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 11-30-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 11-30-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah 63 in which we include a great deal of the surrounding context and learn about God's frustration with the Jewish people during this era. Then we move to the second reading which is the opening verses of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Finally we conclude with a lengthy analysis from Mark's Gospel on the section known as the Olivet Discourse.

The first reading is in Isaiah 63-64. Israel was experiencing the consequences of turning away from God. Isaiah, who was God's spokesperson, cried out to God on behalf of the people. The people were suffering as a result of keeping God out of their lives. But this was a necessary part of the training process, for how else would they know that surrendering to God was actually for their good unless they experienced the harsh reality of living apart from God? (The bold text is what will be read in the mass, the normal text is the biblical verses that provide the context).

> *16 For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us And Israel does not recognize us.* ***You, O LORD, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name. 17 Why, O LORD, do You cause us to stray from Your ways And harden our heart from fearing You? Return for the sake of Your servants, the tribes of Your heritage. 18 Your holy people possessed Your sanctuary for a little while, Our adversaries have trodden it down.*** *19 We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, Like those who were not called by Your name. (Isaiah 63:16-19)*

As a prophet, Isaiah was in a tough position. He desired to see God move in the hearts of the people,

but he knew that the Israelites were unwilling. God is a "gentleman" and does not barge in where He is not wanted. And so the people's hearts grew harder and harder, to the point where God's protective presence was no longer felt in Israel. Isaiah's complaint was that they had become just like the surrounding nations that did not have a covenantal relationship with God. He said, "We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, Like those who were not called by Your name" (v. 19). Again, the reading continues below.

> ***1 Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, That the mountains might quake at Your presence– 2 As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil–To make Your name known to Your adversaries, That the nations may tremble at Your presence! 3 When You did awesome things which we did not expect, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence. 4 For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear, Nor has the eye seen a God besides You, Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him. 5 You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, Who remembers You in Your ways. Behold, You were angry, for we sinned, We continued in them a long time; And shall we be saved? 6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls on Your name, Who arouses himself to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities. 8 But now, O LORD, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand.*** *(Isaiah 63:16 – 64:8)*

Isaiah's response to their predicament was to call God to hurl down His judgment upon the nations that were attacking them (vv. 1-3). He looked back and remembered God's power when He did "awesome things [they] did not expect" (v. 3) and finally admitted their great sin. Isaiah said, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (v. 6). The connotation of the "filthy garments" here is that of a woman's menstrual rags. This is a strong word picture of how God views our "good deeds" done in our own power. This theme is echoed in the words of King David who said in Psalm 14, "They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:3). Seven hundred years later Saint Paul quoted these verses to explain how every person stands condemned before God because of the stain of sin. He said, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He further explained that as result of our sin the penalty is death (Romans 6:23). This passage teaches that we cannot save ourselves. There is no such thing as a cosmic scale that weighs our good deeds versus our bad deeds. All of our deeds, even the so-called "good deeds" are as filthy garments, good only for the trash heap. If this is the case, we must analyze what we are trusting in for salvation. If we are trusting in ourselves, we are going to be sorely lacking.

Isaiah points to a redemptive solution in this passage by showing the need of trusting in God's righteousness. He described God's character: "Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him. You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, who remembers You in Your ways" (vv. 4-5). There is an implied sense of relational dependence to which Isaiah is pointing. He continues this theme of relational dependence at the end of the section saying: "But now, O LORD, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You are our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand" (v. 8). The redemptive solution to the dire situation we find ourselves in as sinners is to throw ourselves on God's mercy and to trust in Him to save us. In the New Testament, we see even more clearly God's redemption in Jesus. He bore the wrath of God and forgives us of our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). As believers in the finished work of Jesus we are forgiven of our sin and have a special relationship with God, Who at the moment we believed sent His Holy Spirit to live within us (Ephesians 1:13).

What does this means for us today? We must consider carefully in what/whom we are trusting for salvation. Isaiah is very clear, that we cannot be good enough to be saved on our own merit. Becoming a Christian means to lean your full weight on Jesus and trust His righteousness to save you. As believers we have a special relationship with God, in a way that is similar but yet unique from God's chosen people Israel. There will be untold blessings for all believers when they pass into eternity with God the moment they die. Saint Paul quoted from the first reading and said about believers in the Lord Jesus, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). God allowed judgment to come upon the people of Israel for the purpose of bringing them back to the Lord. As we transition to the second reading, which is also from 1 Corinthians, Paul celebrates with the believers in that region the forgiveness they received through Jesus Who "died for their sins according the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). We can celebrate that we have come to believe even without having to endure a military invasion and being carried captive into a foreign land as happened with the Jews. Although the Jewish people about whom Isaiah wrote in the reading had turned away from the Lord, one day all of Israel will repent of their sin and be saved (Romans 11:26).

The second reading is the first six verses from Saint Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. Paul founded this church on his second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 18. The Corinthian church was in a major cosmopolitan city in southern Greece, immersed in the surrounding godless culture of a worldly crossroads city. This was actually Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he mentioned the first letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9 that was subsequently lost.

> *1 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, 2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, 6 even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will also confirm you to*

> *the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:1-9)*

Paul began by affirming his apostleship, meaning that he was someone who saw the resurrected Lord Jesus and was personally called by the Lord to his ministry. This happened to him while he journeyed on the road to Damascus as was recorded in the Book of Acts (Acts 9:3-5). Second, Paul provided the name of Sosthenes who was most likely his secretary. This man had suffered for the Lord when he was beaten for taking Paul in front of a Corinthian civil court (Acts 18:12-17). The mention of Sosthenes is significant because it reveals that this important Jewish leader of the synagogue in that region (Acts 18:17) came to faith in the Lord Jesus. Third, Paul affirmed the holiness of anyone who believes in the Lord Jesus. He said, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours (v. 2). Sanctification is the concept of being set apart for the purposes of God. This word comes from the Greek "hagios" meaning "separation," and is the same Greek word that is translated "holiness."

This is a one-time, forever event, but also has an ongoing, growing element, in that as the author of Hebrews stated, "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). Finally, Paul says that in the end, believers in the Lord will be "blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 8). This is a common theme for Paul, we also see it in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 as well as in Philippians 1:6 and 2:15. Paul said in Colossians, "yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach–if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister" (Colossians 1:22-23). Believers are blameless in their positon before the Lord, meaning they are justified as if they had never sinned. However, the ungodly behavior that Paul noted later in 1 Corinthians was not indicative of true believers, for only true believers are blameless before the Lord. Paul said in the closing verse of the reading, "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 9). Although as we saw in the first reading, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), continuing in the faith is a sign of a true believer.

We can celebrate that as believers we have been set apart from the world for the purpose of serving God. Most of us do not get too excited about holiness, because holiness has the connation of being no fun. But that is the deception of the Enemy who makes us think that holiness is a drag. The idea of holiness is to be set apart for special use, and which one of us doesn't want to be "special". That is a longing that everyone has. We see a world full of people trying to be special based on the world's value system, using their looks, their personality, their wit, their charm, their money, and their talents to try to stand out from the rest of the crowd. Wanting to feel special is a legitimate longing, but unless it's met in Christ, we will try to meet it in some illegitimate way, which is sinful (even if it is not immoral). So the moral of the story is to recognize that God's imparted holiness to us is what meets this deep longing to be set apart for special use.

Something Paul said in the second reading provides an entry point to transition to the Gospel lesson. Paul said that the Corinthian believers were "awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). In the Gospel lesson from Mark Chapter 13, Jesus provides some important insight into just how that event will come about. This reading is from the portion of Scripture known as the Olivet Discourse because Jesus told it while on the Mount of Olives just across the Kidron Valley from the Jerusalem temple. In this passage, the Lord predicts the future destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and looks far beyond to the time when God will pour out His judgment upon the world just before He returns to usher in His Millennial reign. *Note: In order to provide the full context the entire first portion of the chapter that was skipped in the lectionary was included since it was so important in order to understand the entire context and the meaning that flows from it.*

> *1 As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" 2 And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down." 3 As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?" 5 And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. 6 Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. 8 For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. 9 But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. 10 The gospel must first be preached to all the nations. 11 When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit. 12 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. 13 You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. 14 But when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. 15 the one who is on the housetop must not go down, or go in to get anything out of his house; 16 and the one who is in the field must not turn back to get his coat. 17 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! 18 But pray that it may not happen in the winter. 19 For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will. 20 Unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom He chose, He shortened the days. 21 And then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ'; or, 'Behold, He is there'; do not believe him; 22 for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect. 23 But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance. 24 But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS*

> *LIGHT, 25 AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. 27 And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven. 28 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. 33 Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. 34 It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. 35 Therefore, be on the alert–for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning– 36 in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. 37 What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'" (Mark 13:1-37)*

In order to understand the meaning of Jesus' message we must provide a brief overall grid of the end time (eschatological) events. First, although this prophecy was partially fulfilled with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70, the final fulfillment will be in the future when the Old Testament prophecies regarding the "Day of the Lord" will be poured out upon the unbelieving world. During this time, the events of the end times will be marked with signs on earth, signs in the sky, and signs in heaven. It is important to understand that some events run in parallel throughout our current age up until the return of the Lord; other events run sequentially, such as those that play out during the tribulation period.

Parallel Events: Some of the events that run in parallel are as follows.

- The persecution of believers (verse 9)
- The overall decline of morality and godly living (2 Timothy 3:13). Both of these conditions will grow worse and the persecution of believers will intensify until the close of this age and the return of the Lord Jesus.
- An overall increase in natural and manmade disasters. Beginning in verse 6 Jesus moved to an overall description of the age preceding his return. This period was to marked by "wars and rumors of wars" (v. 6), earthquakes and famines (v. 8), world wars (v. 8) and by many false Messiahs (christs, v. 6) coming and saying that they are the Christ. Jesus said that the Gospel must first go out to the entire world (v. 10), which we see will be fulfilled by an angel in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:6), in spite of the best efforts of Christian missionaries to achieve this goal.
- The coming of many antichrists (v. 22). Many antichrists have arisen in our age including figures like David Koresh, Joseph Smith (Mormons), and Charles Taze Russell (JW's). An interesting one is the case of a man named Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. This rabbi from New York was a very influential Jewish leader in the world. When he died in 1994 his

followers expected him to rise from the dead in you guessed it, three days. As of this writing, he is still in the grave.

