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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 124: 08/30/2026



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Jeremiah and a reading from this great prophet of God, in whom we find many similarities to Peter and Paul. Then move to the second reading from Saint Paul from Romans 12, in which he warns about not being conformed to the world. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew in which we see a certain circumstance in which Peter found himself conformed to a false belief taught by the world.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. Known as the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah was one of the most prolific prophetic writers in the Old Testament, having written both the Book bearing his name and Lamentations. He began writing during the reign of the godly King Josiah, in 627 BC, and continued through the eventual destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. A key verse

summarizing the situation in Israel during this time appears in the closing chapter of the Book. "For through the anger of the LORD this came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 52:3)

God was angry with the people for a variety of reasons, but foremost among them was that they had turned away from their worship of the One True God and instead worshiped dead idols. Female deities were frequent objects of worship in the Old Testament. For example, God said:

> "Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me" (Jeremiah 7:17-18).

God was angry with them because they were baking cakes and offering cakes to the "queen of heaven," who was the female deity of their day. This goddess was likely someone associated with grace and blessing. The Scripture is clear that all grace flows through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God was clear that worship was to be given to Him alone. The Jews were commanded not only to forsake the worship of foreign gods but also not to even **create** an image of any deity, be it of the True or God or any god. Interestingly enough, this law was binding upon them and all New Testament believers (see John 14:15; this goes beyond the Ten Commandments, as in John 13:34). As well, worshiping an image, they were not to even create an image of even the True God and assign worship to it in any manner. God knew that when they built something to honor Him, they would fall into worshiping the image rather than God Himself. The Second Commandment given by God to Moses spelled this out very clearly to them:

> *2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6)*

If that were all that was going on, then perhaps God would have relented in His judgment of them through allowing Babylon to overcome the nation and destroy Jerusalem. However, conditions in Israel were even worse than that as we see further on in Jeremiah Chapter 7:

> *30 "For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight," declares the LORD, "they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. 31 They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind" (Jeremiah 7:30-31).*

Not only did they offer sacrifices in the temple to false gods, but they even sacrificed their own children in a fire. This was the context of the first reading today. As you read, try to imagine the anguish that Jeremiah must have been experiencing because of the extreme misbehavior of God's chosen people.

First Reading:

> *7 O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; Everyone mocks me. 8 For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction, Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted In reproach and derision all day long. 9 But if I say, "I will not remember Him Or speak anymore in His name," Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; And I am weary of holding it in, And I cannot endure it. (Jeremiah 20:7-9)*

In the reading and in light of the context, we see the passion of the Prophet Jeremiah as he pleads with the Jewish people to repent of their sin and turn to the worship of the True God as prescribed in their Law. Jeremiah said that the people derided him despite the fact that what he was telling them was the truth and for their own good (vv. 7-8). He said that it was impossible for him to contain within himself the words which the Lord God had given to him to proclaim. Later in the Gospel lesson we will see the similarity between Jeremiah and the Apostle Peter in his passion for God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading comes from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. In this passage, he encourages believers to respond to God with their whole lives.

Second Reading:

> *1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)*

Paul begins his thought with the word "therefore." Whenever we see this word, we should ask: "what's the 'therefore' there for?" Paul gives some pretty heavy directions to the believers, but they are grounded in the reality of who God is, which he has spent the last 11 chapters discussing.

As you may recall from previous weeks, Paul was addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church at Rome. He just finished expounding on the mysteries of God, who in his kindness has grafted Gentiles into the true vine of faith. This is truly a wonderful chapter in salvation history; deliverance from God's wrath has been paid in full by Jesus Christ's death on the cross. That is the basis of the "therefore". So this is what Paul is saying: as a result of God's mercies, it is only fitting to respond to Him with our whole lives; body, mind, and spirit.

Have you ever seen people who profess to be Christians, but only act like it when they are at church or around other Christians? Then you see them at work or at a gathering, acting in ways contrary to the way of Christ. They may use foul language, mistreat a waitress, or even cheat in order to get ahead. This is problematic because it is inconsistent with the reality of God's mercy in their life. Paul says in this passage that Christianity is a holistic endeavor. God is looking for true worship. We cannot compartmentalize our spirituality to one day a week or around certain spiritual activities. All of life can be a spiritual endeavor if we give ourselves fully to God as a living sacrifice. God is worthy of our bodies being submitted to Him; that includes our behaviors, actions, and what comes out of our mouths.

What are we sacrificing? We are sacrificing doing things according to the "flesh," which Paul likens

to the worldly system that has infected every fiber of our being. The world's way operates according to doing what is right in our own eyes, without considering God and His ways. The world's way operates without God in the center. So, Paul is urging his brothers (both Jew and Gentile) not to be squeezed into that dead-end mold. Yes, it may feel like a sacrifice to put God at the center of your life, but it is what each person was designed for.

How do we get there? By the renewing of our mind. What does this mean? Our minds have been shaped by so many things: our family values, our cultural values, messages from the media, our experiences, and how we have interpreted those experiences. Paul urges believers to be proactive about understanding what influences their perspective—and to exchange what has held them captive by lies for the freedom of the Truth. We know that the only reliable source of Truth is founded upon and consistent with the Bible. Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32). In context, He was pointing to Himself as the truth and to holding fast to His teaching as the only means of freedom from captivity to the enemy's lies (Satan). So, the only real "sacrifice" in this passage of Romans is giving up the destructive lies in one's life and learning to live according to the Truth. That is why studying the Bible, hearing God's heart through Bible teachers, and being around others who walk according to the Word of God is so important for our minds to be renewed. It may feel like we are swimming upstream at first, but God will slowly and surely renew our minds so that we will see that His will is good, pleasing, and perfect. Paul urges his brothers and us, because he knows it's a matter of life and death.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, let's reflect upon what we learned from the first reading. Jeremiah's passion reminds us of one particular character in the New Testament. Who jumps out at you as the one filled with passion for his people, one who sometimes acted impulsively without regard for how those around him would respond? Cephas, whose name is translated as "Peter" (John 1:42), whose brother was the disciple Andrew, was just such a man. In his second Epistle, Peter spoke similar harsh words about the false teachers of his day:

> *1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is*

> *not asleep. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 6 and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; 7 and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12 But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, 13 suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, 14 having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; 15 forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; 16 but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. 17 These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. 18 For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. 20 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. 22 It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." (2 Peter 2:1-22)*

Like Peter, I also have a passion for confronting false teaching. Some time ago, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses pulled up to my parents' house while I was visiting there one weekend. I knew how their operation worked: only one of them got out of the car, and the other two also recorded their "credit" for having made a household visit. I sensed in my spirit what was happening, and I began to pray silently for God's guidance. As the man sat down at the picnic table outside, I just happened to have a Bible and a sheet of blank paper on at least one side. I drew three columns on the paper with a horizontal heading across each section to serve later as a title for each category. As we talked, I

began to fill in important details about the Person of Jesus Christ in each of the three columns. I filled out the columns like this and explained the biblical support for the first column.

_____	_____	_____
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by Jehovah
uncreated always existed	maker of all other things	maker of some things
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

As we talked, the man began getting more agitated as he realized that his theological beliefs aligned with both the second **and** the third columns. I kept asking him, do you know anything about the religious cult about whom I am writing in that last column? The crowning blow came when I filled in titles for each of the categories:

Biblical Christianity	Jehovah Witness	Mormon
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by God
uncreated always existed and made all things	maker or all other things	maker of all things in partnership with God
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

Suddenly, the man stood up in a rage, just as my sister decided to stop by for a visit, as she saw me sitting outside at the table. As I attempted to introduce my sister to him, the man screamed some obscenities at me and my sister and ran towards his car. I wonder what kind of call report he wrote down that day (follow this link to see their blank form)!

Many of us can relate to Saint Peter. Of all the disciples, Peter is the one with whom I most identify. Some of us are impulsive in our reactions, especially in situations where we feel the Lord Jesus has been disrespected. Peter, like the Prophet Jeremiah, was a man of passion, the first of whom Jesus entrusted the "keys of the kingdom." Even Peter, the foremost of the disciples, was at least once overcome by the forces of evil that raged especially violently during Jesus' earthly ministry. Satan would stop at nothing to derail Jesus' ministry, even if he likely didn't understand all of the implications of Jesus' prediction of His own death. Matthew recorded the following incident, which is

today's Gospel reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. 22 Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." 23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS." (Matthew 16:21-27)*

Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and frequently acted first, taking stock of his actions later. After having spent the better part of three years with Jesus, 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 and representative of all twelve to whom the "keys of the kingdom" were later given, 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's *modusoperandi* may have been something that those of us partial dyslexics can relate, "durry up and hoo something!" 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 Jeremiah and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when he was told that these nemeses would kill his Messiah!

Yes, God's purposes had to be fulfilled through Jesus offering Himself as a Savior for our sins. Peter,

who was overcome with both his passion and his love for Jesus, was, as Jesus said, also influenced by the Father of Lies (v. 23). 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 that 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, just as Paul warned about in the second reading from Romans.

What does this mean in our lives? First, how have we responded to God's prophetic word? Have we, like Jeremiah, taken the Word and given it to others to watch the works of God unfold in their lives? Second, have we taken the Word into our own hearts and allowed God to transform us as Paul stated in the second reading? Are we offering our bodies as living sacrifices, something with which Jeremiah, Peter, and Paul have firmly conformed? Finally, what lies is **our** culture telling us today? What lies would we, like Peter, repeat in an instant when suddenly confronted with something that went against the world's teachings? What would be our reaction when invited to the wedding of a gay friend? How would we respond to the questions of the deacon board about our action in response to this event? Is it acceptable to love the sinner but hate the sin? These are things which we must reason with in advance such that when the sudden circumstance arises we are, as Saint Peter said, ready to give a response" (1 Peter 3:15).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Peter impulsively responded to Jesus' prophecy concerning His coming death, burial, and resurrection. Think back to a time when you found yourself in a situation in which your faith was challenged, and you responded impulsively without thinking about all of the implications of your actions. In light of the Gospel reading, what could you learn from Peter and Jesus in terms of how to respond in the future?

