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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-30-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. A key verse this week that links all three readings together is in the second reading from Galatians, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:17). We desire to accomplish great things for God, but our flesh works against us. When we cooperate with our carnal, fleshly desires we may not achieve the full potential that God has for us. We will see how these forces rage among the people in all three of today's readings.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from First Kings is just before the appointment of Nimshi as the King of the Northern tribes of Israel and the replacement of Elijah the prophet by Elisha. Elijah, the great prophet of God, had just killed the prophets of Baal after the great contest at Mount Carmel. When King Ahab's evil wife Jezebel found out about the slaying of the prophets she set out to kill Elijah (1 Kings 19:2). This caused Elijah to flee and he came to believe that he was the only believer left in the entire kingdom. Elijah said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10). God replied as we see in today's reading and corrected his false assumption.

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First Reading:

> *1 Kings 19:16-21 NAS95 16 and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. 17 "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. 18 "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him." 19 So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him. 20 He left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" 21 So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.*

God gave Elijah specific guidance to appoint Jehu as the king of Israel and to anoint Elisha as his own successor (v. 16). God told Elijah that he wasn't the only believer left and that He had 7,000 true believers left in the kingdom (v. 18). Next, Elijah went and found Elisha out working and placed his prophet mantle (clothing) on him. When Elisha wavered about immediately accepting this responsibility Elijah told him in effect that to forsake this appointment would be an affront to God (v. 20). So Elisha accepted his new position and made a traditional sacrifice to confirm the "covenant" made between him and God to fulfill the prophecy given to Elijah.

The reading points out just how bad conditions had become in Israel such that Elijah believed that he was the only believer left alive. However, it is interesting that while 7,000 believers remained, even that was a very low number in view of the large size of the nation. Evidently most of the people had succumbed to the evil pagan worship practices memorialized in the Bible by King Jeroboam the son of Nabat who is recorded as a standard of evil. We see that standard mentioned earlier in First Kings. "For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and in his sins which he made Israel sin, provoking the LORD God of Israel with their idols" (1 Kings 16:26).

The big idea in the reading is regarding the supreme sovereignty of God. Even when the great prophet in the entire world felt that all hope was lost, God continued making plans for the future of the kingdom and reminding him of His omniscient and long-term view. In our age we can look to this passage to be reminded that God has our best interests in mind, is establishing future plans for us as well as all believers, and even when we feel totally spiritually alone our sovereign Father is superintending the circumstances for His glory and our best interests.

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from Galatians is Saint Paul's teaching on the freedom believers possess in Christ as contrasted to the bondage that the false teachers were imposing upon the people by instructing them that they must obey the Mosaic Law. Paul explains further in the reading the battle between a believer's spirit and their flesh.

Second Reading:

> *Galatians 5:1 NAS95 1 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*
>
> *Galatians 5:13-18 NAS95 13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 15 But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.*

Paul reminded the believers in Galatia of their overarching purpose by quoting from the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He cautioned them not to use their freedom in Christ to take advantage of their "neighbors." The Jews by that time had come to understand their neighbor in a very narrow sense such that it only included their fellow countrymen. Jesus had earlier corrected this false teaching in Luke Chapter 10. There Jesus explained the meaning of "neighbor" by telling them the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus explained to His disciples that, of all the people who passed by the man who had fallen at the hands of robbers, the only one who acted as a true neighbor as intended by God in Leviticus 19:18 was "The one who showed mercy toward him" (Luke 10:37). This is extremely important in this context because the Epistle to the Galatians was directed at the false teachers who taught that in order for people to be saved they must obey the constraints of the Mosaic Law making them, in effect, proselyte Jews. Paul and Jesus taught something quite different, that the neighborhood of God included anyone who was in need. Our true family includes those who have come to the Father through faith in the Son (John 3:16). Therefore, instead of trying to follow all of the contours of the Mosaic law, one would fulfill the spirit of the law by being a loving person. The only way a person can be truly loving (self-sacrificing and honoring of others above self) is if their heart is surrendered to God and His Spirit is now in control of the individual. The difference between someone who tries really hard to be a good

person and one who is a Christian, is the power of the Holy Spirit alive in one's heart. The Holy Spirit is God's evidence that His life is inside a believer. While a believer is a work in progress and will not be perfect in this life, a fundamental change has taken place when we surrender ourselves to God through Christ. A new relationship has begun, and we are under the influence of God's Spirit, which transforms us. We begin to walk in step with the values of God's Spirit. And since God is love, it makes sense that He teaches us how to be more loving. This is not a matter of self-effort, but a growth in the life of God who makes His home in our hearts. Paul was clear that "*if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law*" (v. 18).

One wonders if at times Paul felt marginalized like Elijah as we discussed in the first reading where the prophet had fled from evil Jezebel's murderous plot. Paul, surrounded by false teachers that plotted to drag believers into the strictures of Jewish legalism, expressed God's prophetic word regarding the freedom that was to be found only through faith in Jesus Christ.

