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

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 7-5-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-5-2015**. This week we learn about the commission of the prophet Ezekiel. Then we study the value of weakness in the life of Paul and by application how God uses it for our good. We close with a study of Mark's Gospel in which we see the rejection of Jesus' message by those close to him from His own home town.

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context is the opening of his prophecy and would have been written after he had been carried off captive to Babylon in 597 BC. Ezekiel said in 1:1 that he was 30 years old when he began his ministry, the same age as when the priests begin working in their position. Ezekiel was unique in that he held both offices, that of prophet and priest (see Ezekiel 1:3). The young man Ezekiel wrote of the visions he received from God while he "by the river Chebar among the exiles" (1:1). Today's reading is God's commissioning of Ezekiel to speak to the Nation of Israel that was in the process of being judged by Him for their sin.

First Reading

Ezekiel 2:1-5 NAS95 1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!" 2 As He spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard Him speaking to me. 3 Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. 4 I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' 5 As for them, whether they listen or not–for they are a rebellious house–they will know that a prophet has been among them."

Since Ezekiel was far removed from the temple his ministry duties as a priest would have been practically eliminated. However, God called Ezekiel to a new ministry as a prophet and empowered him through the sending of the Holy Spirit specially to him. The Spirit of God was the One that "set [him] on [his] feet" and only after this event did Ezekiel begin hearing God speak directly to him in contrast to the visions he recorded in the opening of the book. Now that Ezekiel was commissioned as God's prophet, the oracles began pouring out to him. First, God told him to whom he was sent: the "sons of Israel" (v. 3b). Next, as if Ezekiel didn't already know, God told him about the rebellious nature of the people. God used multiple harsh phrases to describe them including rebellious (3 times), transgressors, stubborn, obstinate, as well as implied that they would not listen (v. 5).

What can we learn from this commissioning passage from Ezekiel's life? While we may not be a prophet or a priest, we can see some principles about how God works and what our response to Him should be. First, when God calls a servant He empowers them through His Spirit. As church age believers we are guaranteed that the Holy Spirit lives within us (Ephesians 1:14) to empower us to do works of service that He has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Second, we are to carry out God's commission regardless of the response of those who we are serving. We should not be complexly oblivious to receiving constructive feedback in how to improve in serving people. However, this passage is teaching that sometimes our service will go unappreciated. When that is the case God is calling us to remain faithful, regardless of the response.

I know of a missionary who worked in Germany for a dozen years without seeing even a single faith convert to the Lord. It would have been very easy to be discouraged and to evaluate his work as a failure. But in God's value system this man, like Ezekiel, was faithful even though there wasn't a lot on the outside to show for it. In Ezekiel's case, rabbinical tradition says that he was eventually killed by someone who resisted his message. Both of these examples serve to encourage us to persevere under adverse circumstance when we are trying to do God's will in our own lives.

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. In this passage, Paul is explaining the importance of weakness for our spiritual growth.

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NAS95 7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me–to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

When is weakness ever a good thing? In our culture the answer is never, but in God's economy it serves a valuable purpose. Paul, because of his unique position as one who had direct revelation

from God, could have tried to do ministry in his own strength. Dependence upon God is our life source. Unfortunately we can be deceived into thinking that we don't need God, even as a Christian. So God in His kindness and wisdom allowed the "thorn in the flesh" to come upon Paul. The "thorn in the flesh" is a messenger of Satan, which is obviously something bad, something we wouldn't want for ourselves. Even though Paul pleaded and thought that he would be more productive without it, God reassured him that this bad thing could be used for his own good. The good that God used it for was to break Paul's of the dangerous and self-destructive nature of self-reliance and instead develop a spirit of dependence upon God which was his lifeline.

Like Paul, we are often deluded into believing that real life is found in exerting our independence and power over our circumstances. Self-reliance though, does not lead us to eternal life. Instead, abiding in Christ and dependence upon God is where real life is found (John 15:1-5). These character qualities of abiding and dependence upon God do not come naturally to us. God, in His infinite wisdom, knows how to keep us close to Himself and He will use even bad circumstances, i.e. a thorn in the flesh, to carry out His purpose in our life.

In the next passage, we will see a fatal response to Jesus' display of supernatural power in his home town of Nazareth.

Gospel Reading

Mark 6:1-6 NAS95 1 Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. 2 When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. 4 Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household." 5 And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 And He wondered at their unbelief. And He was going around the villages teaching.

In this vignette we see people discrediting Jesus' ministry because of their own short sightedness and resentment. In other passages, we see people being humbled by Jesus' display of power. Here the people of Jesus' hometown list the names of specific family members in an attempt to invalidate His miraculous signs. This would seemingly let them off the hook for being accountable to recognize the Messiah among them. The proper response to the Messiah would be to follow Him but they choose to disdain Him. As we saw in the first reading the people of Israel are a rebellious lot, obstinate, and refuse to listen even when miraculous signs are manifested in their presence. As a result of their great lack of faith Jesus' miraculous signs were withheld because God shows up when we exercise faith in Him (Hebrews 11:6).