2. Review the past few weeks of your life. In what ways have you been tempted to be conformed to

the pattern of this world? What lie is behind the temptation? What truth can you hold onto to help you to be faithful to God in the midst of ongoing temptation? If you are not sure how to answer these questions, pray to God right now and ask Him to open your eyes to the deceptive nature of sin and help you to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 126: 08-31-2025



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

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First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

> *SIR 3:17-18, 20, 28-29*
> *My child, conduct your affairs with humility,*
> *and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts.*
> *Humble yourself the more, the greater you are,*
> *and you will find favor with God.*
> *What is too sublime for you, seek not,*
> *into things beyond your strength search not.*
> *The mind of a sage appreciates proverbs,*
> *and an attentive ear is the joy of the wise.*
> *Water quenches a flaming fire,*
> *and alms atone for sins.*

The opening verses are a call to show humility, a frequent theme throughout the Bible. It is reminiscent of Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction, and a proud spirit before the fall." The writer calls the lowly people of society to be humble, as well as those in the highest social and political strata, something which was surely countercultural back then and as much so today. The closing verses of the reading echo this same theme; however, they add the insight that wise people listen to the sayings of others, but humble people listen to the sayings of others.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

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

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Now we will examine the context of today's reading from Saint Luke. Here we find Jesus dining at the home of a certain famous Pharisee, likely a member of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin. Could it have been someone like Saint Paul, a Pharisee himself? The Scripture says that the "people" were observing him carefully. It would seem that they were trying to find some fault in Jesus, to trip him up, to find a reason for which they could bring him to trial. It would also seem that other Pharisees were present. So as Jesus often did, he told a parable. When you hear the word "parable," I suggest you think of it this way. The word means quite literally "to throw alongside." So think of a parable as a story thrown alongside to show you a particular spiritual truth. Be careful not to make a parable walk on all fours, but try to get the single spiritual truth out of it. Also, be careful not to take it literally if it isn't meant to be taken that way, and we can determine if that is the case by looking at the context.

Consider this parable that Jesus gave directly to the Pharisees and the context as you read it. Imagine yourself sitting with Jesus among the Pharisees, a group who strived to please God by observing the Law and holding to their oral traditions. We also need to carefully consider that the reading for this week omitted verses 2-6 in Luke chapter 14. This is unfortunate because these verses very clearly describe the context of Jesus' teaching. The audience also included a man suffering from abnormal body swelling in the missing five verses. The Pharisees proceeded to ask Jesus whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, which was the day all of this took place, Saturday (the Jews' Sabbath was always the last day of the week, not on Sunday as is celebrated by Christians). Jesus responded to their question with a question (as Jesus often did!). He asked the Pharisees what they would do if their child or ox fell into a hole on the Sabbath, would they pull them out immediately? The implied answer is, of course, yes. Anyone knows through pure common

sense that you would pull your child or ox out of the hole on the Sabbath Day. Jesus then took hold of the man and healed him, which caused great anger among the Pharisees. They were likely thinking something like, "You just broke the Sabbath Law, and for this lowly scum of a man with a bloated face and who is ceremonially unclean." The question is, what was this man with dropsy even doing there at the prominent Pharisee's house? According to the Law, he would be ruled unclean and unable to enter the temple, but here he was at the home of the prominent Pharisee. Were the Pharisees not already bending their rules to allow this unclean man to be at the meal? Or were they being hypocritical, or was the man able to wander in because of the typical open configuration of the ancient Near Eastern home? The text does not say. Now with this context in mind, let's look at the parable.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 14:1 NAS95 1 It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely.*
> *Omitted Verses:*
> *Luke 14:2-6 NAS95 2 And there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. 3 And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" 4 But they kept silent. And He took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away. 5 And He said to them, "Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" 6 And they could make no reply to this.*
> *Continuing:*
> *Luke 14:7-14 NAS95 7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. 10 But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. 12 And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. 13 But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"*

Jesus' parable was a frontal attack upon the Pharisees who "love[d] the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the marketplaces" (Luke 11:43). Because the Pharisees were exalting

themselves over everyone else, their problem was one of pride. The central teaching by Jesus in this passage was God's calling to be humble. By humbling yourself to help those who cannot help themselves, you will be repaid in heaven, but the reward may not be evident in this life. Jesus was upsetting the apple cart of the Pharisees' world by suggesting that the lowly people in this world, like the man with the terrible dropsy, would be exalted in the coming kingdom of heaven. Jesus demonstrated His humility by healing the man with dropsy (Luke 14:3), although He knew it would anger the Pharisees with whom He would soon be dining. He then went on to teach them why being humble was so important.

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of a time this past week when I considered myself as better than someone else? What were the circumstances? In what ways does Jesus speak to you about what you learned in the Gospel message?

2. What is one thing that you can change regarding this teaching of Jesus on the necessity of being humble?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-01-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a study of a reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses pours out his heart to the Israelites just before they were to begin their final conquest and enter the Promised Land. Moses cautions the people not to add to or take from the Law but to just simply follow it. Second, we look at a reading from the Book of James, said to be "the Proverbs" of the New Testament. Then we close with the Gospel reading from Saint Mark in which Jesus scolds the scribes and Pharisees for doing exactly what Moses told the people not to do by creating religious traditions, which they held above the Mosaic Law. For the application we will address the tendency toward formulaic religion and how God uses hardship to accomplish His purposes.

Do you believe that if you obey the government, pretty much keep the Ten Commandments and go to church every week that God will reward you with a life filled with some level of prosperity and good health? What if you sensed and were obedient to a call from God to uproot your life in order to engage in missions? Would you then be upset if things didn't turn out perfectly for you in your new life? I know a man named Dave that studied hard to become a missionary and moved to France with his wife to reach people for Jesus in this spiritually dark but civilized nation. He worked there for many years, had a good degree of success in his ministry and followed biblical teaching in all that he did. However, after being in France several decades, his health began to decline. As the months went by, his condition continued to worsen and at some point, he was told that he would need a liver transplant or he would die. You may ask, how could God allow this life-threatening condition in his life which threatened to end his ministry? How could God allow this situation in his life when he had sacrificed so much to move there, was faithful in his following the Bible, and was obedient in every way to the laws of his adopted nation? Later in this lesson you will hear what happened to Dave.

According to Scripture God allows challenges in the lives of believers which goes against what is known in our times as "health and wealth" or the prosperity gospel. This week we are going to see in the Gospel reading how Jesus confronted the false teachings occurring during His ministry from a Jewish religious group called the Pharisees. These were a sect that taught, in effect, salvation by works and held some of the same false beliefs as the modern prosperity gospel preachers of today.

It would be easy to misread the first reading if we have this formulaic or prosperity gospel in mind. The formula goes like this: I am obedient to God's commands, then He has to give me the circumstances in life that I think I deserve. The problem behind this formula is that it lacks the relational underpinning that God desires for us. We obey Him out of our own effort and then feel justified in our sense of entitlement. We will need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of relationship with God now made possible through grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, a word that means literally "second law." The Book begins with a chronicle of the events of the Hebrew people in the period just after the wilderness wanderings. Because of the people's disobedience they were forbidden from entering the Promised Land and spent thirty-eight years wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses. During this time God revealed the Law to Moses and began the Levitical Priesthood with his brother Aaron as the first high priest. At the end of these thirty-eight years, God prompted Moses to lead

military campaigns against the two regional leaders on the "other side" (meaning the east) of the Jordan River. The Hebrew army soundly defeated both King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. According to this Scripture, the Hebrews "captured all [their] cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women and children. We left no survivors. Only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves with the plunder of the cities we captured" (Deuteronomy 2:34-35). These events occurred over the final two years, which closed out the full forty years of wandering in the desert outside of God's Promised Land (to the west of the Jordan).

Even more so than in previous readings in order to glean the proper meaning from the passages that follow, it is necessary to clearly understand the context. Reflect upon each of the following points that will help to lead you to the proper contextual understanding of today's lesson.

- God does not change (Malachi 3:6, James 1:17), but He does change the terms through which He deals with His people according to His covenants. There are five covenants in the Old Testament Bible.

  I. First was the Noahic (pronounced "no aye ick") Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7).

  II. The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis Chapter 12. In this, God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v. 1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v. 3). These unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future.

  III. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through which God introduced the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19), and the context of the first reading today. The promises of this Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The Law was clear and exact, unlike the religious traditions that were derived from it over the centuries (as we will read about in the Gospel lesson). Moses spent forty years teaching the people the Law, and they spent forty years breaking it! Point of Fact: Had I lived during that time I wouldn't have done any better than they did.

  IV. The forth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant was and will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah.

  IV. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of

His people (Jeremiah 31:34b), and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v. 34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17). This Covenant is the terms through which God deals with us as believers today.

- God's plan of salvation for people has never changed, whether in the Old or New Testaments, although God has revealed His plan more clearly through the revelation of Jesus Christ (see Colossians 1:26 and Hebrews 1:1). Everyone is saved by faith in God's Savior whether it was Jews in the Old Testament, Jews in the New Testament, or Gentiles during either of the Testaments. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God is clear that there is only one unforgivable sin, which is a rejection of His only provision for the forgiveness of sin.

Finally, this is the key point that we need to remember as we study the first reading showing the sinful behavior of the Jews and how Jesus confronted the false teachings of the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson:

- God assesses different short-term penalties for sin according to each era and covenant. For example, before the Noahic Covenant when Cain killed Abel, God dealt immediately with this sin by putting a mark on Cain, exiling him to a foreign land, and causing him to tirelessly till unfruitful soil (Genesis 4:12-15). As a second example, in the first reading today we will see Moses' mention of an instance in which God acted quickly and harshly to judge sin among the Jewish exiles. Later during the time of the Exodus which is the context of the first reading, God ruled His people as a "theocratic kingdom." During this time Moses, his successor Joshua (and later the prophets and King David) received direct guidance from God. During the "theocratic kingdom" God levied heavy consequences upon those who broke the Law. In John's Gospel Jesus used the metaphor of God's pruning in the life of a believer in order to bring about more fruit (John 15:2). God's pruning in the context of the theocratic kingdom may have meant sudden death for the disobedient Jew, whether it came from God or as a result of capital punishment levied by the Israelite priests (and later Kings).

In our era, God operates according to the New Covenant in which he prunes believers during their earthly lives (John 15:2) while storing up His judgement for unbelievers largely until the end of their lives (John 15:6, "cast into the fire and burned"). Even during the Old Testament times God revealed His grace to the unbelieving world by lavishing His material blessings upon them, although their eternal destination was hell. This is very clear from both Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. Lest we think that God doesn't immediately judge sin in some cases, we must remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:1-11), as well as Saint Paul's teaching about some being sick and some have died because of their unholy behavior in the love feast and communion meal (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Now, with this context in mind, let's move to today's reading which is an address by Moses to the people as he prepares to appoint Joshua his successor (3:28) who would soon lead the people into the new land. Although Moses himself was forbidden by God to enter (Deuteronomy 3:23-26), God did allow him to travel to the top of Mount Pisgah to see a divine vision of the land just before his death (3:27).

