarea Philip. This is a place that I encountered during my trip to Israel that has an eerie sense about it, almost as if Jesus' conflict with Satan had somehow permeated the rocks of that place to this very day. As you read, keep in mind that the purpose of Jesus' miracles was to show the people Who He was, to bring them to repentance of their sins, and to move them to place their trust in Him for eternal life.

Gospel Reading:

The reading omitted verses 36-38 which have been included below.

> *Mark 8:27-38 NAS95 27 Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." 29 And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." 30 And He warned them to tell no one about Him. 31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. 33 But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? 37 For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."*

For the very first time Jesus revealed His Father's plan for Him which was to offer His body as the ultimate and final sacrifice during the Passover celebration. Jesus knew that He had to fulfill the plan His father had for Him exactly, including how and when He was to die. Jesus used the term "I am" in verse 27, something which His Jewish hearers would have known was a claim of divinity. In asking them who they thought He was, Jesus was clearly identifying Himself as God, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the One Who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. After Jesus had warned them not to tell anyone that He was the Christ (v. 30) although His miracles spoke profoundly about His nature (see John 10:25, "The works that I do in My Father's Name bear witness of Me"), He explained to His disciples "plainly" (v. 32) what was to happen to Him in Jerusalem. Note how the text says, "He **began** to teach them" (v. 31a, emphasis added) about this, because even after He rose from the dead, His disciples still didn't understand. He told his disciples to keep quiet about His identity in order to fulfil the Father's timing of His life as the Jews were already seeking to kill Him (John 5:18). We see that in verse 32 Peter, the student, took Jesus, the Teacher, aside and began to rebuke Him! Jesus identification of Himself as the Suffering Servant from Isaiah didn't accord well with Peter's view of Jesus as the conquering Messiah. Peter unwittingly spoke for Satan in attempting to change Jesus' destiny on the cross, in the same way that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13). We will say more about this below.

Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and frequently acted first and too stock of his actions later.

After having spent the better part of three years, he was obviously upset that anyone would harm Jesus, especially the chief priests and scribes. He was clearly the leader of the group of twelve disciples and the first one and a representative of all twelve to whom were later given the "keys of the kingdom," meaning that He entrusted them with the dispersion of the Gospel message to the world. His main role was as a witness to the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Sometimes called the "first among equals," he played a leading role in the early church as can be seen in Acts Chapter 1 when he was the first to gather the ten remaining disciples in order to replace Judas Iscariot the traitor. Peter, whose heart was changed by the Holy Spirit, was the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-18). He was called a "pillar of the church" in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:9) and acted as the de facto spokesman of the disciples (see Matthew 15:15, 18:21, 19:27, Mark 11:21, etc.). Peter couldn't bear the thought of losing his best friend and ministry partner for whom he had dedicated his life the past several years. Peter, like the Old Testament Prophets and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when Jesus told him that this nemesis would kill his Messiah!

Yes, the purposes of God had to be fulfilled through Jesus offering Himself as a Savior for our sins. Peter, who was overcome both with his passion and love of Jesus, was as Jesus said, also influenced by the Father of Lies (v. 32). The time of Jesus ministry was an era of extreme demonic activity. Almost a dozen times in the Gospels Jesus was confronted by a demon possessed person and cast it out of them (for example Matthew 9:33, Mark 7:26, Luke 4:33). Our enemy the devil seems to have a lot of capabilities, but we know for certain that Peter wasn't in any way "possessed by a demon." No, what happened in this incident was that Peter simply repeated a mantra that was implanted in the world by the father of the world (2 Corinthians 4:4), the father of lies (John 8:44), Satan, the devil himself. This lie was the Messiah would come and set up his eternal kingdom without the need for anyone to deal with their sin, either in a personal or corporal sense for all of Israel. The people of the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) saw no need to humble themselves before God, repent of their sins, and allow God to give His life as the perfect, once for all sacrifice of sin forever (Hebrews 10:14). For a very brief instant Peter was conformed to this world, something about which Saint Paul later warned us when he said, "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your heart (Romans 12:2).