Sequential Events: Other events follow sequentially, some of which are as follows.

- Jesus' prediction in verses 1-3 of the destruction of the temple, which was fulfilled in AD 70.
- A future "catching up" to meet Jesus in the air, first of the believers that have already died, then those living of the church to heaven as predicted by Saint Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

  "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

  Once the church is removed from the world because "God has not appointed us to wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9) the cascading series of events known as the tribulation period will commence. The last half of the closing chapter of the tribulation period is known as the "Day of the Lord," and this is the emergency scenario that begins when Jesus warns the people in verse 15.

- Signs in the sky (vv. 24-25).
- The coming of the ultimate Antichrist spoken of by the Prophet Daniel and in the Book of Revelation. Saint John said in his day that many antichrists had already come (1 John 2:18), but the Bible predicts the coming of one known as the Man of Sin (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This is the one that will bring about the "abomination of desolation" described by Jesus in verse 14. This will mark the establishment of a global ruler known as the Antichrist (1 John 2:18, Daniel 7:8 "the little horn," Revelation 6:2 –the rider on the white horse), and the false holy spirit figure known as the false prophet (Revelation 13:11-15).
- The unveiling of God's judgments described in the Book of Revelation including the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls (Revelation 6, 8, 11, 15, 16). These are judgments of God as declared in Revelation: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve. … Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments" (Revelation 16:5-7).
- The unveiling of a powerful missionary force from God known as the "144,000 thousand witnesses" (Revelation 7:4).
- Supernatural protection of the Nation of Israel in a special place prepared by God (Revelation 12:6). This is the place to which Jesus is telling the people to flee in verse 14 when they see the Abomination of Desolation (refer to the next point below).
- The "abomination of desolation" (v. 14). This is when the Antichrist figure will establish himself as God and set up his own image in the temple to be worshiped. Paul said this about the Antichrist: "who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship,

so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2Thessalonians 2:4). The Jews were familiar with something like this happening before when Antiochus IV Epiphanes sacked the temple and rededicated it to the god Zeus in 167 BC, and sacrificed a pig in the temple to his god. This "abomination of desolation" was a type of the one to come, a prefiguring of the time that the Antichrist would establish himself as god in the temple to be worshiped by everyone in the world, not just Jerusalem as happened in the earlier time.

- The destruction of the Antichrist's religious and civil empire known as "Mystery Babylon" (Revelation 18:2).
- Marriage Supper of the Lamb with all believers in heaven (Revelation 19:7)
- Return of the Lord Jesus to earth with his victorious church (Revelation 19:11-19).
- Antichrist and False Prophet thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19:20)
- Satan bound for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:3) then released for a final battle (Revelation 20:7)
- Satan thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10).

What does all of this mean for us today? First, Jesus cautioned His disciples to be aware of their future destiny so that they were living rightly today. By using the parable of the fig tree (v. 28), something with which the people in the Mediterranean region were very familiar, they could see the signs of the times and live in a watchful and purposeful way. In the same way that Jesus cautioned His disciples to beware of by watching for the signs, we can know that Jesus' return in imminent by watching the signs ourselves. This means that we should not delay in accomplishing the work that God has placed in our hearts to accomplish. For, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Second, because God's prophets so accurately predicted events that have already occurred, including Jesus' (the greatest prophet of all) prediction of the destruction of the temple, we can trust that the events will play out exactly as God as described in the Scriptures. Because God has so accurately predicted the future, we can trust Him when He tells us how to enter into an eternal relationship with Him through faith in His Son, the risen the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, we can rest in the fact that everything is going to turn out fine for anyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus for salvation. Those with faith in the Lord can trust that even if they find themselves thrown into tribulation, be it the "Great Tribulation" or any tribulation, they can trust that no matter what happens it will turn out well.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How does knowing how the Grand Story ends influence how you live today? What values do you have as a result of knowing that God wins in the end? What values do you want God to develop in you based on this knowledge of the end times?

2. The first two readings dealt with humankind's lack of righteousness (Isaiah) and the Corinthian's being called saints. Think about this contrast that is spoken about throughout the Bible. The worse the bad news is, the better the good news is. Explain why the coming of Christ to die on the cross for our sins is called "the good news." How has this become good news for your life?

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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/113014.cfm

First Reading IS 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7

Second Reading 1 COR 1:3-9

Gospel Reading MK 13:33-37

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 11-23-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 11-23-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Ezekiel in which we see the contrast between the ungodly shepherds and God the Good Shepherd. We include a great deal of the surrounding verses in order to help us to understand the meaning of the reading based upon its context. Then we move onto the second reading from 1

Corinthians in which we study the truth of the resurrection of believers and how this provides us with great hope. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 25 in which we study the coming judgment of everyone who lives in the world at the end of the tribulation period. We pray that this study gives you much more insight as you attend Mass this coming Sunday.

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context is just after God told Ezekiel that although the people recognized him as a prophet and came to listen to him (Ezekiel 33:30-31c) they did not take his words into account and change their lives (Ezekiel 33:31d-ff). Instead, God told them that it would be afterwards that they would look back and "know that a prophet has been among them" (v. 33). In Ezekiel's time, and also in the present age God is not pleased with people going through the motions of dead religion, especially when they don't listen to God's word and let Him operate on their hearts and minds to change their behavior. Chapter 34, the section from which today's reading is taken, opens with God's scathing critique of the "shepherds of Israel," meaning the ungodly leaders of the nation including kings, priests, and prophets (except for Ezekiel, Daniel and Jeremiah his contemporaries). We get our word "pastor" from the Latin word for "shepherd." These passages are messianic, meaning that they prefigure the revelation of the True Shepherd Jesus Christ. In those days the people were as "sheep without a shepherd," something eerily reminiscent of what Jesus said some six hundred years later. "Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36-37). As usual in these study notes it is crucially important to understand the context as the reading provides a **contrast** between the ungodly "shepherds" of Ezekiel's time and the Godly Shepherd God and His ultimate fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ. This contrast is important enough to understand that we have provided the first ten verses of the chapter leading up to today's reading.

> *1 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? 3 You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. 4 Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. 5 They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. 6 My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.' 7 Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 'As I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock;' 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10 Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from*

> *feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.'"(Ezekiel 34:1-10)*

This is the text of the reading for today that follows the opening of chapter 34. *Note: Verses 13-14 which were skipped in the reading were added in order to provide the full context.*

> 11 For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 "As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. 14 I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. 16 "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment. 17 As for you, My flock, thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats." (Ezekiel 34:11-17).

Throughout the Scripture, the Lord God pictures Himself as the "Shepherd of the Sheep," and this occurs early in the Bible. This theme in the reading from Ezekiel occurs frequently in Ezekiel's Book, occurring some 15 times in chapter 34 alone. The first time this concept appears is back in the Book of Genesis when Jacob was prophesizing about the twelve sons (and tribes) of Israel, this time about Joseph. "Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a spring; Its branches run over a wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, And shot at him and harassed him; But his bow remained firm, And his arms were agile, From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)" (Genesis 49:22-24). The shepherd theme is reminiscent of the opening of Psalm 23, "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want" v. 1). We see this clearly in today's reading. "I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord God" (vv. 14-16). As we examine today's reading we find additional insight into the identity of this Shepherd of Israel. He emerges as a Shepherd-King figure Who has a special relationship with the LORD. This is none other than the Lord Jesus Himself. If we look beyond today's reading to verse 34, we see a continuation of this contrast between the evil shepherds and the One True Shepherd. "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd" (Ezekiel 34:23). "David" in this verse prefigures the One True Shepherd that was yet to come at the time Ezekiel wrote this passage, the Person of Jesus Christ. It is also evident throughout Scripture that the resurrected King David will also play a role in governing Israel in the future Millennial reign of the Lord Jesus on earth.

As believers in Jesus, we can find great comfort from Ezekiel's writing. First, God will seek His sheep that are lost, meaning that God Himself places a calling upon our lives to come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (v. 11). Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). Second, since God keeps His promises that He made to Israel, He will keep all of the promises that He has made to us. One of those promises made to Israel is that He will re-gather this nation Israel at some future time. "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land" (v. 13a). Third, we can trust that God will take care of us in the same way that a Good Shepherd takes care of His sheep. Finally, although we may feel judged by worldly people in this age, the only real judgment that counts is our True Judge the Lord Jesus Himself (v. 17). We can trust that God's judgment will be correct in that as we enter eternity He will judge between the evil shepherds in our land and the ones that do good in serving Him.

As we move onto the second reading, we will see more about the Person Jesus Christ, since He was made alive at the resurrection, we too will be made alive when our bodies are resurrected from the dead. The reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's vigorous explanation of the bodily resurrection of believers, first the Lord Jesus and then all people who put their faith in Him. Paul opens this section with a caution to his readers for them to "hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2b,c). The main theme that runs throughout the chapter is that the risen Lord Jesus is the hope of all believers, in spite of the fact that some in the church had denied the teaching of the future resurrection of the dead (v.12). Paul said, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (1Corinthians 15:13-14). He closes the section just before today's reading by saying, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1Corinthians 15:19), something which denies the conventional wisdom of our age that would say that the Christian life is a noble way of living. With these concepts in mind let's move onto today's reading. *Note: Verse 27 which was skipped in the reading was provided in order to provide the full context.*

> *20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. 21 For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, 24 then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be abolished is death. 27 For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. 28 When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)*

Paul said that since Christ **has** been raised from the dead, is the first One to be resurrected (v.20), He is the one through Whom came life and is a precursor of the hope of resurrection for all who

believe (v. 22b, 23). As we saw in the first reading from Ezekiel, Jesus' rulership will be established on earth, which is one of the aspects of the resurrection. Jesus will "come in glory," (Matthew 25:31) something that we will read about in the Gospel lesson today. Paul quoted from Psalm 8 when he said that Jesus would totally subdue all of His enemies, "put them under His feet" (vv. 25-26). The evil shepherds spoken of by Ezekiel will be subdued and judged forever. The greatest enemy that Jesus will conquer is death through the victory of the resurrection, first Himself and then all believers. The culmination of world history will be marked by the end of Jesus' one thousand year (millennial) reign on earth. This will be concluded with Christ handing over His kingdom to His Father in heaven (vv.24 -28), something that would fall into the category of what Saint Peter called "things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). After Christ has handed His kingdom over to the Father, His eternal reign will begin (Revelation 21, 22).