First Reading:

> *Deuteronomy 4:1-8 NAS95 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. 3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you. 4 But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. 5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"*

Moses urged the people to follow the Levitical Law without adding to it or taking from it (v. 2) so that they may "live and go in and take possession of the land" being given by God to them (v. 1). We

will see later in the Gospel reading that the people didn't heed God's warning not to add to the law. Interestingly, God repeated this admonition in the very last Book of the New Testament not to add to or take from the Scriptures (Revelation 22:18). God's marching orders were for the people to just do what He has clearly told them through the Law delivered to Moses. Twice in this reading Moses tells the people to keep the commandments of the Law (v. 1, v. 2). Keeping the Law in the context of the reading does bring with it the promise of material blessing because God had promised the people entrance to the Promised Land. The recipients of the blessing were the minority of those in the Exodus, those who were still alive and the ones whom had "held fast to the LORD" (v. 4). If God killed a person because of their sin, then obviously, they didn't receive the blessings of the Promised Land. As we noted in the introduction, the consequences of disobedience during the theocratic kingdom could be severe and immediate. Beginning in verse 3 Moses recounted what God did to the disobedient people as recorded in the Book of Numbers. The people had become immersed in the worship of the god "Baal of Peor" (Numbers 25:5). Here the Book of Numbers says, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel'" (Numbers 25:4). A plague followed in which 24,000 people died (Numbers 25:9). This was God's way of purging the evil in order to protect the integrity of those who were seeking to follow God with a pure heart.

Another point from the reading was that God had established the Nation of Israel as a light to everyone in the world. God's "chosen people" were not chosen just for their own sake, but for the salvation of all people groups through their testimony of God's greatness (see also John 4:22). Moses addressed the people just before they were to begin the final conquest(s) to claim the land, saying, "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the **sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes** and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (v. 6, emphasis added). The Jews whose hearts were pointed towards the worship of the true God expressed their beliefs through the observance of the Law. The Jews' unique lifestyle served as God's showplace to the Gentile nations surrounding them. Their unique civil, moral, and ceremonial Laws were designed by God as a herald to the idolatrous people of the world. This was especially true when the Jews were dispersed around the world during the various captivities that God allowed throughout history, a pattern which continues to this very day. As Christians, we are called by God in a way similar to be like the Jew, living in a peculiar way, heralding the good news of God's grace and shining biblical light to our sin darkened world (Matthew 5:14, Ephesians 5:8). This ministry isn't just reserved for vocational works like my missionary friend Dave in France.

As we transition to the second reading, we will see some practical ways in which we are believers in Jesus Christ can live our lives as a beacon shining on the pathway for people to find God.

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of James, a letter often called the "Proverbs of the New Testament." James is a Book filled with practical wisdom and the application of godly principles drawn from throughout Scripture. The message woven into the entire book of James is the principle stated by Jesus, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). In a letter such as written by James, the literary context (knowing the verses before and after the reading, and the flow of the author's thought) is very important for understanding the original author's intent. In the reading today, the verse immediately prior to the reading was omitted (verse 16). Once that is included there is a nice connection created between the first reading and the Gospel lesson we will look at later.

Second Reading:

> *James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. 1:17-27 17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. 19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

James cautioned the people to "not be deceived" (v. 16), but about what? His caution was to not be deceived about the source of good things. The enemy subtly tries to convince us that God's gifts are not good or that good can come from any other source besides God. The source of every authentic blessing is God (v. 17). He encourages them by pointing out that they are the first fruits of the future

believers (v. 18). This is much like the Jews we saw in the first reading who were uniquely commissioned by God as a light to the nations.

You'll notice that James called the people "my beloved brethren" twice in the first four verses to give a loving context of his more confrontational statements in this passage. He gets to the heart of the matter by hitting his readers square between the eyes with teaching on the danger of the tongue (v. 19, v. 26, also repeated in chapter 3), and the falseness of believers who profess one thing, but live another way. In God's economy, there is no such thing as not "living up" to our beliefs. Instead, our lifestyle and choices are merely reflecting our true beliefs. Basic religion, James says, is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (v. 27). While not everyone has a direct ministry to orphans and widows, James is highlighting the need for us to express our religion in practical acts of service to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). The orphans and widows of his day would have been those who are marginalized by society, vulnerable to exploitation and overlooked because of their inability to reward those who serve them. Serving those who cannot give you any "kick back" helps to ensure that our motives are pure.

In the closing verse James said to "keep oneself unstained by the world." This is an important admonition that, if heeded daily, could help all of us live a more abundant life in the Lord. This is akin to "being in the world, but not of it" (Matthew 17:14-16), which allows us to be a witness to those who do not know the Lord as we live with a different mindset. The Book of James provides many such godly proverbs which can help us to live fully surrendered lives for Jesus. In the first reading we saw where Moses called the people to obey the Law of God. James calls people to obey not only the teachings of Jesus but also the spirit of the New Covenant. He also provides additional instruction in practical ways to implement this new relationship with God. We don't have to be motivated by guilt or shame as we consider serving God. When we truly listen to the Holy Spirit, Who is the life giving force empowering us to perform things including (and exceeding) "basic religion," He teaches us how to follow through with our particular race to run (Hebrews 12:1). In this way we look to fulfill not just the letter of the law, but we truly start to see how to be God's hands and feet in the world, thus fulfilling the spirit of His ways. This contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law connects us to the Gospel lesson, where we will see Jesus' teaching against the falsehoods taught by the Pharisees who embraced the letter of the Law but disregarded the spirit of the Law altogether.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is, pardon the pun, sandwiched between Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-34) and His feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10). Just prior to the events in the reading today, Jesus had walked on the water (Mark 6:48) and healed many sick people in the lakeside community of Gennesaret (Mark 6:53-56).

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 7:1-23 NAS95 1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 7 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' 8 "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." 9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; 11 but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' 12 you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." 14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. 16 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. 18 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) 20 And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."*

The scribes and Pharisees formed their own flavor of "Deuteronomy," or second law, not heeding Moses' call we read about in the first reading. As James warned, they were deceived about even doing the works of the Law regarding basic religion including the honoring of the parents, a clear commandment of God (Exodus 20:12). The behaviors associated with basic religion were the things that the Pharisees consciously chose not to do! Because the scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, it was vitally important for Jesus to point out the hypocrisy of their ways and to warn people against their bad influence.

There were a few things in this passage that the religious leaders did that were opposing true heart religion. The first was their insistence on having pure hands, but neglecting to have a pure heart. The second was that they had contrived a religious practice that provided a means to neglect financial assistance to their parents by saying those resources were instead given to God ("Corban," v. 11). The scribes' and Pharisees' "traditions" did in fact trump the first Law of God, that given by Moses and taught throughout the first five Books of the Bible. Jesus explained that what defiles a person is not what goes into their body, but it is what comes out of their heart. The uncleanness is already a part of us, it just takes the right variables to have it come out and show itself. The sin-sickness of the human heart is the issue that Jesus wanted them to see, so that they might see turn to Him for healing as the soul physician (Luke 5:31).

The big idea in the reading is the difference between following human traditions and dead religion versus possessing a life-giving relationship with the lover of a believer's soul through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were teaching a false message of salvation by works. Their non-gospel would accord well with the "health and wealth" teachers of today or the tendency to reduce God down to a formula. Either way, these false messages set us up to expect God to act in certain ways based on our good behavior and subtly demand that He hold up His end of the "bargain." Unfortunately, this is a misguided understanding of how to relate to God.

In the opening I mentioned the story of a missionary who walked with God in every way but still experienced tremendous difficulties. As a result of some excellent medical care he was able to receive the liver transplant that he needed to sustain his life. He has recovered and is continuing to serve overseas even in light of the fact that he will remain on rejection drugs and suffer from their side effects for the rest of his life.

I met with Dave recently to discuss what he has learned so far through his experiences. He told me that one of the things that really sustained him was when he called together a group of leaders from

his church who prayed over him and anointed him with oil in obedience to what James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Dave said that this really helped him to turn the matter over to God. Second, the church came around him and offered excellent prayer support during his most difficult time. He told me that many people reached out to him and told them that they were praying for him. These things gave him confidence that regardless of what happened it would all be for the glory of God. Interestingly, some of the French people told him everything would turn out okay because, "he was a Christian." These sentiments provided Dave with many teachable moments in which he was able to explain to the people that God allows hardships in the lives of Christians and perhaps even more so than those who don't believe. He knew that everything ultimately would turn out okay, but that believing in God did not guarantee a good and long-lived life.

As Christians just because we do everything right doesn't mean that we will be blessed in the earthly sense in which we might expect, including material blessings and good health. Instead, God allows challenges in our lives to lead us to a fuller relationship with Him. Our Christian lives are not like baking a cake. We can't just put together the exact right ingredients using a measured formula and follow the recipe exactly and have the cake turn out perfectly well each and every time. Sometimes God throws a monkey wrench into our plans in order to achieve His purposes. What's more, we may not even know or understand these purposes during out natural lifetimes. Unlike the Pharisees who taught salvation by works and outward obedience to their own set of laws, God calls us to walk in faith alone while behaving in ways as directed by the Holy Spirit. This does include closely understanding the biblical principles taught in the New Testament and the Ten Commandments of the Old. But we should not live our lives "formulaically," doing things for God and expecting Him to "bless" us on our terms. He will surely bless us, but His definition of blessing is a lot broader than our limited perspective. May we learn to walk by faith and not our feelings or our sight.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading James said, *27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27)*. This admonition can weigh heavy on the minds of some Christians because they don't often find themselves busy visiting orphans and widows in distress.

A. In what ways do you obey the spirit of James' calling through the activities that you do engage in

for God.

B. In what ways can you create connections in your life between the first part of verse 27 (Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress) and the last part (keep oneself unstained by the world)? List at least two ways in which you do.

2. Do you catch yourself being a Pharisee, overlooking the motives of the heart and instead, focusing upon minor, outward faults in yourself and others?

A. How does knowing that God looks on the heart change how you evaluate what's important in your own life and in relationship with others?

B. Ask God to reveal to you in what areas you are glossing over God's goodness in a certain person and missing His heart for them.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-29-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a study of a reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses pours out his heart to the Israelites just before they were to

begin their final conquest and enter the Promised Land. Moses cautions the people not to add to or take from the Law but to just simply follow it. Second, we look at a reading from the Book of James, said to be "the Proverbs" of the New Testament. Then we close with the Gospel reading from Saint Mark in which Jesus scolds the scribes and Pharisees for doing exactly what Moses told the people not to do by creating religious traditions, which they held above the Mosaic Law. In application, we will address the tendency toward formulaic religion and how God uses hardship to accomplish His purposes.

Do you believe that if you obey the government, pretty much keep the Ten Commandments and go to church every week that God will reward you with a life filled with some level of prosperity and good health? What if you sensed and were obedient to a call from God to uproot your life in order to engage in missions? Would you then be upset if things didn't turn out perfectly for you in your new life? I know a man named Dave that studied hard to become a missionary and moved to France with his wife to reach people for Jesus in this spiritually dark but civilized nation. He worked there for many years, had a good degree of success in his ministry and followed biblical teaching in all that he did. However, after being in France several decades, his health began to decline. As the months went by, his condition continued to worsen and at some point, he was told that he would need a liver transplant or he would die. You may ask, how could God allow this life-threatening condition in his life which threatened to end his ministry? How could God allow this situation in his life when he had sacrificed so much to move there, was faithful in his following the Bible, and was obedient in every way to the laws of his adopted nation? Later in this lesson you will hear what happened to Dave.