Concluding Thoughts:

In the introduction of today's lesson, I mentioned a theologically liberal preacher who studied the same text we read in Isaiah and came to a completely different conclusion regarding the identity of the figure in the song of the servant. Perhaps he was ashamed of Jesus so as not to offend his Jewish readers. As we saw in the Gospel reading, Jesus had a stern warning for those who would not

confess Him as the Messiah. Jesus made a scary statement concerning this in today's Gospel reading about people who express that kind of faith. "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*" (Mark 8:38). This pastor's denial of the obvious identity of Jesus in Isaiah 50 contrasts sharply with Peter who through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit recognized and confessed Jesus as the Christ. Peter's faith is the kind about which James spoke, the kind saves, the type that expresses itself through good works.

Throughout the readings today, we saw two types of servants, the faithful ones like Jesus and His true followers, and the unfaithful ones that God will send into permanent captivity, unlike the temporary condition suffered by the Nation of Israel. My prayer is that we will live boldly as faithful believers in the Lord Jesus by not denying Him, whether in print, in the ways that we treat others, or in the ways in which we are obedient in serving Him. What if **we** knew how and when we were going to die? How now would we then live?

Reflection Questions

1. That faithful servant is one whose life is marked by good works done as a result of a heart changed by God, however, we all fall short in various ways (Romans 3:23). One of the areas in which I have caught myself falling into a trap over and over again in my marriage (and in other relationships) is to propose a five-point plan to fix someone once they have poured out their heart to me concerning their problems. Have you ever fallen into this type of sinful behavior? In light of what you learned today from the readings, how can you through God's power counteract this in the future?

2. Peter was the first to boldly express that Jesus was the Christ (Mark 8:29), but his confession ended up leading to Jesus' rebuke when his concept of the Christ didn't align with the Father's plan for Jesus which included suffering, death, and resurrection. Discuss in what ways you too have misconceptions about Jesus in your life. In what ways do you expect Jesus to do something in a certain manner or timeframe, but find yourself frustrated when He accomplishes His plan in a contradictory manner?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-11-2022



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

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

built a golden calf idol to worship.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

Exodus 32:7-14 NAS95 7 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" 9 The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. 10 Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

In the introduction we mentioned how the First Commandment comes into view with the people building a molten calf and worshiping it. From my study of archeology, it is very possible that this was what was known as a "pedestal god" which featured a platform on the top of the icon onto which the god supposedly alighted. Giving them the benefit of a doubt along this line of thinking it's at least possible that their motives were to worship the true God Yahweh. However, we learn from the reading that God knew otherwise, for He said the people have "quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them" (v. 8). Regardless of the people's motives, their actions were a clear

violation of the Commandment previously given to them. God's response was to ask Moses to move away so that "My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them" (v. 10). But Moses pleaded with the Lord on the basis of His special covenantal relationship with them and He relented. The people were those "whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt" and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom God "swore by [Him]self [saying], "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever" (vv. 11b, 13).

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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Gospel Reading:

Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." 11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you

have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

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

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

When the son returned his father saw him in the distance and embraced him. But the son evidently had been rehearsing what he was going to say and quickly offered his heartfelt confession. Certainly, the father heard this, but went on with the festivities of welcoming home his lost son. Just like in the other parable the lost sheep was found, the lost coin was located and this was cause for celebration! In the midst of the festivities a wrinkle developed when the older son heard the commotion. This elder one expressed deep resentment for his younger brother, and told his father

that he had always done the right thing. It seemed unfair to him that his brother should receive a party for returning after blowing his inheritance while he had diligently sacrificed all of these years. The father's reply sheds light on the depth of God's love, mercy, and patience. "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

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

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

Which son are you more like? Where have you placed your faith? Have you stopped depending upon your own righteousness and confessed your need to the Father of His mercy? Or do you identify with the older brother, the Pharisee, who always did everything "right" in this life and yet distanced himself from needing the mercy of the Father? Saint John said in 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." If you are in the former category praise God for what He has done for you. If you are not sure then reach out to God for He is a longsuffering God, patient, wishes that none would perish but all would come to the knowledge of the truth. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

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Reflection Questions

1. This week's readings from the Bible highlighted God's heart of mercy, patience and forgiveness. How have you experienced these attributes in your own relationship with God?