As believers, our greatest hope lies in the hope of resurrection. We can rest in the historical fact that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead, something that is one of the best proven historical events throughout all of history. As our bodies wear out and grow old, we can rest in the fact that one day we will be given a new eternal body that will never grow old. In the same way that Paul comforted the Corinthian believers with these facts, we can find comfort and give comfort to other believers through hope in our future resurrection.

As we transition to the Gospel lesson, earlier we mentioned in the first reading how God is the Righteous Judge and in the second reading how one day He will come in Glory to rule and reign over the earth. One of the elements of rulership is acting as a Judge, and at the end His reign on earth Jesus will judge those who have survived the tribulation period at the conclusion of the Day of the Lord. This is the judgment that is marked by Jesus' statement earlier in Matthew 24, "Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left" (Matthew 24:40). The one that is taken will be taken in judgment, the one that is left behind will enter the Millennial Reign of Jesus Christ. This is similar to what happened to the nonbelievers during Noah's flood. Jesus said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be(Matthew 24:37-39). As you read the Gospel lesson from Matthew 25, keep in mind the context that this judgment is immediately preceding Jesus' Millennial Reign on earth, rather than the Great White Throne judgment spoken of in Revelation 20:11-15 which doesn't happen until **after** Jesus' thousand year reign on earth. This judgment is the "reaping" spoken of by John in the Book of Revelation Chapter 14. "And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.' Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped" (Revelation 14:15-16).

> *31 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His*

> *right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' 41 Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' 44 Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' 46 These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46)*

In the reading we see how nonbelieving goats are forcibly separated from the believing sheep by the Good Shepherd Jesus. Up until the time of this judgment these two groups of people who looked identical on the outside lived together in the world. This concept of a "mixed multitude" is clearly taught by Jesus in other places in the Gospel and especially in His parable of the wheat and the tares which also speaks of this same judgment (Matthew 13:24-30). In that parable Jesus said, "Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matthew 13:30). In today's reading Jesus' point is similar, but He used the shepherd analogy that we saw in Ezekiel. The Good Shepherd who knows His Sheep will divide these two groups on the basis of their heart condition. The criteria that He will use was something He explained to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3, "You must be born from above (or again, Greek "anothen") to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3, with my explanation). Jesus said in that same Gospel, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28). Although Jesus as God knows His sheep instinctively, just like any shepherd, and they look the same on the outside, His sheep bear distinctive markings on the inside. These markings display themselves in their **behavior**, which is a way that even the worldly people can recognize them. This becomes clear in verses 35 -40. **Some** of the good works of a believer flow from a heart that has been changed by God (John 3:3), as James said, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14). The sheep indulge in a variety of "sheeplike" behaviors. They feed the hungry (v. 35a), give drink to the thirsty (v. 35c), clothing to those without (v. 36a), visit the sick (v. 36b), and visit those in prison (v. 36b-c). Jesus then went on to explain that anytime you do these things for others it was as if you were doing it directly for Him (vv. 37-40, 42-45). Jesus also made it clear that the eternal destination (v. 46) for nonbelievers is the "eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). It's interesting to note

that Jesus' sheep sit at His right hand, while Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father (1 Peter 3:22).

The Gospel lesson helps us to prioritize and value what God cares about. In this world, attending to the needs of those who are marginalized in society is an opportunity for us to display what's really in our hearts. Do we have the love and compassion of God or ware we still living only for ourselves? Jesus shares specific types of needs that were commonplace in His day and age including hunger, thirst, lack of sufficient clothing, and imprisonment. You might be encountering other types of needs that God is asking you to meet (helping a child learn how to read, sacrificing some of your income to provide a home for someone, giving a friend a ride to work while their car is being repaired. The opportunities to meet other people's needs are endless. So we'll need to ask for wisdom to know what needs are our opportunity to love Christ by serving others.

What does all of this mean in our lives? First, we can trust that the Good Shepherd Who was the first to rise from the dead will also come for us one day when we enter eternity (John 14: 3). Second, even though we may be tortured by the ungodly behavior of people in the world, we can trust that God knows the intentions of our heart and those who are His. God will work it out, "Vengeance is mine says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Second, We can rest in the fact that our good works flow out of a heart changed by God (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 3:3) and these are evident to those who are unknowingly (2 Corinthians 4:3-4) on the broad road to destruction (Matthew 7:13). Our good works will be evident to them and will shed light on their evil works (John 3:20). Finally, we can trust that since we are believers we can trust in the fact that when we sit before the Lord in judgment it will be for the basis of rewards and not to determine our eternal destination.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the Bible the word translated "faith" brings with it the idea of expecting to have the things hoped for or living in light of an unseen reality. In your life, what does it mean to have faith? How does faith play into obedience? Are these two separate things in your mind or are they connected?

2. The Greek word translated "obedience" (hupakoe) according to Strong's Concordance (5218, drawn from 5219) means "attentive hearkening, i.e. (by implication) compliance or submission." Read the following Scripture and answer the question that follows.

> *25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to* ***obedience of faith****; 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 16:25-27, emphasis added)*

In light of what you learned today along with Paul's teaching above on obedience of faith, what does it mean for you to walk in obedience of faith? How is your faith evident to others?

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

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/112314.cfm

First Reading EZ 34:11-12, 15-17

Second Reading 1 COR 15:20-26, 28

Gospel Reading MT 25:31-46

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 11-23-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 11-23-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Ezekiel in which we see the contrast between the ungodly shepherds and God the Good Shepherd. We include a great deal of the surrounding verses in order to help us to understand the meaning of the reading based upon its context. Then we move onto the second reading from 1

Corinthians in which we study the truth of the resurrection of believers and how this provides us with great hope. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 25 in which we study the coming judgment of everyone who lives in the world at the end of the tribulation period. We pray that this study gives you much more insight as you attend Mass this coming Sunday.

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context is just after God told Ezekiel that although the people recognized him as a prophet and came to listen to him (Ezekiel 33:30-31c) they did not take his words into account and change their lives (Ezekiel 33:31d-ff). Instead, God told them that it would be afterwards that they would look back and "know that a prophet has been among them" (v. 33). In Ezekiel's time, and also in the present age God is not pleased with people going through the motions of dead religion, especially when they don't listen to God's word and let Him operate on their hearts and minds to change their behavior. Chapter 34, the section from which today's reading is taken, opens with God's scathing critique of the "shepherds of Israel," meaning the ungodly leaders of the nation including kings, priests, and prophets (except for Ezekiel, Daniel and Jeremiah his contemporaries). We get our word "pastor" from the Latin word for "shepherd." These passages are messianic, meaning that they prefigure the revelation of the True Shepherd Jesus Christ. In those days the people were as "sheep without a shepherd," something eerily reminiscent of what Jesus said some six hundred years later. "Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36-37). As usual in these study notes it is crucially important to understand the context as the reading provides a **contrast** between the ungodly "shepherds" of Ezekiel's time and the Godly Shepherd God and His ultimate fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ. This contrast is important enough to understand that we have provided the first ten verses of the chapter leading up to today's reading.

> *1 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? 3 You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. 4 Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. 5 They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. 6 My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.' 7 Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 'As I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock;' 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10 Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from*

> *feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.'"(Ezekiel 34:1-10)*

This is the text of the reading for today that follows the opening of chapter 34. *Note: Verses 13-14 which were skipped in the reading were added in order to provide the full context.*

> 11 For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 "As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. 14 I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. 16 "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment. 17 As for you, My flock, thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats." (Ezekiel 34:11-17).

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As we transition to the Gospel lesson, earlier we mentioned in the first reading how God is the Righteous Judge and in the second reading how one day He will come in Glory to rule and reign over the earth. One of the elements of rulership is acting as a Judge, and at the end His reign on earth Jesus will judge those who have survived the tribulation period at the conclusion of the Day of the Lord. This is the judgment that is marked by Jesus' statement earlier in Matthew 24, "Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left" (Matthew 24:40). The one that is taken will be taken in judgment, the one that is left behind will enter the Millennial Reign of Jesus Christ. This is similar to what happened to the nonbelievers during Noah's flood. Jesus said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be(Matthew 24:37-39). As you read the Gospel lesson from Matthew 25, keep in mind the context that this judgment is immediately preceding Jesus' Millennial Reign on earth, rather than the Great White Throne judgment spoken of in Revelation 20:11-15 which doesn't happen until **after** Jesus' thousand year reign on earth. This judgment is the "reaping" spoken of by John in the Book of Revelation Chapter 14. "And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.' Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped" (Revelation 14:15-16).

> *31 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His*

> *right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' 41 Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' 44 Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' 46 These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46)*

In the reading we see how nonbelieving goats are forcibly separated from the believing sheep by the Good Shepherd Jesus. Up until the time of this judgment these two groups of people who looked identical on the outside lived together in the world. This concept of a "mixed multitude" is clearly taught by Jesus in other places in the Gospel and especially in His parable of the wheat and the tares which also speaks of this same judgment (Matthew 13:24-30). In that parable Jesus said, "Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matthew 13:30). In today's reading Jesus' point is similar, but He used the shepherd analogy that we saw in Ezekiel. The Good Shepherd who knows His Sheep will divide these two groups on the basis of their heart condition. The criteria that He will use was something He explained to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3, "You must be born from above (or again, Greek "anothen") to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3, with my explanation). Jesus said in that same Gospel, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28). Although Jesus as God knows His sheep instinctively, just like any shepherd, and they look the same on the outside, His sheep bear distinctive markings on the inside. These markings display themselves in their **behavior**, which is a way that even the worldly people can recognize them. This becomes clear in verses 35 -40. **Some** of the good works of a believer flow from a heart that has been changed by God (John 3:3), as James said, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14). The sheep indulge in a variety of "sheeplike" behaviors. They feed the hungry (v. 35a), give drink to the thirsty (v. 35c), clothing to those without (v. 36a), visit the sick (v. 36b), and visit those in prison (v. 36b-c). Jesus then went on to explain that anytime you do these things for others it was as if you were doing it directly for Him (vv. 37-40, 42-45). Jesus also made it clear that the eternal destination (v. 46) for nonbelievers is the "eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). It's interesting to note

that Jesus' sheep sit at His right hand, while Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father (1 Peter 3:22).