According to Scripture God allows challenges in the lives of believers which goes against what is known in our times as "health and wealth" or the prosperity gospel. This week we are going to see in the Gospel reading how Jesus confronted the false teachings occurring during His ministry from a Jewish religious group called the Pharisees. These were a sect that taught, in effect, salvation by works and held some of the same false beliefs as the modern prosperity gospel preachers of today.

It would be easy to misread the first reading if we have this formulaic or prosperity gospel in mind. The formula goes like this: I am obedient to God's commands, then He has to give me the circumstances in life that I think I deserve. The problem behind this formula is that is lacks the relational underpinning that God desires for us. We obey Him out of our own effort and then feel justified in our sense of entitlement. We will need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of relationship with God now made possible through grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, a word that means literally "second law." The Book begins with a chronicle of the events of the Hebrew people in the period just after the wilderness wanderings. Because of the people's disobedience they were forbidden from entering the Promised Land and spent thirty-eight years wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses. During this time God revealed the Law to Moses and began the Levitical Priesthood with his brother Aaron as the first high priest. At the end of these thirty-eight years God prompted Moses to lead military campaigns against the two regional leaders on the "other side" (meaning the east) of the Jordan River. The Hebrew army soundly defeated both King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. According to this Scripture, the Hebrews "captured all [their] cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women and children. We left no survivors. Only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves with the plunder of the cities we captured" (Deuteronomy 2:34-35). These events occurred over the final two years, which closed out the full forty years of wandering in the desert outside of God's Promised Land (to the west of the Jordan).

Even more so than in previous readings in order to glean the proper meaning from the passages that follow, it is necessary to clearly understand the context. Reflect upon each of the following points that will help to lead you to the proper contextual understanding for today's lesson.

- God does not change (Malachi 3:6, James 1:17), but He does change the terms through which He deals with His people according to His covenants. There are five covenants in the Old Testament Bible.

  I. First was the Noahic (pronounced "no ay ick") Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7).

  II. The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis Chapter 12. In this God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v.1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v.3). These unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future.

  III. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through which God introduced the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19), and the context of the first reading today. The promises of this Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The Law was clear and exact, unlike the religious traditions that were

derived from it over the centuries (as we will read about in the Gospel lesson). Moses spent forty years teaching the people the Law, and they spent forty years breaking it! Point of Fact: Had I lived during that time I wouldn't have done any better than they did.

IV. The forth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant was and will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah.

IV. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34b), and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v.34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17). This Covenant is the terms through which God deals with us as believers today.

- God's plan of salvation for people has never changed, whether in the Old or New Testaments, although God has revealed His plan more clearly through the revelation of Jesus Christ (see Colossians 1:26 and Hebrews 1:1). Everyone is saved by faith in God's Savior whether it was Jews in the Old Testament, Jews in the New Testament, or Gentiles during either of the Testaments. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God is clear that there is only one unforgivable sin, which is rejection of His only provision for the forgiveness of sin.

Finally, this is the key point that we need to remember as we study the first reading showing the sinful behavior of the Jews and how Jesus confronted the false teachings of the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson:

- God assesses different short-term penalties for sin according to each era and covenant. For example, before the Noahic Covenant when Cain killed Abel, God dealt immediately with this sin by putting a mark on Cain, exiling him to a foreign land, and causing him to tirelessly till unfruitful soil (Genesis 4:12-15). As a second example, in the first reading today we will see Moses' mention of an instance in which God acted quickly and harshly to judge sin among the Jewish exiles. Later during the time of the Exodus which is the context of the first reading, God ruled His people as a "theocratic kingdom." During this time Moses, his successor Joshua (and later the prophets and King David) received direct guidance from God. During the "theocratic kingdom" God levied heavy consequences upon those who broke the Law. In John's Gospel Jesus used the metaphor of God's pruning in the life of a believer in order to bring about more

> fruit (John 15:2). God's pruning in the context of the theocratic kingdom may have meant sudden death for the disobedient Jew, whether it came from God or as a result of capital punishment levied by the Israelite priests (and later Kings).

In our era God operates according to the New Covenant in which he prunes believers during their earthly lives (john 15:2) while storing up His judgement for unbelievers largely until the end of their lives (John 15:6, "cast in the fire and burned"). Even during the Old Testament times God revealed His grace for the unbelieving world by lavishing His material blessings upon them, although their eternal destination was hell. This is very clear from both Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. Lest we think that God doesn't immediately judge sin in some cases, we must remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:1-11), as well as Saint Paul's teaching about some being sick and some have died because of their unholy behavior in the love feast and communion meal (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Now, with this context in mind let's move to today's reading which is an address by Moses to the people as he prepares to appoint Joshua his successor (3:28) who would soon lead the people into the new land. Although Moses himself was forbidden by God to enter (Deuteronomy 3:23-26), God did allow him to travel to the top of Mount Pisgah to see a divine vision of the land just before his death (3:27).

First Reading:

Deuteronomy 4:1-8 NAS95 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. 3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you. 4 But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. 5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"

Moses urged the people to follow the Levitical Law without adding to it or taking from it (v. 2) so that they may "live and go in and take possession of the land" being given by God to them (v. 1). We will see later in the Gospel reading that the people didn't heed God's warning not to add to the law. Interestingly, God repeated this admonition in the very last Book of the New Testament not to add to or take from the Scriptures (Revelation 22:18). God's marching orders were for the people to just do what He has clearly told them through the Law delivered to Moses. Twice in this reading Moses tells the people to keep the commandments of the Law (v. 1, v. 2). Keeping the Law in the context of the reading does bring with it the promise of material blessing because God had promised the people entrance to the Promised Land. The recipients of the blessing were the minority of those in the Exodus, those who were still alive and the ones whom had "held fast to the LORD" (v. 4). If God killed a person because of their sin, then obviously, they didn't receive the blessings of the Promised Land. As we noted in the introduction, the consequences of disobedience during the theocratic kingdom could be severe and immediate. Beginning in verse 3 Moses recounted what God did to the disobedient people as recorded in the Book of Numbers. The people had become immersed in the worship of the god "Baal of Peor" (Numbers 25:5). In that Numbers it says, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel'" (Numbers 25:4). A plague followed in which 24,000 people died (Numbers 25:9). This was God's way of purging the evil in order to protect the integrity of those who were seeking to follow God with a pure heart.

Another point from the reading was that God had established the Nation of Israel as a light to everyone in the world. God's "chosen people" were not chosen just for their own sake, but for the salvation of all people groups through their testimony of God's greatness (see also John 4:22). Moses addressed the people just before they were to begin the final conquest(s) to claim the land, saying "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the **sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes** and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (v. 6, emphasis added). The Jews whose hearts were pointed towards the worship of the true God expressed their beliefs through the observance of the Law. The Jews' unique lifestyle served as God's showplace to the Gentile nations surrounding them. Their unique civil, moral, and ceremonial Laws were designed by God as a herald to the idolatrous people of the world. This was especially true when the Jews were dispersed around the world during the various captivities that God allowed throughout history, a pattern which continues to this very day. As Christians we are called by God in a way similar to be like the Jew, living in a peculiar way, heralding the good news of God's grace and shining biblical light to our sin darkened world (Matthew 5:14, Ephesians 5:8). This ministry isn't just reserved for vocational works like my missionary friend Dave in France.

As we transition to the second reading we will see some practical ways in which we are believers in Jesus Christ can live our lives as a beacon shining on the pathway for people to find God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of James, a letter often called the "Proverbs of the New Testament." James is a Book filled with practical wisdom and the application of godly principles drawn from throughout Scripture. The message woven into the entire book of James is the principle stated by Jesus, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). In a letter such as written by James, the literary context (knowing the verses before and after the reading, and the flow of the author's thought) is very important for understanding the original author's intent. In the reading today, the verse immediately prior to the reading was omitted (verse 16). Once that is included there is a nice connection created between the first reading and the Gospel lesson we will look at later.

Second Reading:

James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

James 1:17-27 NAS95 17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. 19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James cautioned the people to "not be deceived" (v. 16), but about what? His caution was to not be deceived about the source of good things. The enemy subtly tries to convince us that God's gifts are

not good or that good can come from any other source besides God. The source of every authentic blessing is God (v. 17). He encourages them by pointing out that they are the first fruits of the future believers (v. 18). This is much like the Jews we saw in the first reading who were uniquely commissioned by God as a light to the nations.

You'll notice that James called the people "my beloved brethren" twice in the first four verses to give a loving context for his more confrontational statements in this passage. He gets to the heart of the matter by hitting his readers square between the eyes with teaching on the danger of the tongue (v. 19, v. 26, also repeated in chapter 3), and the falseness of believers who profess one thing, but live another way. In God's economy, there is no such thing as not "living up" to our beliefs. Instead, our lifestyle and choices are merely reflecting our true beliefs. Basic religion, James says, is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (v. 27). While not everyone has a direct ministry to orphans and widows, James is highlighting the need for us to express our religion in practical acts of service to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). The orphans and widows of his day would have been those who are marginalized by society, vulnerable to exploitation and overlooked because of their inability to reward those who serve them. Serving those who cannot give you any "kick back" helps to ensure that our motives are pure.

In the closing verse James said to "keep oneself unstained by the world." This is an important admonition that, if heeded daily, could help all of us live a more abundant life in the Lord. This is akin to "being in the world, but not of it" (Matthew 17:14-16), which allows us to be a witness to those who do not know the Lord as we live with a different mindset. The Book of James provides many such godly proverbs which can help us to live fully surrendered lives for Jesus. In the first reading we saw where Moses called the people to obey the Law of God. James calls people to obey not only the teachings of Jesus but also the spirit of the New Covenant. He also provides additional instruction in practical ways to implement this new relationship with God. We don't have to be motivated by guilt or shame as we consider serving God. When we truly listen to the Holy Spirit, Who is the life giving force empowering us to perform things including (and exceeding) "basic religion," He teaches us how to follow through with our particular race to run (Hebrews 12:1). In this way we look to fulfill not just the letter of the law, but we truly start to see how to be God's hands and feet in the world, thus fulfilling the spirit of His ways. This contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law connects us to the Gospel lesson, where we will see Jesus' teaching against the falsehoods taught by the Pharisees who embraced the letter of the Law but disregarded the spirit of the Law altogether.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is, pardon the pun, sandwiched between Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-34) and His feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10). Just prior to the events in the reading today Jesus had walked on the water (Mark 6:48) and healed many sick people in the lakeside community of Gennesaret (Mark 6:53-56).