2. Do you have a prodigal son in your family or know of one among your friends or relatives? Is their story one of redemption or are they still working as a slave for a pig farmer as in the Gospel lesson today? What can you learn from this prodigal person?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-12-2021



One time while I was studying the first reading from Isaiah Chapter 50 I came across an interesting commentary on a web site. This supposedly Christian pastor wrote about the identity of the servant figure in the reading either as the Nation of Israel as a whole, or perhaps as he said, "an individual person." Then he gave an analysis of verses 4 – 9a in which he never once identified the "servant" mentioned there with the Person of Jesus Christ. This contradicts the Gospel narrative who very clearly ascribed these exact events in describing the Passion of Jesus Christ (for example Matthew 26:67). This week we will study that reading from Isaiah and learn about what Jesus had to say in the Gospel reading about those who like the pastor I mentioned, deny or ignore that Jesus is the Christ of God presented by Isaiah. This week we will also learn from James about two types of faith, one that saves and one that does not. The key idea that runs throughout the three readings today is the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of God's servants.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 50 and is one of what is known as Isaiah's "Servant Songs." The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long-awaited Messiah. As we mentioned in the introduction, some present-day scholars (especially including Jewish writers) identify the servant in these songs as the entire Nation of Israel. This is true in a certain sense and especially about the one spoken of in the opening verses of Chapter 50 just prior to today's reading. Verse one reads, "*Thus says the LORD: Where is your mother's bill of divorce with which I put her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? No, because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away*" (Isaiah 50:1). Clearly the Lord is using a figure of speech in referring to the Nation who went astray from Him and was sold into captivity for their sins. However, in contrast to the servant we will read in the subsequent verses, the servant figure implied in this verse is an unfaithful one. As we will see in the reading below, the Servant beginning in verse 5 is undeniably the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The overall preceding context of today's reading is the preparation of Judah's return from captivity at Babylon, something we know happened during the times of Nehemiah. Isaiah had also just introduced the prophecy of the future captivity under a yet to be born ruler named Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:1). This future Persian King would be responsible for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and is also called a servant or shepherd of God (Isaiah 44:28). Isaiah prophesies about both faithful and unfaithful servants, be they Jews or Gentiles like Cyrus. This same idea of faithfulness carries into the second reading today as well as the Gospel lesson in which Jesus is the faithful Servant of God. As you read, take careful note of the characteristics of the faithful Servant.

First Reading:

Isaiah 50:5-9 NAS95 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them.

Although the Nation of Israel sinned, God was obedient in fulfilling His promises of redemption through His Servant Son Jesus Christ. The Servant (whom we know as Jesus) was obedient in doing all that God had for Him to accomplish (v. 5).Although Jesus was condemned by the then leaders of the world, He was obedient to God and looked to His Father for His ultimate vindication. In a similar way, we too are called to obey our Father God in accomplishing all the things He has for us to do and we will ultimately be vindicated when we meet the Lord.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James we read last week but moving ahead to verse 14. The content of his teaching is the quality of true faith. Throughout the Bible, there are many examples of people possessing different qualities of faith, one that saves and one that does not. Rahab was commended for her saving faith by the author of Hebrews when he said, "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Hebrews 11:31). Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who received the two spies sent by Joshua and hid them in defiance of the King (Joshua 2:1-6). Had she not taken this bold step of faith she would have perished at the hands of the Israelites when they toppled the city. As we read from James we will see both kinds of faith, the kind that saves and expresses itself in godly actions (Ephesians 2:10), and the kind that cannot save. It is this latter kind about which we will read later in the Gospel lesson about which Jesus said, "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*" *(*Matthew 8:38).

Second Reading:

James 2:14-18 NAS95 14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

James asks a hypothetical question, essentially "What good is a dead faith because a dead faith doesn't result in the salvation of one's soul" (v. 14). He then went on to illustrate the works that

proceed from a person possessing such a dead faith. This person could say something like, "be warmed and filled" (v. 16b) to a person that is cold and hungry. There are two types of faith, that which can save and that which cannot. The faithful servant is one whose works manifest themselves into acts of service. This is a type of faith that can save, and does save a person (1 John 5:13). Although they are saved by God's grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9) this faith manifests itself in good works (Ephesians 2:10).