The Gospel lesson helps us to prioritize and value what God cares about. In this world, attending to the needs of those who are marginalized in society is an opportunity for us to display what's really in our hearts. Do we have the love and compassion of God or ware we still living only for ourselves? Jesus shares specific types of needs that were commonplace in His day and age including hunger, thirst, lack of sufficient clothing, and imprisonment. You might be encountering other types of needs that God is asking you to meet (helping a child learn how to read, sacrificing some of your income to provide a home for someone, giving a friend a ride to work while their car is being repaired. The opportunities to meet other people's needs are endless. So we'll need to ask for wisdom to know what needs are our opportunity to love Christ by serving others.

What does all of this mean in our lives? First, we can trust that the Good Shepherd Who was the first to rise from the dead will also come for us one day when we enter eternity (John 14: 3). Second, even though we may be tortured by the ungodly behavior of people in the world, we can trust that God knows the intentions of our heart and those who are His. God will work it out, "Vengeance is mine says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Second, We can rest in the fact that our good works flow out of a heart changed by God (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 3:3) and these are evident to those who are unknowingly (2 Corinthians 4:3-4) on the broad road to destruction (Matthew 7:13). Our good works will be evident to them and will shed light on their evil works (John 3:20). Finally, we can trust that since we are believers we can trust in the fact that when we sit before the Lord in judgment it will be for the basis of rewards and not to determine our eternal destination.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the Bible the word translated "faith" brings with it the idea of expecting to have the things hoped for or living in light of an unseen reality. In your life, what does it mean to have faith? How does faith play into obedience? Are these two separate things in your mind or are they connected?

2. The Greek word translated "obedience" (hupakoe) according to Strong's Concordance (5218, drawn from 5219) means "attentive hearkening, i.e. (by implication) compliance or submission." Read the following Scripture and answer the question that follows.

> *25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to* ***obedience of faith****; 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 16:25-27, emphasis added)*

In light of what you learned today along with Paul's teaching above on obedience of faith, what does it mean for you to walk in obedience of faith? How is your faith evident to others?

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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/112314.cfm

First Reading EZ 34:11-12, 15-17

Second Reading 1 COR 15:20-26, 28

Gospel Reading MT 25:31-46

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 11-16-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 11-16-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Proverbs in which we see the wise stewardship of God's resources by a godly woman. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally we close with a kingdom parable from Saint Matthew in which we also see God's call for careful stewardship of the

resources He has given to us.

The first reading is from the Book of Proverbs. This Scripture was written by King Solomon and is a book of wisdom regarding practical and godly living. The main theme in the reading is how a godly person is a careful steward of their time, talents, and treasures given to them from God. This is the same theme that we will explore later in the Gospel lesson.

Note: All of the skipped verses between 31:13-31 were included in order to provide the full context.

> *10 An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good and not evil All the days of her life. 13 She looks for wool and flax And works with her hands in delight. 14 She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar. 15 She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her household And portions to her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard. 17 She girds herself with strength And makes her arms strong. 18 She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle. 20 She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy. 21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22 She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple. 23 Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land. 24 She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen. 25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future. 26 She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. 27 She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. 28 Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying: 29 "Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all." 30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. 31 Give her the product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:10-31)*

This "Proverbs 31 woman" is one who fears the Lord (v. 30). The big idea from the reading is that a godly person is a careful steward of the gifts they receive from God. Several points arise from the text.

- The godly woman works willingly, not under compulsion (v. 13, "in delight"). She also goes to great lengths in order to get things done (v. 13b-ff).
- The godly woman is a servant to others, even to her own servant (v. 15). She is not a sluggard, but works hard in her service to others.
- She is an entrepreneur (v. 16). In that era her husband would have had to make the actual transaction for the purchase of land, but she was the instigator of it and the one who took care in planting and tending the vineyard.
- She understands that what she gains is from God (v. 18).
- She is optimistic about her future, because she knows that she belongs to God (v. 35, 30b).

The bottom line is that the godly woman is like Jesus, a servant, Someone who came not to be served

but to serve (Matthew 20:28). She is a faithful steward of the gifts that God has given to her. Faithfulness and careful stewardship are common themes throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. We will see this theme continue later in the Gospel lesson.

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. The context is Paul's discussion of the Day of the Lord that we discussed in a previous edition of Mass Notes. This is the period of time at the end of the tribulation period in which Israel finally returns to worship of their Lord. The reading today is a warning to the people living in that era to be watchful for the Lord's return. Watchfulness for the return of the Lord Jesus is a continuing theme in the New Testament.

> *1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-6)*

Just like the parable of the virgins that we will discuss in the introduction to the Gospel reading, everyone is called to be watchful for the return of the Lord. They are to be certain that they find faith in Jesus Christ while they still have the opportunity to do so (Romans 13:11) because nobody knows the hour when the Lord will return (Matthew 24:36). As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God places a high value upon not only being watchful for His return, but also in being a good steward of the things that He has given to us.

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The reading today is part of what is called the Lord's "Olivet Discourse" (Matthew 24:1 – 25:46) in which He describes what is going to happen after the end of the church age. This section contains "kingdom parables" that begin with our Lord saying something similar to, "The kingdom of heaven is like." This is the way that chapter 25 begins with Jesus saying, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to . . ." (Matthew 25:1a). The Lord then went on to tell the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), which has the same theme of watchfulness that we saw in the second reading. Being watchful for the Lord is closely related to being **prepared** for His return, meaning we must already be a citizen of the kingdom before He comes. In the parable, the Lord described how five of the virgins were prepared for the bridegroom and five were not. In Jewish culture the practice was for the groom to come at an unexpected time. The application of the parable is that half of the virgins were prepared for the Lord Jesus' return by studying the Scriptures and coming to a saving knowledge of faith in Jesus Christ while the other five were lost and eternally separated from God in Hell. In the context of chapter 25, the application is that at the end of the tribulation period before the Lord begins His millennial reign there will be a final judgment in which unbelievers will be taken away and not allowed to enter the kingdom. Only God knows people's true hearts so no one should wait to receive God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ because it may end up being too late.

The reading today opens with another of Jesus' "kingdom parable" introductions, "For it is just like" (v. 14a). What Jesus is saying is, "The Kingdom of God is like . . ." As you read, try to determine the main theological idea that emerges from the reading.

> *14 For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. 16 Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17 In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18 But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 22 Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 24 And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. 25 'And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' 26 But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. 27 'Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 28 'Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' 29 For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30 Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30)*

The big idea that emerges from the reading is that stewardship is based on knowing and trusting the heart of the Master. Misguided understanding of the Master's heart leads to living in self-protective, ungodly ways with one's talents, as was the case with the man who buried his talent. The ones who understood and trusted the Master's generous heart were able to take risks and multiply what was entrusted to them. Notice the misconception of the "wicked and lazy slave." He miscalculated the Master's heart when he revealed his deep distrust of him: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground" (verses 24-25). He was blaming his wickedness and laziness on the Master's seemingly unpredictable and untrustworthy character. But the Master smartly revealed the inconsistency in his argument. If he was truly afraid, it seems that he would have at least been wise enough to produce some interest, even if out of fear, if nothing else. The man made an eternal miscalculation when he did not trust the Master's heart.

Many applications arise from the text, here are some of them:

- Knowing and trusting the Master's heart is of utmost importance. We should be spending our time and energy on this endeavor so that we become wise stewards of what is entrusted to us. We look forward to the day when we will enter into our Master's joy. We can trust that it will all be worth it to hear these words of affirmation.
- Although people in this age are entrusted with different levels of abilities and worldly good, if they are faithful in being good stewards of them they are equally rewarded and entrusted with more responsibilities in heaven. Jesus said to the servant that gained five talents from the original five invested, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 21, emphasis added). Likewise, He told the one that was entrusted with only two and gained two, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 23, emphasis added).
- The world is a profitable place for investing God's gifts, both for God and for the people who are entrusted with them. The five talents that God invested in the world became ten (v. 20) and the two talents became four (v. 22). This magical doubling is from God even though it came through the agents to whom He entrusted it.
- Faithful servants have "gifts" to present to their masters, while unfaithful servants have only that which was given to them by God who owns it all in the first place. As believers we are called to invest our time, talents, and treasures in the service of God so that we may have something to present to him when we too stand in judgment before him. Our judgment won't be for salvation, but for rewards.
- Believers come to the understanding that all that they have is from God, as we saw in the first reading about the godly woman in Proverbs 31. In contrast, unbelievers never come to this understanding, because they are carnally minded (Romans 8:6). Saint Paul said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).
- The world's resources flow through a worldly power structure of ungodly masters (v. 24b). Although there are exceptions to this principle, the richest people in the world are almost universally nonbelievers (with an exception being John Rockefeller). Although they don't understand their responsibility of stewardship of God's resources during their lives, they will after they die.
- Hell is real, just as heaven is real. Unbelievers will be far worse off in Hell than they are on earth (v. 29). They will be very worried (v. 25) when they stand before the Lord who will judge them for how they used the resources that he gave to them. Though in the parable the unfaithful servant was nagged with worry about giving his report to his master, in the end his judgment will be far worse.

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Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How do you view the Master's heart? Is He generous and gracious, thereby freeing you from self-protective ways, so that you can take risks with what He has entrusted to you? Or do you view Him like the one talent servant, who saw God as a harsh task-master, blaming God for his own laziness and wickedness?