Gospel Reading:

Mark 7:1-23 NAS95 1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 7 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' 8 "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." 9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; 11 but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' 12 you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." 14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. 16 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. 18 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) 20 And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

The scribes and Pharisees formed their own flavor of "Deuteronomy," or second law, not heeding Moses' call we read about in the first reading. As James warned, they were deceived about even doing the works of the Law regarding basic religion including the honoring of the parents, a clear commandment of God (Exodus 20:12). The behaviors associated with basic religion were the things that the Pharisees were consciously choosing not to do! Because the scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, it was vitally important for Jesus to point out the hypocrisy of their ways and to warn people against their bad influence.

There were a few things in this passage that the religious leaders did that were opposing true heart religion. The first was their insistence on having pure hands, but neglecting to have a pure heart. The second was that they had contrived a religious practice that provided a means to neglect financial assistance to their parents by saying those resources were instead given to God ("Corban," v. 11). The scribes' and Pharisees' "traditions" did in fact trump the first Law of God, that given by Moses and taught throughout the first five Books of the Bible. Jesus explained that what defiles a person is not what goes into their body, but it is what comes out of their heart. The uncleanness is already apart of us, it just takes the right variables to have it come out and show itself. The sin-sickness of the human heart is the issue that Jesus wanted them to see, so that they might see turn to Him for healing as the soul physician (Luke 5:31).

The big idea in the reading is the difference between following human traditions and dead religion versus possessing a life-giving relationship with the lover of a believer's soul through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were teaching a false message of salvation by works. Their non-gospel would accord well with the "health and wealth" teachers of today or the tendency to reduce God down to a formula. Either way, these false messages set us up to expect God to act in certain ways based on our good behavior and subtly demand that He hold up His end of the "bargain." Unfortunately, this is a misguided understanding of how to relate to God.

In the opening I mentioned the story of a missionary who walked with God in every way but still experienced tremendous difficulties. As a result of some excellent medical care he was able to receive the liver transplant that he needed to sustain his life. He has recovered and is continuing to serve overseas even in light of the fact that he will remain on rejection drugs and suffer from their side effects for the rest of his life.

I met with Dave recently to discuss what he has learned so far through his experiences. He told me that one of the things that really sustained him was when he called together a group of leaders from

his church who prayed over him and anointed him with oil in obedience to what James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Dave said that this really helped him to turn the matter over to God. Second, the church came around him and offered excellent prayer support during his most difficult time. He told me that many people reached out to him and told them that they were praying for him. These things gave him confidence that regardless of what happened it would all be for the glory of God. Interestingly, some of the French people told him everything would turn out okay because, "he was a Christian." These sentiments provided Dave with many teaching moments in which he was able to explain to the people that God allows hardships in the lives of Christians and perhaps even more so than those who don't believe. He knew that everything ultimately would turn out okay, but that believing in God did not guarantee a good and long-lived life.

As Christians just because we do everything right doesn't mean that we will be blessed in the earthly sense in which we might expect, including material blessings and good health. Instead, God allows challenges in our lives to lead us to a fuller relationship with Him. Our Christian lives are not like baking a cake. We can't just put together the exact right ingredients using a measured formula and follow the recipe exactly and have the cake turn out perfectly well each and every time. Sometimes God throws a monkey wrench into our plans in order to achieve His purposes. What's more, we may not even know or understand these purposes during out natural lifetimes. Unlike the Pharisees who taught salvation by works and outward obedience to their own set of laws, God calls us to walk in faith alone while behaving in ways as directed by the Holy Spirit. This does include closely understanding the biblical principles taught in the New Testament and the Ten Commandments of the Old. But we should not live our lives formulaically, doing things for God and expecting Him to "bless" us on our terms. He will surely bless us, but His definition of blessing is a lot broader than our limited perspective. May we learn to walk by faith and not our feelings or our sight.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading James said, *27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27)*. This admonition can weigh heavy on the minds of some Christians because they don't often find themselves busy visiting orphans and widows in distress.

A. In what ways do you obey the spirit of James' calling through the activities that you do engage in

for God.

B. In what ways can you create connections in your life between the first part of verse 27 (Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress) and the last part (keep oneself unstained by the world)? List at least two ways in which you do.

2. Do you catch yourself being a Pharisee, overlooking the motives of the heart and instead, focusing upon minor, outward faults in yourself and others?

A. How does knowing that God looks on the heart change how you evaluate what's important in your own life and in relationship with others?

B. Ask God to reveal to you in what areas you are glossing over God's goodness in a certain person and missing His heart for them.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-30-2020

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Jeremiah and a reading from this great prophet of God in whom we find many similarities to Peter and Paul. Then move to the second reading from Saint Paul from Romans 12 in which he warns about not being conformed to the world. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew in which we see a certain circumstance in which Peter found himself conformed to a false belief taught by the world.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. Known as the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah was one of the most prolific prophetic writers in the Old Testament having written both the Book by his name as well as Lamentations. He began writing during the reign of godly King Josiah beginning in 627 BC and continued during the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 586 by the Babylonians. A key verse that summarizes the situation in Israel during this time is found in the closing chapter of the Book. "For through the anger of the LORD this came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 52:3)

God was angry with the people for a variety of reasons, but foremost among them was that they had turned away from their worship of the One True God and instead worshiped dead idols. Female deities were frequent objects of worship in the Old Testament. For example, God said:

"Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me" (Jeremiah 7:17-18).

God was angry with them because they were baking cakes and offering cakes to the "queen of heaven," who was the female deity of their day. This goddess was likely someone associated with grace and blessing. The Scripture is clear that all grace flows through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God was clear that worship was to be given to Him alone. The Jews were commanded not only to forsake worship of foreign gods but also not to even **create** an image of any deity, be it of the True or God or any god. Interestingly enough, this law was binding upon them and all New Testament believers (see John 14:15, this goes beyond the Ten Commandments as in John 13:34). As well worshiping an image they were not to even **create** an image of even the True God and assign worship to it in any manner. God knew that when they built something to honor Him that they would fall into worship of the image and not God Himself. The Second Commandment given by God to Moses spelled this out very clearly to them:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6)

If that were all that was going on then perhaps God would have relented in His judgment of them through allowing Babylon to overcome the nation and destroy Jerusalem. However, conditions in Israel were even worse than that as we see further on in Jeremiah Chapter 7:

30 "For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight," declares the LORD, "they have

set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. 31 They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind" (Jeremiah 7:30-31).

Not only did they offer sacrifices in the temple to false gods, they even sacrificed their own children in a fire. This was the context of the first reading today. As you read, try to imagine the anguish that Jeremiah must have been experiencing because of the extreme misbehavior of God's chosen people.

First Reading:

7 O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; Everyone mocks me. 8 For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction, Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted In reproach and derision all day long. 9 But if I say, "I will not remember Him Or speak anymore in His name," Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; And I am weary of holding it in, And I cannot endure it. (Jeremiah 20:7-9)

In the reading and in light of the context we see the passion of the Prophet Jeremiah in pleading with the Jewish people to repent of their sin and turn to the worship of the True God as prescribed in their Law. Jeremiah said that the people derided him in spite of the fact that what he was telling them was the truth and was for their own good (vv. 7-8). He said that it was impossible for him to contain within himself the words which the Lord God has given to him to proclaim. Later in the Gospel lesson we will see the similarity between Jeremiah and the Apostle Peter in his passion for God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading comes from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. In this passage, he is encouraging the believers to respond to God with their whole lives:.

Second Reading:

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

Paul begins his thought with the word "therefore." Whenever we see this word, we should ask: "what's the 'therefore' there for?" Paul gives some pretty heavy directions to the believers, but it is based in the reality of who God is, which he has spent the last 11 chapters talking about.

As you may recall from previous weeks, Paul was addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church at Rome. He just finished expounding on the mysteries of God, who in his kindness has grafted Gentiles into the true vine of faith. This is truly a wonderful chapter in salvation history, deliverance from God's wrath has been paid in full by Jesus Christ's death on the cross. That is the basis of the "therefore". So this is what Paul is saying: as a result of God's mercies, it is only fitting to respond to Him with our whole lives; body mind, and spirit.

Have you ever seen people who profess to be Christians, but only act like it when they are at church or around other Christians? Then you see them at work or at a gathering acting in ways that are contrary to the way of Christ. They may using foul language, mistreating a waitress, or even cheating in order to get ahead. This is problematic because it is inconsistent with the reality of God's mercy in their life. Paul says in this passage that Christianity is a wholistic endeavor. God is looking for true worship. We cannot compartmentalize our spirituality to one day a week or around certain spiritual activities. All of life can be a spiritual endeavor if we give ourselves fully to God as a living sacrifice. God is worthy of our bodies being submitted to Him, that includes our behaviors, actions and what comes out of our mouths.

What are we sacrificing? We are sacrificing doing things according to the "flesh" which Paul likens to the worldly system that has infected every fiber of our being. The world's way operates according to doing what is right in our own eyes, without considering God and His ways. The world's way operates without God in the center. So Paul is urging his brothers (both Jew and Gentile) to not be squeezed into that dead end mold. Yes, it may feel like a sacrifice to put God at the center of your life, but it is what each person was designed for.

How do we get there? By the renewing of our mind. What does this mean? Our minds have been shaped by so many things: our family values, our cultural values, messages from the media, our experiences and how we have interpreted those experiences. Paul urges believers to be proactive about understanding what influences your perspective—and to exchange what has held you captive by lies for the freedom of the Truth. We know that the only reliable source of Truth is founded upon and consistent with the Bible. Jesus said "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). In context, He was pointing to Himself as the truth and to holding to His teaching as the only form of freedom from being captive to the lies of the enemy (satan). So the only real "sacrifice" in this passage of Romans is giving up the destructive lies in one's life and learning to live according to the Truth. That is why studying the Bible, hearing God's heart by biblical teachers and being around others who walk according to the Word of God is so important for our minds to be renewed. It may feel like we are swimming upstream at first, but God will slowly and surely renew our minds so that we will see that His will is good, pleasing and perfect. Paul urges his brothers and us, because he knows it a matter of life and death.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson let's and reflect upon what we learned from the first reading. Jeremiah's passion reminds us of one particular character in the New Testament. Whom jumps out at you as the one filled with passion for his people, one who sometime acted impulsively without regard for who those around him would respond? Cephas, whose name is translated as "Peter" (John 1:42), whose brother was the disciple Andrew, was just such as man. In his second Epistle, Peter spoke similar harsh words about the false teachers of his day:

1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 6 and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; 7 and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep

the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12 But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, 13 suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, 14 having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; 15 forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; 16 but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. 17 These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. 18 For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. 20 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. 22 It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." (2 Peter 2:1-22)

I, like Peter, also have a passion for confronting false teaching. Some time ago a group of Jehovah's witnesses pulled up to my parent's house while I was visiting there one weekend. I knew how their operation worked, as only one of them got out of the car and the other two also recorded their "credit" for having made a household visit. I sensed in my spirit what was happening and I began to pray silently for God's guidance. As the man sat down at the picnic table outside I just happened to have a Bible ready along with a sheet of paper blank on at least one side. I drew three columns on the paper with a horizontal heading across each section to serve later as a title for each category. As we talked I began to fill in important details about the Person of Jesus Christ in each of the three columns. I filled out the columns like this and explained the biblical support for the first column.