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, remember how in the first reading we saw how Isaiah portrayed Jesus as the faithful Servant Who willingly surrendered Himself to the vile treatment of His tormenters. In contrast, we also saw how Isaiah in the earlier verses spoke of the unfaithfulness of the implied servant figure, the Nation of Israel who was sold into captivity for their sin. In the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus is the faithful Servant of God and how Saint Peter boldly proclaims this message even though he misunderstood the nature of God's Servant Son.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Saint Mark begins Jesus' inevitable and irreversible journey to the cross. As we saw in the pleas of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, in today's Gospel reading Jesus testifies about the difficult plan that His Father has for Him (Mark 8:31). The context of the reading is in Caesarea Philip. This is a place that I encountered during my trip to Israel that has an eerie sense about it, almost as if Jesus' conflict with Satan had somehow permeated the rocks of that place to this very day. As you read, keep in mind that the purpose of Jesus' miracles was to show the people Who He was, to bring them to repentance of their sins, and to move them to place their trust in Him for eternal life.

Gospel Reading:

The reading omitted verses 36-38 which have been included below.

Mark 8:27-38 NAS95 27 Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." 29 And

He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." 30 And He warned them to tell no one about Him. 31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. 33 But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? 37 For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

For the very first time Jesus revealed His Father's plan for Him which was to offer His body as the ultimate and final sacrifice during the Passover celebration. Jesus knew that He had to fulfill the plan His father had for Him exactly, including how and when He was to die. Jesus used the term "I am" in verse 27, something which His Jewish hearers would have known was a claim of divinity. In asking them who they thought He was, Jesus was clearly identifying Himself as God, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the One Who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. After Jesus had warned them not to tell anyone that He was the Christ (v. 30) although His miracles spoke profoundly about His nature (see John 10:25, "The works that I do in My Father's Name bear witness of Me"), He explained to His disciples "plainly" (v. 32) what was to happen to Him in Jerusalem. Note how the text says, "He **began** to teach them" (v. 31a, emphasis added) about this, because even after He rose from the dead His disciples still didn't understand. He told his disciples to keep quiet about His identity in order to fulfil the Father's timing for His life as the Jews were already seeking to kill Him (John 5:18). We see that in verse 32 Peter, the student, took Jesus, the Teacher, aside and began to rebuke Him! Jesus identification of Himself as the Suffering Servant from Isaiah didn't accord well with Peter's view of Jesus as the conquering Messiah. Peter unwittingly spoke for Satan in attempting to change Jesus' destiny on the cross, in the same way that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13). We will say more about this below.

Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and frequently acted first and too stock of his actions later. After having spent the better part of three years, he was obviously upset that anyone would harm Jesus, especially the chief priests and scribes. He was clearly the leader of the group of twelve disciples and the first one and a representative of all twelve to whom were later given the "keys of the kingdom," meaning that He entrusted them with the dispersion of the Gospel message to the world. His main role was as a witness to the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Sometimes called the "first among

equals," he played a leading role in the early church as can be seen in Acts Chapter 1 when he was the first to gather the ten remaining disciples in order to replace Judas Iscariot the traitor. Peter, whose heart was changed by the Holy Spirit, was the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-18). He was called a "pillar of the church" in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:9) and acted as the de facto spokesman of the disciples (see Matthew 15:15, 18:21, 19:27, Mark 11:21, etc.). Peter couldn't bear the thought of losing his best friend and ministry partner for whom he had dedicated his life the past several years. Peter, like the Old Testament Prophets and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when Jesus told him that this nemesis would kill his Messiah!