In our lives we must ask ourselves in what ways are we attempting to work out our own salvation through obedience to some form of religious law. It's hard not to notice those in our neighborhoods who never seem to leave their houses on Sunday morning to go to church. Do we hold to a false belief system that we are a pretty good person because we have faithfully attended Mass on Sundays and holy days that we are somehow going to be set apart from others who have not so zealously obeyed the commandments of the church? When we place our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins we have moved from darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9). The difference between a person that has truly trusted in Jesus versus the one that is relying upon their own works for salvation is subtle but very real as Jesus explained to Nicodemus. In John Chapter 3 Nicodemus, a legalistic Jew from the group known as the Pharisees, was a Rabbi who came to Jesus at night for fear of the Jews (John 3:2). Jesus explained to Nicodemus how he could only enter the kingdom of heaven through faith in Him. In one of the most important verses in the entire Bible Jesus told him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Jesus went on to explain to him that in addition to the obvious necessity of physical birth, something much less obvious was necessary. In order to become a citizen of heaven one must be born spiritually through faith in God's Son. He told Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:16-17).

If you are struggling with understanding the true motives of your heart, the Scripture says that you should call out to God in prayer. Paul said, "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Romans 10:9-10). As we move to the final reading this week, take a moment to affirm your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the reading is Luke's recording of the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly life just before he gave His life for us on the cross at Calvary. Earlier the disciples had been arguing over who among them was the greatest. Jesus then presented them with a child and told them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great" (Luke 9:48). He then corrected His disciples who had rebuked someone for casting out demons in the name of Jesus, saying "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you" (v. 50). This hints at some of the same tension that Paul was indicating in the second reading between the strict followers of the Law and those that followed it less closely or held to other religious traditions. Nowhere was this tension more evident than in the region of Samaria where the people were held in contempt by the Jewish legalists. The Samaritans were considered a half breed people since they had been overtaken by the Assyrian Empire during the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. Interestingly, Jesus turned to this despised group for help in making the preparations for the celebration of His last Passover feast. This was the Passover after which the true Lamb of God would be sacrificed for the sins of the world.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 9:51-62 NAS95 51 When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; 52 and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. 53 But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. 54 When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" 55 But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; 56 for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And they went on to another village. 57 As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." 59 And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." 60 But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." 61 Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." 62 But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."*

We see in the reading that the Samaritans didn't welcome Jesus' disciple's efforts in making the arrangements for the Passover feast even though Jesus had sent messengers ahead of time to them (vv. 52-53). Instead, they were forced to travel onto another village, one which was very likely outside the constraints of Samaritan beliefs. When James and John, named by Jesus the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17), were confronted with the rejection of their efforts they showed their passion

and love for Jesus by asking Him whether they should command fire to come down from the sky and destroy the Samaritans (v. 54). The disciples were familiar with how Elijah had commanded fire to come down from the sky to consume the sacrifice during the contest with the prophets of Baal, but now they were asking not to burn already dead cattle but rather living people! Jesus quickly corrected their false thinking and reminded them that He didn't come to "*destroy men's lives, but to save them*" (v. 56). This is reminiscent of what we read in our discussion of the second reading from John 3:17 where Jesus said, "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." As the reading progressed, Jesus taught His disciples about true discipleship and answering the calling of God. A true disciple would have to be willing to not only forsake their comfortable home (v. 58) but also to forsake their family in order to follow Him (v. 59). Here we see a clear parallel with Elisha's initial response to God's call through Elijah that we read about in the first reading.

As believers in the Lord Jesus we are called to forsake the things which hold us back to true obedience of the Lord Jesus. As we saw in the first reading, when God places a calling upon our lives we are to respond in obedience. Our answer must be to forsake the things which may hold us back, whether they be family, as we saw in the Gospel reading, or religious practices as we saw in the second. Like Elisha, even if in our humanness we hesitate for a moment while we count the cost of our obedience, we are called to respond in faith by following the directives given to us by God. As a first step of belief we are called to forsake the false understanding that we are saved from our good works and rather seeing that our deeds flow from our relationship with God. As we enter into God's invisible spiritual kingdom, the "kingdom of heaven" that Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3:3, we participate through God's power, as Paul said in the reading from Galatians, being led by the Spirit. At times although we too may desire to command fire down from heaven to consume our adversaries, Jesus calls us to a higher standard by recognizing these people as our "neighbors." This battle will continue for the duration of our life here on earth, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:17).

Reflection Questions

1. Most Christians are not known for their love. Instead, the world characterizes us as judgmental, harsh, and angry. Who are the "neighbors" that you regularly interact with? What would it look like for you to walk in the Spirit and change this characterization with your "neighbor?"
2. Jesus illustrated true discipleship as a relationship with Him that prioritized Him above all other priorities. In what ways have you made intentional decisions to orient your life around His Kingdom principles? What has been the cost of discipleship for you? Are there any new ways that He is asking you to follow Him?

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