2. The world we live in is unpredictable. We don't know what each new day will bring, but God has given us some landmarks of the end times. How does the Proverbs 31 woman face the future? How did Paul encourage the Thessalonians to face the future? What truths about the Master's heart and the future will allow you to face the near and eternal future with confidence?

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/111614.cfm

First Reading PRV 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

Second Reading 1 THES 5:1-6

Gospel Reading MT 25:14-30

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 10-26-2014

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 10-26-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Moses' Book of Exodus in which we see God's concern for widows, orphans, and the poor. Then we move to the second reading, which is a continuation of the study we began last week from 1 Thessalonians. We conclude with another of Jesus' discussions with the Jewish leaders from the Gospel of Saint Matthew, this time with the infamous Pharisees.

The first reading is from Chapter 22 of the Book of Exodus. This is one of the first five Books of the Bible known as the Pentateuch and was written by Moses. The Book is an account of God's sovereign rising of Moses as a leader to shepherd the Israelites out of their captivity in Israel. The Book also contains the chronicle of the giving of the Law to Moses including the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Anytime that the biblical texts use the term "Law" they mean the whole canon of the Jewish Law including the Ten Commandments and the other several hundred laws contained in the last four books of the Pentateuch: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Chapter 20 contains the Ten Commandments and opens as follows. "Then God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Exodus 20:1-2). God, who calls Himself "I am" in verse one, meaning the "self-existent One," led the Israelites out of their bondage under the oppressive rule of the Pharaoh of Egypt through His ordained leader Moses. God gradually revealed the entire Canon of the Law to Moses during his wanderings in the desert.

The verses leading up to today's reading provided important emphasis on points of the Law already covered earlier in Exodus. In verse 20, we find the often repeated warning about idolatry. "He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed" (Exodus 20:20). Then in the next verse, God introduces new teaching on proper treatment of aliens. God said, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:21). This time God gave a reason for treating foreigners properly, because the Israelites were once

foreigners under the rule of the Pharaoh.

Foreigners were not the only downtrodden class of people to whom God afforded special protection in the Law. Before we move onto the reading, we need to discuss the standing of the underlings in the historical context of ancient Near East. In those days there were three classes of people that were as low in the socioeconomic strata as foreigners were. These were widows, orphans, and the poor, although the first two certainly shared the characteristic of being poor. These groups of people had almost no rights in the secular kingdoms that surrounded Israel. However, we find throughout the Law God's special protection provided for these groups of people. The fact that God provides protection for the lower classes of people through the Law is an insight into God's very nature. We see in the Book of Psalms God's care for the poor. God says that He is "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows" (Psalms 68:5). The Psalmist said, "I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted And justice for the poor" (Ps 140:12). "The LORD performs righteous deeds And judgments for all who are oppressed," the Psalmist said (Ps 103:6). God made special provisions for the protection of these classes of people throughout the Law. In Lev. 19:9–10 God provided special protection for strangers and the poor in providing for them through the gleanings in the corners of the fields. In Deut. 14:28–29 God provided special Laws for strangers, the fatherless, and widows. The Prophet Isaiah gave God's call to the Israelites to repent of their sin in the opening of his Book. God said, "Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). This admonition appears multiple times throughout the Old Testament, and is in fact what James in the New Testament called "basic religion." He said, "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).

As you read the text of the first reading, try to imagine what it would be like to have absolutely nothing along with no social standing in the ancient world. *Note: Verse 27 was included for the context.*

> *22 You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. 23 If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; 24 and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. 25 If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest. 26 If you ever take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, 27 for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear him, for I am gracious. (Exodus 22:22-27)*

In the reading we see God's concern for widows (v. 22), orphans (v. 22), and the poor (v. 25). God said that He would hear the cries of the widows and the orphans and answer with judgment by allowing the people to be killed by their enemies with the sword (v. 24). This is something that was repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament, especially in the era of the Judges. When times were good the people would begin to oppress the lower classes, then God would allow an alien nation to overtake the people. Then they would repent, God would raise up a deliver (for

example a judge like Gideon in Judges 6), the people would again return to prosperity and the cycle would repeat. God's instruction about not oppressing the poor continued in verses 26-27 as neighbor took his neighbor's cloak as collateral for a loan. This person was so poor that the only thing that they had to pledge was their clothing. God knew that this was a dire situation and provided a clear principle that such essential items were not to be taken as collateral in loans among fellow Israelites. The principle is that when the poor neighbor is taken advantage of by being forced to pledge his essentials in order to survive that God will raise up a deliverer against the more prosperous man to bring judgment upon him for his unrighteous action. Instead, God said in Leviticus something that we shall study later in the Gospel lesson, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Loving your neighbor in the case of what God said about not taking your neighbor's cloak as a pledge instead meant sharing in your abundance and that of the community.

As we move onto the second reading, ask yourself what it means to act in full conviction of the Holy Spirit in response to the biblical precepts about serving Jesus and others? The Jews knew the Laws about not oppressing aliens, orphans and the poor, yet they didn't practice what was preached. You may have heard the cute acronym "J-O-Y" which means to consider our lives in light of the hierarchy of Jesus, others, and you. We should, as the teaching goes, consider Jesus first, then others, and finally ourselves. See what you can uncover from Saint Paul as your read his admonition on this subject of literally taking the Word to heart.

> *5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:5-10)*

Paul told the Thessalonians how impressed he was with them because they didn't just do as he had told them to do ("word only," v. 5), but that they also carried out those things that he had directed them to do through the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but they became examples to others (v. 7). The Thessalonians turned from the worship of idols as was the custom of their culture to the worship of the One True God (v. 9). Finally, Paul commended them for holding hope in the resurrection of the dead. When he said that Jesus "rescues us from the wrath to come" (v. 10) he was referring to the eternal punishment that was promised to the unbelievers in hell, not some sort of temporal deliverance or rapture (catching up) from their present circumstances. Later in the Book Paul did discuss how believers who were alive at the time when Jesus did return would be united with him in the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:17), which is the context of the books and movie entitled

Left Behind (we will cover that in a future lesson). The key point that Paul was making to the Thessalonians was his commendation for them for living out their Christian lives in word **and** in action, something that the Sadducees and Pharisees in the Gospel narrative hadn't learned.

We saw in the second reading Saint Paul's admonition to take the Word to heart and his commendation to the Thessalonians for doing so. In the Gospel lesson today, we will see how Jesus summarized the Law into two key points that revealed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees hearts who didn't take the Word to heart. This lesson is another of Jesus' interactions with the Jewish ruling authorities during His inevitable journey to death at Calvary, this time with one of the Pharisees' best legal experts.

> *34 But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' 38 This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' 40 On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:34-40)*

First, a bit about the context. When Matthew said, "But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees," he was referring to the story that happened just previously. Here the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, had come to ask Jesus a theoretical expansion of the Levitical Law known as Levirate Marriage. They asked Jesus about the relationship in the resurrection between a certain woman and her chain of husbands afforded to her under the Levirate Law. Remember that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection, but they were just trying to trap Jesus. When they asked Jesus whose husband the woman would be in the resurrection after being married to seven different brothers Jesus answered them as follows.

> *29 But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." 33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. (Matthew 22:29-33)*

The short term silencing of the Sadducees provided the Pharisees with the opportunity to test Jesus for themselves. They asked Him, "which is the great commandment in the Law" (v. 36), again addressing Him with the honorable title of Rabbi (teacher). When the Pharisees use the term "Law" they are referring to the whole of the Old Testament. During that era, a frequent debate among the rabbis was which elements of the Law held the most weight and which ones could be given less weight or even discounted. Jesus' answer summarized the whole Canon of both the Law **and** the Prophetic writings. He answered them by quoting from the Levitical Law, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE

LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (vv. 38-40). Here Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 or the "Shema," a phrase that religious Jews stated twice a day. He also quoted from Leviticus 19:18 that we mentioned in the discussion of the first reading. What Jesus is saying is that a true follower of God is a unique whole being, one with a heart that is united in purpose (heart, soul, and mind) rather than compartmentalized into theoretical knowledge that does not lead to action. Loving God naturally leads us to keeping the commandments of God. Jesus said in John 14:23, "If anyone love Me, he will obey my teaching . . . ." Saint John continued Jesus' connection between love and action when He said, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with action and in truth" (1 John 3:18). And again, "We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:19-21). This was the heart of the indictment against the Pharisees. They were a group about which it could be said, "do as I say, but not as I do" as the expression goes. Love demands concrete action, not just correct information about God. This means to give help your neighbor when he needs help, not offer him a loan by taking his cloak as collateral as we saw in the first reading. Loving your neighbor as yourself also means loving yourself as one that was created in the image of God. This means caring for our bodies both spiritually and physically as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. As your journey through the week, what does it look like for you to have a heart united in love and action for God? In our global society, what "neighbor" is God placing on your heart to help with a gift that doesn't require a loan and payment of collateral?

2. Spiritually, we are all as helpless as the orphans and widows of the ancient society. How do you respond to God's heart for you in your own spiritual poverty? What spiritual resources (see below) have you appropriated in your life? Which ones do you need to continue internalizing?

Spiritual Resources in Christ:

- I have been washed (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been sanctified (set apart for special use) (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been justified (pronounced "not guilty") (1 Corinthians 6:11)
- I have been forgiven of my sins (1 John 1:9)
- When I sin I have an Advocate – Jesus Christ, who speaks to the Father in my defense (1 John 2:1)
- I am a new creation, the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- I have been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3)
- I belong, I have been adopted, I have a spiritual family (Ephesians 1:5)

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- I have resurrection power (Ephesians 1:19-20)
- I have God's grace that teaches me to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live a self-controlled, upright and godly life (Titus 2:11-12, 1 Corinthians 10:13)

3. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-14. Unpack the meaning of verse 13 in light of the context of the surrounding verses. How does this spiritual truth help you to live your life as a Christian in light of temptation?

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/102614.cfm

First Reading EX 22:20-26

Second Reading 1 THES 1:5C-10

Gospel Reading MT 22:34-40

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 10-19-2014

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 10-19-2014. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Isaiah where we see a prophecy about a future world leader that was fulfilled some 150 years later. Then we move to the second reading from Paul's Letter to Thessalonians and include a general introduction to that Book. Finally, we conclude with another of Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees from the Gospel of Matthew.