Yes, the purposes of God had to be fulfilled through Jesus offering Himself as a Savior for our sins. Peter, who was overcome both with his passion and love of Jesus, was as Jesus said, also influenced by the Father of Lies (v. 32). The time of Jesus ministry was an era of extreme demonic activity. Almost a dozen times in the Gospels Jesus was confronted by a demon possessed person and cast it out of them (for example Matthew 9:33, Mark 7:26, Luke 4:33). Our enemy the devil seems to have a lot of capabilities, but we know for certain that Peter wasn't in any way "possessed by a demon." No, what happened in this incident was that Peter simply repeated a mantra that was implanted in the world by the father of the world (2 Corinthians 4:4), the father of lies (John 8:44), Satan, the devil himself. This lie was the Messiah would come and set up his eternal kingdom without the need for anyone to deal with their sin, either in a personal or corporal sense for all of Israel. The people of the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) saw no need to humble themselves before God, repent of their sins, and allow God to give His life as the perfect, once for all sacrifice of sin forever (Hebrews 10:14). For a very brief instant Peter was conformed to this world, something about which Saint Paul later warned us when he said, "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your heart (Romans 12:2).

Concluding Thoughts:

In the introduction of today's lesson, I mentioned a theologically liberal preacher who studied the same text we read in Isaiah and came to a completely different conclusion regarding the identity of the figure in the song of the servant. Perhaps he was ashamed of Jesus so as not to offend his Jewish readers. As we saw in the Gospel reading, Jesus had a stern warning for those who would not confess Him as the Messiah. Jesus made a scary statement concerning this in today's Gospel reading about people who express that kind of faith. "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*" (Mark 8:38). This pastor's denial of the obvious identity of Jesus in Isaiah 50 contrasts sharply with Peter who through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit

recognized and confessed Jesus as the Christ. Peter's faith is the kind about which James spoke, the kind saves, the type that expresses itself through good works.

Throughout the readings today, we saw two types of servants, the faithful ones like Jesus and His true followers, and the unfaithful ones that God will send into permanent captivity, unlike the temporary condition suffered by the Nation of Israel. My prayer is that we will live boldly as faithful believers in the Lord Jesus by not denying Him, whether in print, in the ways that we treat others, or in the ways in which we are obedient in serving Him. What if **we** knew how and when we were going to die? How now would we then live?

Reflection Questions

1. That faithful servant is one whose life is marked by good works done as a result of a heart changed by God, however, we all fall short in various ways (Romans 3:23). One of the areas in which I have caught myself falling into a trap over and over again in my marriage (and in other relationships) is to propose a five-point plan to fix someone once they have poured out their heart to me concerning their problems. Have you ever fallen into this type of sinful behavior? In light of what you learned today from the readings, how can you through God's power counteract this in the future?

2. Peter was the first to boldly express that Jesus was the Christ (Mark 8:29), but his confession ended up leading to Jesus' rebuke when his concept of the Christ didn't align with the Father's plan for Jesus which included suffering, death, and resurrection. Discuss in what ways you too have misconceptions about Jesus in your life. In what ways do you expect Jesus to do something in a certain manner or timeframe but find yourself frustrated when He accomplishes His plan in a contradictory manner?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-13-2020



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

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

SIR 27:30—28:7

Wrath and anger are hateful things,

yet the sinner hugs them tight.

The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,

for he remembers their sins in detail.

Forgive your neighbor's injustice;

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

Could anyone nourish anger against another

and expect healing from the LORD?

Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,

can he seek pardon for his own sins?

If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,

who will forgive his sins?

Remember your last days, set enmity aside;

remember death and decay, and cease from sin!

Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus' teaching in the parable gets at some very important truths. First, unbelievers are separated from God the Father by a debt that they can never repay, even in 200,000 years or working to earn their salvation. The Scripture make it clear that nobody can earn their way into heaven, regardless of how "good" they are and how hard they work. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). God's standard of righteousness in order to enter heaven is perfection. Perfection cannot be granted by our doing of good works but rather by faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross. The scripture says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

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

mistreatment.

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

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_09-13-2020Download

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



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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

> *Exodus 32:7-14 NAS95 7 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" 9 The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. 10 Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.*

In the introduction we mentioned how the First Commandment comes into view with the people

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine*

in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." 11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

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

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

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

The key players in the parable are obvious only to a person whose heart has been enlightened to the truths of God. The father is God the Father. Earlier in the study we found that the Father is

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

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

Which son are you more like? Where have you placed your faith? Have you stopped depending upon your own righteousness and confessed your need to the Father of His mercy? Or do you identify with the older brother, the Pharisee, who always did everything "right" in this life and yet distanced himself from needing the mercy of the Father? Saint John said in 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." If you are in the former category praise God for what He has done for you. If you are not sure then reach out to God for He is a longsuffering God, patient, wishes that none would perish but all would come to the knowledge of the truth. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reflection Questions