_____	_____	_____
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by Jehovah
uncreated always existed	maker or all other things	maker of some things
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

Column Chart I Made for the JW's

As we talked, the man began getting more agitated as he realized that his theological beliefs aligned with both the second **and** the third columns. I kept asking him, do you know anything about the religious cult about whom I am writing in that last column? The crowning blow came when I filled in titles for each of the categories:

Biblical Christianity	Jehovah Witness	Mormon
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by God
uncreated always existed and made all things	maker or all other things	maker of all things in partnership with God
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

Suddenly the man stood up in a rage just at the exact time that my sister decided to stop by for a visit as she saw me sitting outside at the table. As I attempted to introduce my sister to him, the man screamed some obscenities at me and my sister and ran towards his car. I wonder what kind of call report he wrote down that day (follow this link to see their blank form)!

Many of us can relate to Saint Peter. Of all the disciples, Peter is the one with whom I most identify. Some of us are impulsive in our reactions and responses, especially in situations in which we feel the Lord Jesus has been disrespected. Peter like the Prophet Jeremiah, was a man of passion, the first of whom Jesus entrusted the "keys of the kingdom." Even Peter, the foremost of the disciples, was at least one time overcome by the forces of evil that raged especially violently during the period of Jesus' earthly ministry. Satan would stop at nothing to derail Jesus' ministry, even if he likely didn't understand all of the implications of Jesus' prediction of His own death. Matthew recorded the following incident which is the Gospel reading for today.

Gospel Reading:

21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. 22 Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." 23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 24 Then Jesus said to

His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS." (Matthew 16:21-27)

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's modus operando may have been something that those of us partial dyslexics can relate, "durry up and hoo something." 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 Jeremiah and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when he was told that these nemeses 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. 23). 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, just as Paul warned about in the

second reading from Romans.

What does this mean in our lives? First, how have we responded to God's prophetic word? Have we like Jeremiah taken the Word and given it to others to watch the works of God unfold in their lives? Second, have we taken the Word into our own hearts and allowed God to transform us in such a way as Paul stated in the second reading? Are we offering our bodies as living sacrifices, something with which Jeremiah, Peter, and Paul have firmly conformed? Finally, what lies is **our** culture telling us today? What lies would we, like Peter, repeat in an instant when suddenly confronted with something that went against the world's teachings? What would be our reaction when invited to the wedding of a gay friend, how would we respond to the questions of the deacon board about our action in response to this event? Is it acceptable to love the sinner but hate the sin? These are things which we must reason with in advance such that when the sudden circumstance arises we are as Saint Peter said, ready to give a response" (1 Peter 3:15).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Peter impulsively responded to Jesus' prophecy concerning His coming death, burial, and resurrection. Think back to a time when you found yourself in a situation in which your faith was challenged and you responded impulsively without thinking about all of the implications of your actions. In light of the Gospel reading, what could you learn from Peter and Jesus in terms of how to respond in the future?

2. Review the past few weeks of your life. In what ways have you been tempted to be conformed to the pattern of this world? What lie is behind the temptation? What truth can you hold onto to help you to be faithful to God in the midst of ongoing temptation? If you are not sure how to answer these questions, pray to God right now and ask Him to open your eyes to the deceptive nature of sin and help you to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

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



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

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

> *SIR 3:17-18, 20, 28-29*
>
> *My child, conduct your affairs with humility,*
>
> *and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts.*
>
> *Humble yourself the more, the greater you are,*
>
> *and you will find favor with God.*

> *What is too sublime for you, seek not,*
>
> *into things beyond your strength search not.*
>
> *The mind of a sage appreciates proverbs,*
>
> *and an attentive ear is the joy of the wise.*
>
> *Water quenches a flaming fire,*
>
> *and alms atone for sins.*

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

> *church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.*

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week we return to Hebrews and the Gospel of Luke that we saw last week. And again we see some more about the group called the Pharisees in the Gospel teaching, just like the last week. Perhaps what may be helpful here is a bit of background about this group of Jewish people. The Pharisees were middle-class common men that were not necessarily educated like the other group known as the Sadducees. The Pharisees differed in their beliefs from the Sadducees in that they

believed in life after death, in miracles, and also in angelic beings. They believed that the word of God was inspired and sought to hold very strictly to the tradition of the Law as given by Moses in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch. However, they taught falsely that their oral traditions held equal authority to Scripture. Jesus warned the Pharisees about these and other false teachings in His message of the seven woes found in Matthew 23:1-36. In our day, we must endeavor to always measure and test our own religious traditions and beliefs against the unchanging Scriptures.

Now we will examine the context of today's reading from Saint Luke. Here we find Jesus dining at the home of a certain famous Pharisee, likely a member of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin. Could it have been someone like Saint Paul, who was a Pharisee himself? Anyway the Scripture says that the "people" were observing him carefully. It would seem that they were trying to find some fault in Jesus, to trip him up, to find a reason for which they could bring him to trial. It would also seem that other Pharisees were present. So as Jesus often did he told a parable. When you hear the word "parable" I suggest you think of it this way. The word means quite literally "to throw alongside." So think of a parable as a story is thrown alongside to show you some certain spiritual truth. Be careful not to try and make a parable walk on all fours, but just try to get out of it the single spiritual truth. Also, be careful to not take it literally if it isn't meant to be taken that way, and we can determine if that is the case by looking at the context.

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

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Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 14:1 NAS95 1 It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely.*
>
> *Omitted Verses:*
>
> *Luke 14:2-6 NAS95 2 And there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. 3 And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" 4 But they kept silent. And He took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away. 5 And He said to them, "Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" 6 And they could make no reply to this.*
>
> *Luke 14:7-14 NAS95 7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. 10 But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. 12 And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. 13 But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"*

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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09-02-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a study of a reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses pours out his heart to the Israelites just before they were to begin their final conquest and enter the Promised Land. Moses cautions the people not to add to or take from the Law but to just simply follow it. Second, we look at a reading from the Book of James, said to be "the Proverbs" of the New Testament. Then we close with the Gospel reading from Saint Mark in which Jesus scolds the scribes and Pharisees for doing exactly what Moses told the people not to do by creating religious traditions, which they held above the Mosaic Law. In application, we will address the tendency toward formulaic religion and how God uses hardship to accomplish His purposes.

Do you believe that if you obey the government, pretty much keep the Ten Commandments and go to church every week that God will reward you with a life filled with some level of prosperity and good health? What if you sensed and were obedient to a call from God to uproot your life in order to engage in missions? Would you then be upset if things didn't turn out perfectly for you in your new life? I know a man named Dave that studied hard to become a missionary and moved to France with his wife to reach people for Jesus in this spiritually dark but civilized nation. He worked there for many years, had a good degree of success in his ministry and followed biblical teaching in all that he did. However, after being in France several decades, his health began to decline. As the months went by, his condition continued to worsen and at some point, he was told that he would need a liver transplant or he would die. You may ask, how could God allow this life-threatening condition in his life which threatened to end his ministry? How could God allow this situation in his life when he had

sacrificed so much to move there, was faithful in his following the Bible, and was obedient in every way to the laws of his adopted nation? Later in this lesson you will hear what happened to Dave.

According to Scripture God allows challenges in the lives of believers which goes against what is known in our times as "health and wealth" or the prosperity gospel. This week we are going to see in the Gospel reading how Jesus confronted the false teachings occurring during His ministry from a Jewish religious group called the Pharisees. These were a sect that taught, in effect, salvation by works and held some of the same false beliefs as the modern prosperity gospel preachers of today.

It would be easy to misread the first reading if we have this formulaic or prosperity gospel in mind. The formula goes like this: I am obedient to God's commands, then He has to give me the circumstances in life that I think I deserve. The problem behind this formula is that is lacks the relational underpinning that God desires for us. We obey Him out of our own effort and then feel justified in our sense of entitlement. We will need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of relationship with God now made possible through grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, a word that means literally "second law." The Book begins with a chronicle of the events of the Hebrew people in the period just after the wilderness wanderings. Because of the people's disobedience they were forbidden from entering the Promised Land and spent thirty-eight years wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses. During this time God revealed the Law to Moses and began the Levitical Priesthood with his brother Aaron as the first high priest. At the end of these thirty-eight years God prompted Moses to lead military campaigns against the two regional leaders on the "other side" (meaning the east) of the Jordan River. The Hebrew army soundly defeated both King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. According to this Scripture, the Hebrews "captured all [their] cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women and children. We left no survivors. Only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves with the plunder of the cities we captured" (Deuteronomy 2:34-35). These events occurred over the final two years, which closed out the full forty years of wandering in the desert outside of God's Promised Land (to the west of the Jordan).

Even more so than in previous readings in order to glean the proper meaning from the passages that follow, it is necessary to clearly understand the context. Reflect upon each of the following points that will help to lead you to the proper contextual understanding for today's lesson.

- God does not change (Malachi 3:6, James 1:17), but He does change the terms through which He deals with His people according to His covenants. There are five covenants in the Old Testament Bible.

  I. First was the Noahic (pronounced "no ay ick") Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7).

II. The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis Chapter 12. In this God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v.1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v.3). These unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future.

III. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through which God introduced the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19), and the context of the first reading today. The promises of this Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The Law was clear and exact, unlike the religious traditions that were derived from it over the centuries (as we will read about in the Gospel lesson). Moses spent forty years teaching the people the Law, and they spent forty years breaking it! Point of Fact: Had I lived during that time I wouldn't have done any better than they did.

IV. The forth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant was and will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah.

IV. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34b), and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v.34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17). This Covenant is the terms through which God deals with us as believers today.

- God's plan of salvation for people has never changed, whether in the Old or New Testaments, although God has revealed His plan more clearly through the revelation of Jesus Christ (see Colossians 1:26 and Hebrews 1:1). Everyone is saved by faith in God's Savior whether it was Jews in the Old Testament, Jews in the New Testament, or Gentiles during either of the Testaments. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God is clear that there is only one unforgivable sin, which is rejection of His only provision for the forgiveness of sin.