The first reading is a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, which is a book filled with an amazing series of prophecies especially regarding the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. His prophecies include many detailed predictions about the Messiah including that He would be born of a virgin and even that He would be named Immanuel meaning God with us (Isaiah 7:14). The reading today also contains a prophecy about a world leader who like Jesus wasn't born yet and the prophecy also includes his future name although he wouldn't be born until a century and a half later. A lead-in to the message for today was given one verse before the beginning of today's reading. God said through Isaiah:

> *"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" (Isaiah 44:28).*

Cyrus was the King of Persia (in present day Iran) who reigned over that country from around 559 BC to 530 BC. God used King Cyrus as his shepherd to "regather" the Jewish people (Ezra 1:1-4) after their deportation to Babylon in three waves in the years 605, 597, and 586 BC (2 Kings 24-25). King Cyrus gave the order in 538 BC to rebuild the Jerusalem temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The rebuilding of the temple under the direction of Nehemiah marked the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy above. As we move onto the text of today's reading we will learn

more details about Isaiah's predictions regarding Cyrus who was named even though he hadn't yet been born. *Note: Verses 2-3 were included for context.*

> *1 Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, Whom I have taken by the right hand, To subdue nations before him And to loose the loins of kings; To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:*
>
> *Omitted verses:*
>
> > *2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.*
>
> *4 For the sake of Jacob My servant, And Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; 6 That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other," (Isaiah 45:1-6)*

God called Cyrus His "anointed" in English or transliterated from Hebrew as "mashiyach" that means "the anointed one or Messiah." This is the same word used for the "Messiah the Prince" Jesus in Daniel 9:25. This language makes it clear that God meant Cyrus to prefigure the later Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was God's true and final Shepherd of His people (Isaiah 44:28, above). God said in verse 1 that although Cyrus would not be a believer in God (v. 4d "Though you have not known me") He would be used as God's "right hand" to "subdue nations before him" and subdue and kill kings ("loose the loins"). This prophecy was fulfilled after Darius the Mede, who was Cyrus' maternal uncle, overthrew the Babylon Empire as recorded in Daniel 7:30-31. Cyrus proclaimed himself King of Babylon in 540 BC after the great battle in that city. The biblical record of these events is backed up and further details are given by secular accounts including the famous "Babylonian Chronicle," a clay tablet that was found showing details of Babylonian history during the period.

You may ask why God would prefigure the Messiah through an unbelieving, civil king like King Cyrus. God provided some insights into this in the verses that were omitted from the reading:

> *2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. " (Isaiah 45:2-3)*

Cyrus was a king that God set apart by His divine providence to use for His purposes. The power that Cyrus had to "shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars" (v. 2) was given by God Himself. God said that it was He who would give Cyrus "the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places **So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who**

calls you by your name" (v. 3, emphasis added). God promised Cyrus these victories for the purpose of revealing His divine power. God used nonbelieving people throughout the Old Testament for this purpose, including men like the Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus. God not only uses men but even animals such as Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:21-39).

Contemplate how God may be using unbelieving rulers even in the present time. Even though you may disagree with the actions of the rulers, consider whether it is possible that God is working out His larger plan even through these ungodly leaders. Although Cyrus was an ungodly type of Christ, we can rest in the fact that God used even this ungodly leader to accomplish His purposes. When you consider these things, you can find comfort that since God was able to predict with exact precision who the ruler would be that would "regather" the Israelites after their deportation to Babylon He will superintend all of human events in order to accomplish His purposes. You can also praise God for raising up godly spiritual leaders such as Saint Paul who we are going to be reading about in the next reading.

The second reading is from the Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. This Book is one of the earliest Letters written by Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:1), penned sometime around the year 51 as confirmed by an inscription found in the temple of Apollos at Delphi (near the town of Corinth). Paul's two Letters to the Thessalonians are sometimes called the "eschatological epistles" because of the wealth of content in them regarding the end times, but were primarily Letters dealing with people in the local church in Thessalonica. Paul's occasion for writing was to show his concern for the believers there after he had visited them on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1). He had a variety of purposes in writing to them including instructing them in holy living, commending them for their significant progress made in implementing the biblical truths he had given them, and correcting a misunderstanding that they had about the return or the Lord Jesus.

Read the text and ask yourself, what key points jump out at you?

> *1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-5)*

They key point that jumped out when I read this passage was Paul's overwhelming thankfulness to God for how the Thessalonians had embraced and lived out the Gospel truths. First, Paul thanked God for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (v. 3). Second, Paul was thankful that they didn't just mentally embrace the truths of the Gospel but they also lived them out "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (v. 5). Finally, Paul was thankful for how they had emulated him (v. 5). The

example of the Thessalonians faith provided comfort to him as he endured troubles from the Jews and Gentiles as he traveled on his missionary journeys. Paul said in Chapter 3, "we were comforted about you through your faith" (1 Thessalonians 3:7b).

A final observation of the reading is how Paul honored all three Persons of the Godhead in the very opening verses of this Letter. Paul commended God the Father and God the Son in verse 1, and God the Holy Spirit in verse 5. Paul indicated to the Thessalonians that the source of their power was God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (v. 5). The word translated "power" in the English is the Greek word "dunamis" from which we also get the word "dynamite." The Holy Spirit provided the dynamite to the Thessalonians but they had to set and light the fuse. Paul rejoiced because the Thessalonians took advantage of God's power. As we move to the Gospel lesson we will see how the religious Pharisees **didn't** take advantage of God's power but instead took the Scriptures for their literal "word only" (v. 5).

The Gospel lesson is another of the interactions that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Last week we studied Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Feast that is found just before today's reading. In this previous study, we saw how Jesus told the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders how the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to the Gentiles. In the reading this week a new group is introduced called the "Herodians." The Herodians were a group of secular, non-religious Jews that held the political power in alliance with King Herod Antipas (reigned 4 BC to 39 AD). Their alliance with King Herod and secular worldview set them at odds with the ultra-religious Pharisees. As you read today's Gospel lesson you will discover a new alliance that emerged to fight a common threat.

> *15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. 16 And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodian's, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. 17 Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" 18 But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? 19 Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. 20 And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 21 They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:15-21)*

The Herodians and the Pharisees allied themselves to fight their common threat, Jesus Christ (v. 15). Their plot was to trap Jesus by asking Him some question (v. 15) that would reveal Jesus' opposition to the ruling Roman authorities and therefore make it easy for them to bring an indictment against Him. They began their attack by patronizing Jesus by calling Him by the title "Teacher," a word meaning Rabbi (v. 16). Their plan backfired. When they asked Jesus about the lawfulness of paying taxes to the Roman government, Jesus amazed them with His answer. Matthew said in the next verse after the end of today's reading, "And hearing this, **they were amazed**, and leaving Him, they went away" (Matthew 22:22, emphasis added). Jesus told them in effect that He had not come yet as a military leader. Jesus not only spoiled their plan to entrap Him with their question, but He also validated the legitimacy of the Roman government in collecting taxes, something to which the

Pharisees would have been deeply opposed. The irony of it all was that the Pharisees took the lead in collaborating with their former enemies for the purpose of defeating Jesus. But what ended up happening was that Jesus defeated their beliefs about the illegitimacy of the Roman taxation system. In yet another irony the whole account was recorded by none other than Saint Matthew, the former tax collector!

Sometimes the easiest way for us to learn is when a teacher provides us with a clear contrast between two conflicting positions. The message that God gave us in the Gospel lesson today illustrated two opposing forces that came together for the purpose of defeating the Messiah Jesus. During our study, we saw that these forces weren't really in opposition at all. Instead they were both aligned with false religion. The Pharisees strived to obtain a righteousness through the Law, and the Herodians found their faith in aligning themselves with the right group with the necessary influence in the Roman government.

What does this mean for us today? First, we can trust that although Jesus didn't come the first time as a military leader, He will do so the second time He returns, as chronicled in the Book of Revelation. John said in that Book, "And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war" (Revelation 19:11). Second, Jesus' answer revealed that during the intermediate period between his first and second comings we will have obligations to obey civil governments. Paul said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). Finally, we must recognize that God owns everything, and even though we may have to give to Caesar that which bears the resemblance of Caesar, we are to give to God the things that are God's (v. 21). This means that unlike the Pharisees who only gave lip service to doing God's work, as we saw in Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians we are to emulate God by giving back to Him what is His own. This includes the stewardship of our time, talents and treasures far beyond what is required by our civil government. Paul praised the Thessalonians for emulating his character, and Paul strived to emulate Jesus Christ. Paul said:

> *8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, (Philippians 3:8-9)*

May we find our righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ and not in our political power, like the Herodians, or through our good works in obedience to an elevated and false interpretation of religious laws, like the Pharisees.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Since humans are made in the image of God, what did Jesus mean when He said to give to God what God's?

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2. How do you live this truth out in your own life each week?

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/101914.cfm

First Reading IS 45:1, 4-6

Second Reading 1 THES 1:1-5B

Gospel Reading MT 22:15-21

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 10-12-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 10-12-2014. This week we open with the first reading

from Isaiah 25 in which we see a song of praise and a promise of redemption of the fallen earth and its people in a future age. Then we move to the second reading that is a continuation of the study from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Finally, we conclude with a parable of Jesus in The Gospel of Matthew addressed to the Jewish leaders that is very similar to what we studied last week.

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah who wrote of God's judgment and blessings. The context is just after God spoke about warnings of wrath in Chapter 24 that began with, "Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface and scatters its inhabitants" (Isaiah 24:1). This theme continued throughout that chapter with promises of wrath for those who dealt treacherously (v. 16) as well as promises of judgment on the angels who rebelled against God. God said, "So it will happen in that day, That the LORD will punish the host of heaven on high, And the kings of the earth on earth" (Isaiah 24:21). Chapter 25 then opens with a song of praise reminiscent of the Book of Psalms as follows, which will provide a backdrop for the first reading later in this study.