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-16-2018



This week while I was studying the first reading from Isaiah Chapter 50 I came across an interesting commentary on a web site. This supposedly Christian pastor wrote about the identity of the servant figure in the reading either as the Nation of Israel as a whole, or perhaps as he said, "an individual person." Then he gave an analysis of verses 4 – 9a in which he never once identified the "servant" mentioned there with the Person of Jesus Christ. This contradicts the Gospel narrative who very clearly ascribed these exact events in describing the Passion of Jesus Christ (for example Matthew 26:67). This week we will study that reading from Isaiah and learn about what Jesus had to say in the Gospel reading about those who like the pastor I mentioned, deny or ignore that Jesus is the Christ of God presented by Isaiah. This week we will also learn from James about two types of faith, one that saves and one that does not. The key idea that runs throughout the three readings today is the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of God's servants.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 50 and is one of what is known as Isaiah's "Servant Songs." The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long awaited Messiah. As we mentioned in the introduction, some present day scholars (especially including Jewish writers) identify the servant in these songs as the entire Nation of Israel. This is true in a certain sense and especially about the one spoken of in the opening verses of Chapter 50 just prior to today's reading. Verse one reads, "*Thus says the LORD: Where is your mother's bill of divorce with which I put her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? No, because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away*" (Isaiah 50:1). Clearly the Lord is using a figure of speech in referring to the Nation who went astray from Him and was sold into captivity for their sins. However, in contrast to the servant we will read in the subsequent verses, the servant figure implied in this verse is an unfaithful one. As we will see in the reading below, the Servant beginning in verse 5 is undeniably the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The overall preceding context of today's reading is the preparation of Judah's return from captivity at Babylon, something we know happened during the times of Nehemiah. Isaiah had also just introduced the prophecy of the future captivity under a yet to be born ruler named Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:1). This future Persian King would be responsible for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and is also called a servant or shepherd of God (Isaiah 44:28). Isaiah prophesies about both faithful and unfaithful servants, be they Jews or Gentiles like Cyrus. This same idea of faithfulness carries into the second reading today as well as the Gospel lesson in which Jesus is the faithful Servant of God. As you read, take careful note of the characteristics of the faithful Servant.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 50:5-9 NAS95 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them.*

Although the Nation of Israel sinned, God was obedient in fulfilling His promises of redemption through His Servant Son Jesus Christ. The Servant (whom we know as Jesus) was obedient in doing all that God had for Him to accomplish (v. 5).Although Jesus was condemned by the then leaders of the world, He was obedient to God and looked to His Father for His ultimate vindication. In a similar way, we too are called to obey our Father God in accomplishing all the things He has for us to do and we will ultimately be vindicated when we meet the Lord.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James we read last week but moving ahead to verse 14. The content of his teaching is the quality of true faith. Throughout the Bible, there are many examples of people possessing different qualities of faith, one that saves and one that does not. Rahab was commended for her saving faith by the author of Hebrews when he said, "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Hebrews 11:31). Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who received the two spies sent by Joshua and hid them in defiance of the King (Joshua 2:1-6). Had she not taken this bold step of faith she would have perished at the hands of the Israelites when they toppled the city. As we read from James we will see both kinds of faith, the kind that saves and expresses itself in godly actions (Ephesians 2:10), and the kind that cannot save. It is this latter kind about which we will read later in the Gospel lesson about which Jesus said, "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (*Matthew 8:38).

Second Reading:

> *James 2:14-18 NAS95 14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*

James asks a hypothetical question, essentially "What good is a dead faith because a dead faith doesn't result in the salvation of one's soul" (v. 14). He then went on to illustrate the works that proceed from a person possessing such a dead faith. This person could say something like, "be warmed and filled" (v. 16b) to a person that is cold and hungry. There are two types of faith, that which can save and that which cannot. The faithful servant is one whose works manifest themselves into acts of service. This is a type of faith that can save, and does save a person (1 John 5:13). Although they are saved by God's grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9) this faith manifests itself in good works (Ephesians 2:10).