This passage teaches us that there are two responses to Jesus' rightful claim as Messiah. One response is to believe and place our trust in Jesus even when it feels kind of awkward or it costs us

dearly. The second response is to push away the overwhelming evidence by discrediting the messengers of the Gospel and His message. These people could see the signs because they were coming from Jesus who was to them just a regular human being. Instead of shifting their lives to be open to Jesus' claim of divinity and messiahship they rejected Him. We can learn from their fatal response.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. I have been struggling with some health issues that are chronic in nature and undiagnosed. The daily frustration and concern over this causes me to live my life in a way much closer to God's kingdom than the world. Without this constant struggle I would not be as conscious of my need for the Lord and his daily sustenance.
List one weakness with which you are suffering from which you have asked God to deliver you. Talk to Him in prayer about how He might be using this to develop your dependence upon Him.

2. During the Fourth of July holiday I frequently travel back to my hometown to celebrate. I encounter people who are aware of the spiritual transformation that happened in my life when I surrendered my life to Jesus. Sometimes they respond to me in a similar way as the people in Jesus' hometown who resented the fact that He was holy.
How can the passages from this week's study encourage you to persist in your own holiness and personal service of the Lord even when others disparage or scoff at your spiritual development?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/070515.cfm

First Reading EZ 2:2-5

Second Reading 2 COR 12:7-10

Gospel Reading MK 6:1-6

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

The Role of Weakness in Spiritual Formation



The Role of Weakness in Spiritual Formation

Reflections by Christy Hill, Ph.D.

Who wants to feel weak? Who enjoys bumping up against one's own inadequacies? Why would I desire to get in touch with the many times (a day) I don't live up to my own standards, let alone God's? Isn't the Christian life supposed to make me feel better?

The Apostle Paul may have resisted feeling weak, at first, too. He was a very successful Jew—even of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of heresy. If you go by strict religious standards, his resume was impressive. But after his conversion to Christ, those things no longer mattered. In fact, he considered them rubbish.[i] But I wonder how long it took him to gain this perspective.

He gives us a glimpse of his journey toward recognizing the value of weakness in his life, modeling a mature Christian perspective of the ongoing struggle we have with the flesh and its falleness. He wrestled with God over this topic. Three times he prayed for God to relieve him of a

thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan. We don't know what this messenger of Satan was, but we do know it "tormented" him and made him feel weak.[ii] But God, who has infinite power and wisdom, ordained that weakness could actually be something good for His children. He said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."[iii]

So what is the value of weakness for spiritual formation? Could it be that we, like Paul, have a tendency to put confidence in ourselves to live the Christian life? Could it be that I have a deeply ingrained success mentality that desires to use Christianity and the spiritual disciplines to help me feel better about myself, without deepening my relationship and dependence on my Savior? So instead of allowing us to live in the delusion that we are better off on our own (autonomy) and that we really need to get our act together in order to be loved by God (work's righteousness), God breaks us of these ingrained beliefs by giving us the gift of weakness and inadequacy. So then when I bump up against my weakness, I can be reminded of my need for a Savior, even as a mature Christian. I can continue to fall in love with my Rescuer, when I realize that His blood covers my sin. I can turn to Him in dependence, not as a last resort, but as a welcomed reminder of my true state of dependence. It would be cruel of God to allow us to live in the lies of autonomy and work's righteousness, which is our natural tendency.

Maturity starts to look a little bit different than the "victorious Christian living" model that feeds our success mentality. Growth in sanctification means recognizing and internalizing the truth of who I am in Christ and relating to God in deeper, more intimate ways. If a thorn in the flesh helps me to recognize my continual need for a Savior and to turn often to God throughout my day, then it accomplishes a noble purpose. And we can say with Paul, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."[iv]

I have to admit, I'm not there yet. But I do have to ask the question: Does our doctrine of sanctification address and have room for the daily experience of weakness, inadequacy and failure?

Do we teach those we disciple and have influence over the value of recognizing our moments of weakness that come to us throughout the day and allowing it to remind us to turn to God and not depend on self? Do I model a life that is comfortable with my own messiness, so that others may see that God's love is not based on our performance, but on His desire to love us? It is going to take a lot of weakness, failure and inadequacy to undo the false beliefs that we are better off on our own (autonomy) and we have to work hard to gain God's favor (work's righteousness). The message of the Gospel still speaks to us in the ongoing journey of spiritual formation as we embrace weakness and let it do God's noble purposes.

End Notes

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[i] Philippians 3:4b-11 (all Scripture quotations from NIV).

[ii] 2 Corinthians 12:7, 10.

[iii] 2 Corinthians 12:9a.

[iv] 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10.

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