> *1 O LORD, You are my God; I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; For You have worked wonders, Plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness. 2 For You have made a city into a heap, A fortified city into a ruin; A palace of strangers is a city no more, It will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore a strong people will glorify You; Cities of ruthless nations will revere You. 4 For You have been a defense for the helpless, A defense for the needy in his distress, A refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; For the breath of the ruthless Is like a rain storm against a wall. 5 Like heat in drought, You subdue the uproar of aliens; Like heat by the shadow of a cloud, the song of the ruthless is silenced. (Isaiah 25:1-5)*

These verses apply both in Isaiah's near term context as well as in the eschatological (end times) future, which is a frequent occurrence in Isaiah. The city in verse two is symbolic of any city that sets itself against God, rather than some particular place. In the Old Testament, this was pictured by cities including Moab, Edom and Babylon. The Babylonian Empire was destroyed some two hundred years after Isaiah wrote about the capital city of Babylon, marking one of the near term fulfillments of verse 2. However, in a future time, a city also called Babylon will also set itself against God and ultimately be overthrown as we read in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:8, 18:2). In the verses that follow, God promises to be an advocate for the weak (v. 4) and to silence all of His oppressors (v. 5d). An understanding of this context helps to understand the banquet described in the subsequent text of today's reading because God will prepare this feast for His believers after he vanquishes the enemies of His people. As you read the text of the first reading, note how God will at some future time prepare a banquet for His people.

> *6 The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine. 7 And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the*

> *LORD has spoken. 9 And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." 10 For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain, And Moab will be trodden down in his place As straw is trodden down in the water of a manure pile. (Isaiah 25:6-10)*

God promises us that at some future time He will prepare a banquet for His people, either during Christ's one thousand year reign on the earth as described in Revelation Chapter 20 or some other time. God says that this banquet will be held "on this mountain" (v. 7a) most likely meaning the location from which the rulership will be centered, meaning Jerusalem, the center of the earth (Ezekiel 5:5, Revelation 11:2, Daniel 8:14). Next, God says that He will remove the veil that is over the nations (v. 7b) and eliminate death forever. Saint Paul spoke about the spiritual veil that exists in the heart of every nonbeliever. He said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). Before this bountiful feast, once the earth has been purified during the time described by Jeremiah as "Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7), the people that remain will enter into God's eternal reign. Any nation that ever exalted itself against God, typified by "Moab" in verse 10, will be put down into the "manure pile" (v. 10b).

This passage in Isaiah is reminiscent of what John wrote about in the Book of Revelation. The way biblical revelation works is that God has gradually unfolded information about His divine plan, first through the Old Testament writings by Moses and the Prophets, and finally through Jesus and the New Testament. Jesus' disciples understood more than the Old Testament saints did, and John understood more than did the readers of Isaiah as God gradually unfolded more of the scroll of revelation. Perhaps this is why the events in the Book of Revelation are the unrolling of a scroll (Revelation 5:1). Notice the similarity in Revelation Chapter 21 to what we read from Isaiah:

> *3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." 5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." (Revelation 21:3-5).*

We can rest in the promises of God, because as we have seen how He faithfully accomplished His past promises He will also accomplish His future promises. God is faithful in doing what He says He will do, and generous in what He both gives us and promises us in the future. These truths are true regardless of how we feel about them, although as believers the veil has already been lifted from our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:16). As we move onto the second reading, we will see a continuation of the themes of faithfulness and generosity as God calls His people to model both of these traits.

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The context is Paul's teaching that

we studied last week on the antidote for worry. Paul made a commanding call to prayer, correct thinking, and right actions in order to combat anxiety. He said that instead of worrying we should pray (Philippians 4:6). Second, we should focus our thoughts upon the correct things including a list of good things that are worthy of praise (v. 8). As you read today's reading, note that we have included verses 15-18 in order to understand the full context.

> *12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.*
>
> *15 You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; 16 for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. 17 Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. 18 But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.*
>
> *19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Philippians 4:12-20)*

Paul said that he understood how to "get along with humble means" (v. 12), meaning just the basic necessities of life such as food, water, and clothing. He said that he had learned "the secret" (v. 12) of being satisfied whether he had an abundance or a lack of the things he needed. Paul revealed the secret of his success in verse 13 for dealing with a lack of provision. He said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." The verb that Paul used for being able to do all things means to "be strong," or to have strength. The word he used for "strengthens me" means to "put power in." What Paul was saying was that he could be strong when he was lacking because God infuses him with the necessary power until He provided the necessary provision. In the closing verse, Paul said that God would supply all of our needs "according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (v. 19). This means that God will supply our needs in proportion to His **infinite** resources.

In trying to understand the application of Paul's message, it is important to understand the context given in verses 15-18. The Philippians had given generously to Paul, and they were the **only** ones to do so. This provides us with a strong insight into the application of Paul's message. As believers we are to be generous in our giving because this is how God supplies other people's needs. We are to hold our possessions that God has given us with an open hand and let God take from them and add more as He sees fit. A principle is that the more generous we are, the more that He will place into our hands for the stewardship of giving to others. This is far from the "name it and claim it" theology

often seen on many of the TV "preachers." Rather, this is how God ordains us to give to others by entrusting us to be good stewards or what He has given to us.

How many of us can understand what it means to live with nearly nothing? I remember a story about a friend of mine from Liberia who immigrated to America and is now a pastor. During the oppression by the various military forces in the country, he was forced to live without any food for a period of two weeks. He said that looking back on it he was able to endure it through his faith that God would provide for his needs. It was his faith in God that got him through this and kept him safe during his harrowing journey out of the country. He told me something like, "It wasn't bad, you would be surprised how easy it was to go without food for two weeks when you are on the run and you know that God is on your side." Saint Paul said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

The Gospel lesson is from Matthew and is similar to what we studied last week with Jesus addressing the Jewish religious leaders. This time the story is about a king that planned a wedding feast for his son. Notice how Jesus opened the story with "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (v. 1) which provides an insight into the meaning that Jesus intended the chief priests and Pharisees (Matthew 21:45) to understand.

> *1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. 3 And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. 4 Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.' 5 But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, 6 and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. 7 But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. 11 But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:1-14)*

In the story, we see how the king, who by application is God, sent the good news (aka the Gospel) of the marriage feast for his son, who by application is Jesus. The invited guests were by application the Jews to whom the kingdom was initially given, except they rejected the message from the king and instead went about their worldly business (vv. 3-6). Some even went so far as to kill the king's servants, who are by application the prophets that we discussed last week. The fact that the invitation came directly from the king made the rejection of the invitation that much more of a

serious matter. By application, the Jews rejected the offer of salvation provided by God through his Son Jesus Christ. As a result, they will bear the rage of the king (v. 7). When the invited guests failed to attend the wedding, the king sent his servants to find other guests, by application the Gentile world. The Gospel message went out to the Gentile world and many came to the church but not everyone who came was clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ (v. 11). The person that the king discovered without the wedding clothes (v. 11) was guilty of a great sin because God was the One who provided the attire in the first place. The application is that of a person who goes through the motions of Christianity but was never "born from above" (John 3:3). The penalty for committing the only unpardonable sin of not putting on the righteousness of Christ (Romans 13:14) is assignment of the soul to a literal place known as hell, where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12, 13:42). Jesus taught about this in His Sermon on the Mount:

> *21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23)*

God provides everything that a person needs to be properly clothed at the upcoming feast that we read about in the first reading from Isaiah. People obtain the necessary "wedding attire" by repenting of their sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross. Any good works that believers do flow out of their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9) as a result of the new heart that was given to them the moment that they believed (2 Corinthians 5:17). They are justified in the eyes of God, meaning that it was just as if they had never sinned. Although the Scripture is clear that the sins of a believer are not held against them, as we saw in the second reading they are accountable for the stewardship of what God has given to them. As believers, we are accountable to God for the use of our time, our talents and our treasures. As a result of our stewardship we will shall give account of ourselves to God (Romans 14:12) resulting in various degrees of reward in heaven.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. God will lovingly hold us accountable for the use of our spiritual gifts, so it's very important to understand that which we have been given. Sometimes the best way to understand your gifts is to ask others. A second insight about understanding our spiritual gifts is that we can ask ourselves what we like doing. What gifts, meaning time, talents, and treasures, have you been given by God? Write down a list of two or three gifts that you feel or others have told you that you possess.

2. How are you using each of the gifts that you have been given. Pray that God would enlighten your heart to show you ways in which you may expand you ministry. Perhaps you will receive an insight similar to this, "I have the sense that I want to volunteer in a nursing home one night a week" (gift of helps or hospitality). Alternatively, "Many people have always told me how positive I am" (gift of encouragement), "I will be more intentional about encouraging those whom I come in

contact with each week."

For Further Study:

If you desire a more comprehensive method of determining your spiritual gifts there are some innovative spiritual gift tests available online. Here is a link to one such resource: http://tinyurl.com/spiritualgifts

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/101214.cfm

First Reading IS 25:6-10A

Second Reading PHIL 4:12-14, 19-20

Gospel Reading MT 22:1-14

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 10-5-2014

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 for 10-5-2014. This week we open with the New Testament reading from the book of Philippians, which addresses an antidote to worry and anxiety. Then we will move to the Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah which sets the stage for a parable of Jesus that we will cover last in the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew.

In the New Testament reading we find how obedient believers can have a clear conscience and live without worry. This reading is a continuation of the study from the Book of Philippians that we have been reading for the last several weeks. As a reminder, Paul was in prison for his faithfulness to God in preaching the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In the previous verses, Paul admonishes two specific women in the church to resolve some certain unmentioned conflict. You can imagine that hearing of this conflict while he was in prison would have been discouraging to Paul. In the verse leading up to today's reading Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). Before you read the text ask yourself, what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord especially given Paul's unpleasant conditions and his admonition to resolve interpersonal conflict?

> *6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:6-9)*

In the reading, Paul made a commanding call to prayer, correct thinking, and right actions; which he

said would result in peace in the heart of a believer. As we saw in the context leading up to the reading, Paul said first to rejoice in the Lord. This means that as believers we can rest in the finished work of the Lord Jesus in securing our salvation and rejoice that regardless of our circumstances we can never be taken away from our relationship with the Lord (John 10:28-29). Paul said in the reading that we do not have to suffer anxiety if we turn our anxiety into a prayer request (v. 6). The word "supplication" is an even stronger word, for it connotes a sense of urgency, desperation and humility. This is the attitude with which we can approach the throne of grace.