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, remember how in the first reading we saw how Isaiah portrayed Jesus as the faithful Servant Who willingly surrendered Himself to the vile treatment of His tormenters. In contrast, we also saw how Isaiah in the earlier verses spoke of the unfaithfulness of the implied servant figure, the Nation of Israel who was sold into captivity for their sin. In the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus is the faithful Servant of God and how Saint Peter boldly proclaims this message even though he misunderstood the nature of God's Servant Son.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Saint Mark begins Jesus' inevitable and irreversible journey to the cross.

As we saw in the pleas of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, in today's Gospel reading Jesus testifies about the difficult plan that His Father has for Him (Mark 8:31). The context of the reading is in Caesarea Philip. This is a place that I encountered during my trip to Israel that has an eerie sense about it, almost as if Jesus' conflict with Satan had somehow permeated the rocks of that place to this very day. As you read, keep in mind that the purpose of Jesus' miracles was to show the people Who He was, to bring them to repentance of their sins, and to move them to place their trust in Him for eternal life.

Gospel Reading:

The reading omitted verses 36-38 which have been included below.

> *Mark 8:27-38 NAS95 27 Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." 29 And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." 30 And He warned them to tell no one about Him. 31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. 33 But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? 37 For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."*

For the very first time Jesus revealed His Father's plan for Him which was to offer His body as the ultimate and final sacrifice during the Passover celebration. Jesus knew that He had to fulfill the plan His father had for Him exactly, including how and when He was to die. Jesus used the term "I am" in verse 27, something which His Jewish hearers would have known was a claim of divinity. In asking them who they thought He was, Jesus was clearly identifying Himself as God, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the One Who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. After Jesus had warned them not to tell anyone that He was the Christ (v. 30) although His miracles spoke profoundly about His nature (see John 10:25, "The works that I do in My Father's Name bear witness of Me"), He explained to His disciples "plainly" (v. 32) what was to happen to Him in Jerusalem. Note how the text says, "He **began** to teach them" (v. 31a, emphasis added) about this, because even after He rose from the dead His disciples still didn't understand. He told his disciples to keep quiet about His identity in order to fulfil the Father's timing for His life as the Jews were already

seeking to kill Him (John 5:18). We see that in verse 32 Peter, the student, took Jesus, the Teacher, aside and began to rebuke Him! Jesus identification of Himself as the Suffering Servant from Isaiah didn't accord well with Peter's view of Jesus as the conquering Messiah. Peter unwittingly spoke for Satan in attempting to change Jesus' destiny on the cross, in the same way that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13). We will say more about this below.

Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and frequently acted first and too stock of his actions later. After having spent the better part of three years, he was obviously upset that anyone would harm Jesus, especially the chief priests and scribes. He was clearly the leader of the group of twelve disciples and the first one and a representative of all twelve to whom were later given the "keys of the kingdom," meaning that He entrusted them with the dispersion of the Gospel message to the world. His main role was as a witness to the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Sometimes called the "first among equals," he played a leading role in the early church as can be seen in Acts Chapter 1 when he was the first to gather the ten remaining disciples in order to replace Judas Iscariot the traitor. Peter, whose heart was changed by the Holy Spirit, was the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-18). He was called a "pillar of the church" in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:9) and acted as the de facto spokesman of the disciples (see Matthew 15:15, 18:21, 19:27, Mark 11:21, etc.). Peter couldn't bear the thought of losing his best friend and ministry partner for whom he had dedicated his life the past several years. Peter, like the Old Testament Prophets and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when Jesus told him that these nemesis would kill his Messiah!

Yes, the purposes of God had to be fulfilled through Jesus offering Himself as a Savior for our sins. Peter, who was overcome both with his passion and love of Jesus, was as Jesus said, also influenced by the Father of Lies (v. 32). The time of Jesus ministry was an era of extreme demonic activity. Almost a dozen times in the Gospels Jesus was confronted by a demon possessed person and cast it out of them (for example Matthew 9:33, Mark 7:26, Luke 4:33). Our enemy the devil seems to have a lot of capabilities, but we know for certain that Peter wasn't in any way "possessed by a demon." No, what happened in this incident was that Peter simply repeated a mantra that was implanted in the world by the father of the world (2 Corinthians 4:4), the father of lies (John 8:44), Satan, the devil himself. This lie was the Messiah would come and set up his eternal kingdom without the need for anyone to deal with their sin, either in a personal or corporal sense for all of Israel. The people of the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) saw no need to humble themselves before God, repent of their sins, and allow God to give His life as the perfect, once for all sacrifice of sin forever (Hebrews 10:14). For a very brief instant Peter was conformed to this world, something about which Saint Paul later warned us when he said, "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your heart (Romans 12:2).