Finally, this is the key point that we need to remember as we study the first reading showing the sinful behavior of the Jews and how Jesus confronted the false teachings of the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson:

- God assesses different short-term penalties for sin according to each era and covenant. For example, before the Noahic Covenant when Cain killed Abel, God dealt immediately with this sin by putting a mark on Cain, exiling him to a foreign land, and causing him to tirelessly till unfruitful soil (Genesis 4:12-15). As a second example, in the first reading today we will see

> Moses' mention of an instance in which God acted quickly and harshly to judge sin among the Jewish exiles. Later during the time of the Exodus which is the context of the first reading, God ruled His people as a "theocratic kingdom." During this time Moses, his successor Joshua (and later the prophets and King David) received direct guidance from God. During the "theocratic kingdom" God levied heavy consequences upon those who broke the Law. In John's Gospel Jesus used the metaphor of God's pruning in the life of a believer in order to bring about more fruit (John 15:2). God's pruning in the context of the theocratic kingdom may have meant sudden death for the disobedient Jew, whether it came from God or as a result of capital punishment levied by the Israelite priests (and later Kings).

In our era God operates according to the New Covenant in which he prunes believers during their earthly lives (john 15:2) while storing up His judgement for unbelievers largely until the end of their lives (John 15:6, "cast in the fire and burned"). Even during the Old Testament times God revealed His grace for the unbelieving world by lavishing His material blessings upon them, although their eternal destination was hell. This is very clear from both Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. Lest we think that God doesn't immediately judge sin in some cases, we must remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:1-11), as well as Saint Paul's teaching about some being sick and some have died because of their unholy behavior in the love feast and communion meal (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Now, with this context in mind let's move to today's reading which is an address by Moses to the people as he prepares to appoint Joshua his successor (3:28) who would soon lead the people into the new land. Although Moses himself was forbidden by God to enter (Deuteronomy 3:23-26), God did allow him to travel to the top of Mount Pisgah to see a divine vision of the land just before his death (3:27).

First Reading:

> *Deuteronomy 4:1-8 NAS95 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. 3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you. 4 But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. 5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"*

Moses urged the people to follow the Levitical Law without adding to it or taking from it (v. 2) so that they may "live and go in and take possession of the land" being given by God to them (v. 1). We will see later in the Gospel reading that the people didn't heed God's warning not to add to the law. Interestingly, God repeated this admonition in the very last Book of the New Testament not to add to or take from the Scriptures (Revelation 22:18). God's marching orders were for the people to just do what He has clearly told them through the Law delivered to Moses. Twice in this reading Moses tells the people to keep the commandments of the Law (v. 1, v. 2). Keeping the Law in the context of the reading does bring with it the promise of material blessing because God had promised the people entrance to the Promised Land. The recipients of the blessing were the minority of those in the Exodus, those who were still alive and the ones whom had "held fast to the LORD" (v. 4). If God killed a person because of their sin, then obviously, they didn't receive the blessings of the Promised Land. As we noted in the introduction, the consequences of disobedience during the theocratic kingdom could be severe and immediate. Beginning in verse 3 Moses recounted what God did to the disobedient people as recorded in the Book of Numbers. The people had become immersed in the worship of the god "Baal of Peor" (Numbers 25:5). In that Numbers it says, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel'" (Numbers 25:4). A plague followed in which 24,000 people died (Numbers 25:9). This was God's way of purging the evil in order to protect the integrity of those who were seeking to follow God with a pure heart.

Another point from the reading was that God had established the Nation of Israel as a light to everyone in the world. God's "chosen people" were not chosen just for their own sake, but for the salvation of all people groups through their testimony of God's greatness (see also John 4:22). Moses addressed the people just before they were to begin the final conquest(s) to claim the land, saying "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the **sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes** and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (v. 6, emphasis added). The Jews whose hearts were pointed towards the worship of the true God expressed their beliefs through the observance of the Law. The Jews' unique lifestyle served as God's showplace to the Gentile nations surrounding them. Their unique civil, moral, and ceremonial Laws were designed by God as a herald to the idolatrous people of the world. This was especially true when the Jews were dispersed around the world during the various captivities that God allowed throughout history, a pattern which continues to this very day. As Christians we are called by God in a way similar to be like the Jew, living in a peculiar way, heralding the good news of God's grace and shining biblical light to our sin darkened world (Matthew 5:14, Ephesians 5:8). This ministry isn't just reserved for vocational works like my missionary friend Dave in France.

As we transition to the second reading we will see some practical ways in which we are believers in Jesus Christ can live our lives as a beacon shining on the pathway for people to find God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of James, a letter often called the "Proverbs of the New

Testament." James is a Book filled with practical wisdom and the application of godly principles drawn from throughout Scripture. The message woven into the entire book of James is the principle stated by Jesus, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). In a letter such as written by James, the literary context (knowing the verses before and after the reading, and the flow of the author's thought) is very important for understanding the original author's intent. In the reading today, the verse immediately prior to the reading was omitted (verse 16). Once that is included there is a nice connection created between the first reading and the Gospel lesson we will look at later.

Second Reading:

> *James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.*
>
> *James 1:17-27 NAS95 17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. 19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

James cautioned the people to "not be deceived" (v. 16), but about what? His caution was to not be deceived about the source of good things. The enemy subtly tries to convince us that God's gifts are not good or that good can come from any other source besides God. The source of every authentic blessing is God (v. 17). He encourages them by pointing out that they are the first fruits of the future believers (v. 18). This is much like the Jews we saw in the first reading who were uniquely commissioned by God as a light to the nations.

You'll notice that James called the people "my beloved brethren" twice in the first four verses to give a loving context for his more confrontational statements in this passage. He gets to the heart of the matter by hitting his readers square between the eyes with teaching on the danger of the tongue (v. 19, v. 26, also repeated in chapter 3), and the falseness of believers who profess one thing, but live another way. In God's economy, there is no such thing as not "living up" to our beliefs. Instead, our

lifestyle and choices are merely reflecting our true beliefs. Basic religion, James says, is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (v. 27). While not everyone has a direct ministry to orphans and widows, James is highlighting the need for us to express our religion in practical acts of service to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). The orphans and widows of his day would have been those who are marginalized by society, vulnerable to exploitation and overlooked because of their inability to reward those who serve them. Serving those who cannot give you any "kick back" helps to ensure that our motives are pure.

In the closing verse James said to "keep oneself unstained by the world." This is an important admonition that, if heeded daily, could help all of us live a more abundant life in the Lord. This is akin to "being in the world, but not of it" (Matthew 17:14-16), which allows us to be a witness to those who do not know the Lord as we live with a different mindset. The Book of James provides many such godly proverbs which can help us to live fully surrendered lives for Jesus. In the first reading we saw where Moses called the people to obey the Law of God. James calls people to obey not only the teachings of Jesus but also the spirit of the New Covenant. He also provides additional instruction in practical ways to implement this new relationship with God. We don't have to be motivated by guilt or shame as we consider serving God. When we truly listen to the Holy Spirit, Who is the life giving force empowering us to perform things including (and exceeding) "basic religion," He teaches us how to follow through with our particular race to run (Hebrews 12:1). In this way we look to fulfill not just the letter of the law, but we truly start to see how to be God's hands and feet in the world, thus fulfilling the spirit of His ways. This contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law connects us to the Gospel lesson, where we will see Jesus' teaching against the falsehoods taught by the Pharisees who embraced the letter of the Law but disregarded the spirit of the Law altogether.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is, pardon the pun, sandwiched between Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-34) and His feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10). Just prior to the events in the reading today Jesus had walked on the water (Mark 6:48) and healed many sick people in the lakeside community of Gennesaret (Mark 6:53-56).

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 7:1-23 NAS95 1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure*

> *hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 7 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' 8 "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." 9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; 11 but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' 12 you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." 14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. 16 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. 18 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) 20 And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."*

The scribes and Pharisees formed their own flavor of "Deuteronomy," or second law, not heeding Moses' call we read about in the first reading. As James warned, they were deceived about even doing the works of the Law regarding basic religion including the honoring of the parents, a clear commandment of God (Exodus 20:12). The behaviors associated with basic religion were the things that the Pharisees were consciously choosing not to do! Because the scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, it was vitally important for Jesus to point out the hypocrisy of their ways and to warn people against their bad influence.

There were a few things in this passage that the religious leaders did that were opposing true heart religion. The first was their insistence on having pure hands, but neglecting to have a pure heart. The second was that they had contrived a religious practice that provided a means to neglect financial assistance to their parents by saying those resources were instead given to God ("Corban," v. 11). The scribes' and Pharisees' "traditions" did in fact trump the first Law of God, that given by Moses and taught throughout the first five Books of the Bible. Jesus explained that what defiles a person is not what goes into their body, but it is what comes out of their heart. The uncleanness is already apart of us, it just takes the right variables to have it come out and show itself. The sin-sickness of the human heart is the issue that Jesus wanted them to see, so that they might see turn to Him for healing as the soul physician (Luke 5:31).

The big idea in the reading is the difference between following human traditions and dead religion versus possessing a life-giving relationship with the lover of a believer's soul through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were teaching a false message of salvation by works. Their non-gospel would accord well with the "health and wealth" teachers of today or the tendency to reduce God down to a formula. Either way, these false messages set us up to expect God to act in certain ways based on our good behavior and subtly demand that He hold up His end of the "bargain." Unfortunately, this is a misguided understanding of how to relate to God.

In the opening I mentioned the story of a missionary who walked with God in every way but still experienced tremendous difficulties. As a result of some excellent medical care he was able to receive the liver transplant that he needed to sustain his life. He has recovered and is continuing to serve overseas even in light of the fact that he will remain on rejection drugs and suffer from their side effects for the rest of his life.

I met with Dave recently to discuss what he has learned so far through his experiences. He told me that one of the things that really sustained him was when he called together a group of leaders from his church who prayed over him and anointed him with oil in obedience to what James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Dave said that this really helped him to turn the matter over to God. Second, the church came around him and offered excellent prayer support during his most difficult time. He told me that many people reached out to him and told them that they were praying for him. These things gave him confidence that regardless of what happened it would all be for the glory of God. Interestingly, some of the French people told him everything would turn out okay because, "he was a Christian." These sentiments provided Dave with many teaching moments in which he was able to explain to the people that God allows hardships in the lives of Christians and perhaps even more so than those who don't believe. He knew that everything ultimately would turn out okay, but that believing in God did not guarantee a good and long-lived life.

As Christians just because we do everything right doesn't mean that we will be blessed in the earthly sense in which we might expect, including material blessings and good health. Instead, God allows challenges in our lives to lead us to a fuller relationship with Him. Our Christian lives are not like baking a cake. We can't just put together the exact right ingredients using a measured formula and follow the recipe exactly and have the cake turn out perfectly well each and every time. Sometimes God throws a monkey wrench into our plans in order to achieve His purposes. What's more, we may not even know or understand these purposes during out natural lifetimes. Unlike the Pharisees who taught salvation by works and outward obedience to their own set of laws, God calls us to walk in faith alone while behaving in ways as directed by the Holy Spirit. This does include closely understanding the biblical principles taught in the New Testament and the Ten Commandments of the Old. But we should not live our lives formulaically, doing things for God and expecting Him to "bless" us on our terms. He will surely bless us, but His definition of blessing is a lot broader than our limited perspective. May we learn to walk by faith and not our feelings or our sight.