Concluding Thoughts:

In the introduction of today's lesson I mentioned a liberal preacher would studied the same text we read in Isaiah and came to a completely different conclusion regarding the identity of the figure in

the song of the servant. Perhaps he was ashamed of Jesus so as not to offend his Jewish readers. As we saw in the Gospel reading, Jesus had a stern warning for those who would not confess Him as the Messiah. Jesus made a scary statement concerning this in today's Gospel reading about people who express that kind of faith. "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*" (Mark 8:38). This pastor's denial of the obvious identity of Jesus in Isaiah 50 contrasts sharply with Peter who through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit recognized and confessed Jesus as the Christ. Peter's faith is the kind about which James spoke, the kind saves, the type that expresses itself through good works.

Throughout the readings today, we saw two types of servants, the faithful ones like Jesus and His true followers, and the unfaithful ones that God will send into permanent captivity, unlike the temporary condition suffered by the Nation of Israel. My prayer is that we will live boldly as faithful believers in the Lord Jesus by not denying Him, whether in print, in the ways that we treat others, or in the ways in which we are obedient in serving Him. What if **we** knew how and when we were going to die? How now would we then live?

Reflection Questions

1. That faithful servant is one whose life is marked by good works done as a result of a heart changed by God, however, we all fall short in various ways (Romans 3:23). One of the areas in which I have caught myself falling into a trap over and over again in my marriage (and in other relationships) is to propose a five-point plan to fix someone once they have poured out their heart to me concerning their problems. Have you ever fallen into this type of sinful behavior? In light of what you learned today from the readings, how can you through God's power counteract this in the future?

2. Peter was the first to boldly express that Jesus was the Christ (Mark 8:29), but his confession ended up leading to Jesus' rebuke when his concept of the Christ didn't align with the Father's plan for Jesus which included suffering, death, and resurrection. Discuss in what ways you too have misconceptions about Jesus in your life. In what ways do you expect Jesus to do something in a certain manner or timeframe but find yourself frustrated when He accomplishes His plan in a contradictory manner?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-17-2017



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

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:

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

Second Reading:

Romans 14:7-9 NAS95 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we

live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 18:21-35 NAS95 21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up

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

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

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

As the servant left the encounter with the king-judge, he went out and found a fellow slaved who owed him a substantial sum, equivalent to about one hundred days wages (one denarii was about one day's wage). In contrast to the "zillion dollars" the first servant had owed to the king this was a relatively insignificant amount. Additionally, since this first servant's debts would have most likely included the sum total of all that was owed to him by all of the other servants who had made

borrowed from him, in all probability all of the debts had been erased. Though we have to be careful not to make a parable walk on all fours and instead to seek the central principle our Lord is getting at, all the members of this "loan pyramid" we will call it were forgiven, including the first servant and all of the servants who owed money to him. Therefore, the act of the first servant in asking for repayment of the 100 denarii debt was pure greed. This calls into question the honesty of the servants "impassioned plea" before the king in the first place. As a result of his greed and unrepentant heart, the king ordered the debts of the servant reinstated, something which was impossible for him to ever repay.

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

Jesus' teaching in the parable gets at some very important truths. First, unbelievers are separated from God the Father by a debt that they can never repay, even in 200,000 years or working to earn their salvation. The Scripture make it clear that nobody can earn their way into heaven, regardless of how "good" they are and how hard they work. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). God's standard of righteousness in order to enter heaven is perfection. Perfection cannot be granted by our doing of good works but rather by faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross. The scripture says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

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

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

When we talk to others we can find many stories of forgiveness, or the lack thereof. I think of

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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