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Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading James said, *27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27)*. This admonition can weigh heavy on the minds of some Christians because they don't often find themselves busy visiting orphans and widows in distress.

A. In what ways do you obey the spirit of James' calling through the activities that you do engage in for God.
B. In what ways can you create connections in your life between the first part of verse 27 (Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress) and the last part (keep oneself unstained by the world)? List at least two ways in which you do.

2. Do you catch yourself being a Pharisee, overlooking the motives of the heart and instead, focusing upon minor, outward faults in yourself and others?

A. How does knowing that God looks on the heart change how you evaluate what's important in your own life and in relationship with others?
B. Ask God to reveal to you in what areas you are glossing over God's goodness in a certain person and missing His heart for them.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-3-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Jeremiah and a reading from this great prophet of God in whom we find many similarities to Peter and Paul. Then move to the second reading from Saint Paul from Romans 12 in which he warns about not being conformed to the world. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew in which we see a certain circumstance in which Peter found himself conformed to a false belief taught by the world.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. Known as the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah was one of the most prolific prophetic writers in the Old Testament having written both the Book by his name as well as Lamentations. He began writing during the reign of godly King Josiah beginning in 627 BC and continued during the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 586 by the Babylonians. A key verse that summarizes the situation in Israel during this time is found in the closing chapter of the Book. "For through the anger of the LORD this came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 52:3)

God was angry with the people for a variety of reasons, but foremost among them was that they had turned away from their worship of the One True God and instead worshiped dead idols. Female deities were frequent objects of worship in the Old Testament. For example, God said:

"Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me" (Jeremiah 7:17-18).

God was angry with them because they were baking cakes and offering cakes to the "queen of heaven," who was the female deity of their day. This goddess was likely someone associated with grace and blessing. The Scripture is clear that all grace flows through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God was clear that worship was to be given to Him alone. The Jews were commanded not only to forsake worship of foreign gods but also not to even **create** an image of any deity, be it of the True or God or any god. Interestingly enough, this law was binding upon them and all New Testament believers (see John 14:15, this goes beyond the Ten Commandments as in John 13:34). As well worshiping an image they were not to even **create** an image of even the True God and assign worship to it in any manner. God knew that when they built something to honor Him that they would fall into worship of the image and not God Himself. The Second Commandment given by God to Moses spelled this out very clearly to them:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6)

If that were all that was going on then perhaps God would have relented in His judgment of them through allowing Babylon to overcome the nation and destroy Jerusalem. However, conditions in Israel were even worse than that as we see further on in Jeremiah Chapter 7:

30 "For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight," declares the LORD, "they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. 31 They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind" (Jeremiah 7:30-31).

Not only did they offer sacrifices in the temple to false gods, they even sacrificed their own children in a fire. This was the context of the first reading today. As you read, try to imagine the anguish that Jeremiah must have been experiencing because of the extreme misbehavior of God's chosen people.

First Reading:

7 O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; Everyone mocks me. 8 For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction, Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted In reproach and derision all day long. 9 But if I say, "I will not remember Him Or speak anymore in His name," Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; And I am weary of holding it in, And I cannot endure it. (Jeremiah 20:7-9)

In the reading and in light of the context we see the passion of the Prophet Jeremiah in pleading with the Jewish people to repent of their sin and turn to the worship of the True God as prescribed in their Law. Jeremiah said that the people derided him in spite of the fact that what he was telling them was the truth and was for their own good (vv. 7-8). He said that it was impossible for him to contain within himself the words which the Lord God has given to him to proclaim. Later in the Gospel lesson we will see the similarity between Jeremiah and the Apostle Peter in his passion for God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading comes from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. In this passage, he is encouraging the believers to respond to God with their whole lives:.

Second Reading:

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

Paul begins his thought with the word "therefore." Whenever we see this word, we should ask: "what's the 'therefore' there for?" Paul gives some pretty heavy directions to the believers, but it is based in the reality of who God is, which he has spent the last 11 chapters talking about.

As you may recall from previous weeks, Paul was addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church at Rome. He just finished expounding on the mysteries of God, who in his kindness has grafted Gentiles into the true vine of faith. This is truly a wonderful chapter in salvation history, deliverance from God's wrath has been paid in full by Jesus Christ's death on the cross. That is the basis of the "therefore". So this is what Paul is saying: as a result of God's mercies, it is only fitting to respond to Him with our whole lives; body mind, and spirit.

Have you ever seen people who profess to be Christians, but only act like it when they are at church or around other Christians? Then you see them at work or at a gathering acting in ways that are contrary to the way of Christ. They may using foul language, mistreating a waitress, or even cheating in order to get ahead. This is problematic because it is inconsistent with the reality of God's mercy in their life. Paul says in this passage that Christianity is a wholistic endeavor. God is looking for true worship. We cannot compartmentalize our spirituality to one day a week or around certain spiritual activities. All of life can be a spiritual endeavor if we give ourselves fully to God as a living sacrifice. God is worthy of our bodies being submitted to Him, that includes our behaviors, actions and what comes out of our mouths.

What are we sacrificing? We are sacrificing doing things according to the "flesh" which Paul likens to the worldly system that has infected every fiber of our being. The world's way operates according

to doing what is right in our own eyes, without considering God and His ways. The world's way operates without God in the center. So Paul is urging his brothers (both Jew and Gentile) to not be squeezed into that dead end mold. Yes, it may feel like a sacrifice to put God at the center of your life, but it is what each person was designed for.

How do we get there? By the renewing of our mind. What does this mean? Our minds have been shaped by so many things: our family values, our cultural values, messages from the media, our experiences and how we have interpreted those experiences. Paul urges believers to be proactive about understanding what influences your perspective—and to exchange what has held you captive by lies for the freedom of the Truth. We know that the only reliable source of Truth is founded upon and consistent with the Bible. Jesus said "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). In context, He was pointing to Himself as the truth and to holding to His teaching as the only form of freedom from being captive to the lies of the enemy (satan). So the only real "sacrifice" in this passage of Romans is giving up the destructive lies in one's life and learning to live according to the Truth. That is why studying the Bible, hearing God's heart by biblical teachers and being around others who walk according to the Word of God is so important for our minds to be renewed. It may feel like we are swimming upstream at first, but God will slowly and surely renew our minds so that we will see that His will is good, pleasing and perfect. Paul urges his brothers and us, because he knows it a matter of life and death.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson let's and reflect upon what we learned from the first reading. Jeremiah's passion reminds us of one particular character in the New Testament. Whom jumps out at you as the one filled with passion for his people, one who sometime acted impulsively without regard for who those around him would respond? Cephas, whose name is translated as "Peter" (John 1:42), whose brother was the disciple Andrew, was just such as man. In his second Epistle, Peter spoke similar harsh words about the false teachers of his day:

1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 6 and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; 7 and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep

the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12 But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, 13 suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, 14 having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; 15 forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; 16 but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. 17 These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. 18 For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. 20 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. 22 It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." (2 Peter 2:1-22)

I, like Peter, also have a passion for confronting false teaching. Some time ago a group of Jehovah's witnesses pulled up to my parent's house while I was visiting there one weekend. I knew how their operation worked, as only one of them got out of the car and the other two also recorded their "credit" for having made a household visit. I sensed in my spirit what was happening and I began to pray silently for God's guidance. As the man sat down at the picnic table outside I just happened to have a Bible ready along with a sheet of paper blank on at least one side. I drew three columns on the paper with a horizontal heading across each section to serve later as a title for each category. As we talked I began to fill in important details about the Person of Jesus Christ in each of the three columns. I filled out the columns like this and explained the biblical support for the first column.

_____	_____	_____
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by Jehovah
uncreated always existed	maker or all other things	maker of some things
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

As we talked, the man began getting more agitated as he realized that his theological beliefs aligned with both the second **and** the third columns. I kept asking him, do you know anything about the

religious cult about whom I am writing in that last column? The crowning blow came when I filled in titles for each of the categories:

Biblical Christianity	Jehovah Witness	Mormon
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by God
uncreated always existed and made all things	maker or all other things	maker of all things in partnership with God
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

Suddenly the man stood up in a rage just at the exact time that my sister decided to stop by for a visit as she saw me sitting outside at the table. As I attempted to introduce my sister to him, the man screamed some obscenities at me and my sister and ran towards his car. I wonder what kind of call report he wrote down that day (follow this link to see their blank form)!

Many of us can relate to Saint Peter. Of all the disciples, Peter is the one with whom I most identify. Some of us are impulsive in our reactions and responses, especially in situations in which we feel the Lord Jesus has been disrespected. Peter like the Prophet Jeremiah, was a man of passion, the first of whom Jesus entrusted the "keys of the kingdom." Even Peter, the foremost of the disciples, was at least one time overcome by the forces of evil that raged especially violently during the period of Jesus' earthly ministry. Satan would stop at nothing to derail Jesus' ministry, even if he likely didn't understand all of the implications of Jesus' prediction of His own death. Matthew recorded the following incident which is the Gospel reading for today.

Gospel Reading:

21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. 22 Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." 23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS." (Matthew 16:21-27)

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's modus operando may have been something that those of us partial dyslexics can relate, "durry up and hoo something." 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 Jeremiah and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when he was told that these nemeses 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. 23). 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, just as Paul warned about in the second reading from Romans.

What does this mean in our lives? First, how have we responded to God's prophetic word? Have we like Jeremiah taken the Word and given it to others to watch the works of God unfold in their lives? Second, have we taken the Word into our own hearts and allowed God to transform us in such a way as Paul stated in the second reading? Are we offering our bodies as living sacrifices, something with which Jeremiah, Peter, and Paul have firmly conformed? Finally, what lies is **our** culture telling us today? What lies would we, like Peter, repeat in an instant when suddenly confronted with something that went against the world's teachings? What would be our reaction when invited to the wedding of a gay friend, how would we respond to the questions of the deacon board about our action in response to this event? Is it acceptable to love the sinner but hate the sin? These are things which we must reason with in advance such that when the sudden circumstance arises we are as Saint Peter said, ready to give a response" (1 Peter 3:15).

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Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Peter impulsively responded to Jesus' prophecy concerning His coming death, burial, and resurrection. Think back to a time when you found yourself in a situation in which your faith was challenged and you responded impulsively without thinking about all of the implications of your actions. In light of the Gospel reading, what could you learn from Peter and Jesus in terms of how to respond in the future?

2. Review the past few weeks of your life. In what ways have you been tempted to be conformed to the pattern of this world? What lie is behind the temptation? What truth can you hold onto to help you to be faithful to God in the midst of ongoing temptation? If you are not sure how to answer these questions, pray to God right now and ask Him to open your eyes to the deceptive nature of sin and help you to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

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