This is the same message that the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples in His great Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told them," And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name'" (Matthew 6:7-9). In Jesus' model prayer He instructed His disciples to first begin with adoration of God and thanksgiving. Jesus continued, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:10-12). After adoring God and thanking Him for His provisions we should remember to confess our sins to Him before we move onto asking Him for the matter about which we need help. One of the things we can confess (which literally means "to say the same thing" which implies we agree with God) is our limited perspective, which is causing our anxiety in the first place. We can approach God with confidence (Hebrews 4:16), which should produce thankfulness in our hearts, no matter the circumstances we face. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

Finally, Paul made a call to the believers in Philippi not only to prayer when tempted with worry but to think about the right things as a second means of combatting worry. Paul told the believers to think about those things that were pure, lovely, of good repute, things of excellence and worthy of praise (v. 8) as well as the Scriptures that they had received from Paul (v. 9). Not only were they to concentrate their thoughts on the correct things but they were also to practice the things which they had learned from Paul (v. 9). Many people have discovered that one way of forgetting their own troubles is to help others with their troubles. After they had done all of these things **then** the peace of God would be with them (v. 9c).

To summarize, Paul said that instead of worrying, we should pray, being thankful that God hears us and that we are not alone in our trials. He also directed believers to focus our thoughts upon the correct things including a list of good things that are worthy of praise. In addition, we should practice the things that Paul taught which would entail walking by faith in the truth of Scripture and not by sight (or our feelings). Finally, we can only expect and look forward to experiencing the peace of God after we have done these things that are connected to living in the truth.

The Old Testament reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. He was a prophet to Judah during the reigns of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1). His prophetic view frequently extended far beyond the immediate circumstances of Judah who was facing a threat from Babylon. Isaiah

prophesied about a distant day when the Lord's temple and holy city of Jerusalem would be exalted and the world would be at peace. The following biblical text provides a backdrop of hopefulness in the midst of Judah's impending exile.

> *2 Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it. 3 And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For the law will go forth from Zion And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war. (Isaiah 2:2-4)*

The events about which Isaiah spoke were often "telescoped" together in such a way that distant events were seen as happening with near-term events. This is sometimes called the "mountain peaks of prophecy" or "prophetic foreshortening." The "last days" about which Isaiah spoke in verse two above is the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) that is chronicled by John in Revelation. It is at this time that the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to usher in His kingdom reign over the world and finally bring an era of peace (Revelation 19:11-16).

But before peace could come, Judah must face the consequences for her disregard for the relational covenant that God had made with her. Judah repeatedly rejected God's overtures of loving provision, and His desire for relational loyalty was continually met with spiritual adultery. As you read, listen to God's heart as He faced the disappointment of unmet relational expectations with His chosen people.

> *1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. 2 He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. 3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? 5 So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. 6 I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress. (Isaiah 5:1-7)*

In today's reading, Isaiah is singing a song about God, who is Isaiah's beloved. God had a vineyard that was planted with a choice vine. Isaiah explained the metaphor of the vineyard being the house

of Israel (v. 7). This metaphor of Israel as the vine occurs throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. After tending it and building a tower to protect it, the vineyard produced "worthless" grapes (connoting wild or sour grapes). God had no other choice but to remove the hedge of protection that He placed around Jerusalem and Judah and allow it to become a wasteland because of their rejection of the covenant relationship with God (v. 5). This prophecy of physical destruction was fulfilled through the invasion of the Babylonian forces in successive waves with the last one in 586 BC resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (2 Kings 25:1-10). The final destruction of Jerusalem will occur in the future, when God allows a person called the AntiChrist to establish his kingdom rule in Jerusalem (Revelation 13). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see that a second part of the destruction of Jerusalem was the spiritual element that came when the Messiah, Jesus, whom God sent, was rejected by the Jews.

This passage teaches about God's heart and the fallen human condition. God provided everything for his chosen people to thrive and be fruitful. The passage shows God's great amount of care in establishing and tending His vineyard, the house of Israel (v. 7). "He dug it, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine" (v. 2). This parallels the creation account of what He did for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was part of the original design for humans to be image bearers of God and to be fruitful here on Earth (Genesis 1:27-28).

The consistent nature of human beings, as seen in Adam and Eve and in His people Israel, has been to break God's heart and to not live up to their noble identity as image-bearers. "Then I expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones" (v. 4). Isaiah repeats God's unmet expectation: "Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold a cry of distress" (v. 7). These verses reveal the systemic human condition of fallenness (or depravity). Even with the best of conditions, humans show their propensity toward rejecting God and choosing a life of self-reliance.

Therefore, God's response toward these choices of autonomy and independence are not justified and necessary. It's almost as if God is saying, "What else can I do? They have rejected Me, so I will honor their choice." But their choice to live in autonomy from God has dire consequences. "I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed . . ." (v. 5). Israel was free to live outside the covenant relationship set up by God, but she would also forfeit the benefits of this loving and protective relationship. They would reap the natural consequences of life apart from God. Rejecting God had dire consequences for the nation of Judah, as it continues to have for us today.

The Gospel lesson continues the theme of God's vineyard as Jesus teaches using a parable. The context is extremely important this week in order to understand Jesus' intended meaning. It is clear that Jesus' message was addressed directly to the Jewish religious authorities. This group had just witnessed Jesus riding into Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Matthew 21:7), something that would be done by a king in that culture. As Jesus rode past the crowds they cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" (v. 9b). Immediately afterwards Jesus escalated the tense situation even more as Matthew recorded that Jesus "entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and

overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves" (v. 12). Next, while still in the temple He healed the blind and lame (v. 14). All of this inflamed the Jewish leaders and further exposed their hatred of Jesus. Matthew recorded what happened next. "But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became indignant and said to Him, 'Do You hear what these children are saying?'" (vv. 15-16a). Jesus responded, "Yes; have you never read, 'OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF'" (v. 16b). The next day, Jesus returned to the temple (v. 23) after staying overnight in Bethany (v. 17). After cursing the fig tree in front of His disciples (v. 20), He was confronted by the chief priests and elders in the temple who questioned His authority (v. 23). Finally, in the verses leading up to today's reading He told the authorities in the temple the parable of the Sons in the Vineyard that we studied last week. That particular lesson, directed squarely at the hearts of the Jewish leaders, revealed that even though a person may outwardly act in a religious manner they could be spiritually dead on the inside (Matthew 7:13). Jesus had taught the crowds earlier about this as recorded in Matthew:

> *21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23)*

The religious leaders were not pleased with what Jesus told them. Later in the chapter Matthew recorded, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet" (Matthew 21:45-46). How insightful of them, they were afraid to seize him, at least at that point, because the people considered Him to be a prophet!

Now that we understand the context of the Gospel lesson, as you read the Gospel text take particular note of the identity of each of the characters in the story. *Note: Verse 44 was included for context.*

> *33 Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT AND DUG A WINE PRESS IN IT, AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 "The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers? 41 They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons." 42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never*

> *read in the Scriptures, 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES'? 43 Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.*
>
> *44 And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." (Matthew 21:33-46)*

This parable shows the goodness of God and the reasonable expectation that His peoples would respond to His goodness by being obedient workers on God's behalf and producing fruit in His vineyard.

The story starts with a landowner who planted a vineyard. The text in all capitals in verse 33 is a reference to Isaiah 5:1 that we read in the first reading. It is also very similar to the wording that God said about Israel being a "choice vine" in Jeremiah 2:21. The vinegrowers rejected their role as laborers on behalf of the landowner by abusing and killing the landowner's servants who came to collect the produce (v. 35). The escalation continued to the point that the vinegrowers killed the landowner's son (vv. 37-39). In light of the context, it is clear at this point that Jesus is referring to Himself. Jesus then let the Jewish leaders dig their own graves, so to speak, by asking them what they would do in such a situation. They said, "He [would] bring those wretches to a wretched end, and [would] rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who [would] pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons" (v. 42). In other words, the landowner would entrust the vineyard to other people who **would** be trustworthy. Jesus then seized the opportunity to teach them from their own Holy Scriptures by quoting a verse from Psalm 118 with which they would have been familiar. What Jesus was telling the Jewish leaders was that **He** was the stone who they (the builders) were about to reject. But their rejection of Him as Messiah did not deter God's plan, for Jesus would become the cornerstone of real faith for past and future generations.

Below is a summary of the characters and subjects along with their meaning in the story:

1. The landowner represents God the Father. The landowner made a huge investment in the vineyard and then entrusted it to the vinegrowers. In the same way, God invests in people and then entrusts His ministry to them for the purposes of bearing fruit.

2. The vineyard represents Israel. It contained a tower and walls which were protective measures taken by the landowner to preserve his valuable investment in the vineyard.

3. The vinegrowers represent the Jewish religious leaders.

4. The slaves are the prophets that God sent to the Old Testament Jews to remind them of their covenantal relationship with God.

4. The landowner's son represents God's Son, Jesus Christ.

5. The "other tenants" are the future church that would consist primarily of the Gentiles in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies.

Some insights about the parable are as follows. First, this parable provided a key insight into the hearts of the religious leaders. The priests and elders claimed to belong to God's kingdom but were not obedient to God the Father. Instead they were obedient to a different father, their father the devil (John 8:44).

Second, the implication of this parable is that the disobedience of the Jewish people throughout history up until that time was actually a **conspiracy** against God. In verse 38 Jesus said, "they said among themselves," meaning they conspired to kill the landowner's son. Conspiracy has always been regarded as a greater crime than manslaughter in the legal system. In modern times each of the vinegrowers would have been charged with both murder **and** conspiracy to commit murder. Jesus knew that the Jewish leaders had murder in their hearts. We see later on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem who killed the prophets (Matthew 23:23), the greatest of whom was John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11) who had just been killed by King Herod (Matthew 14:10). This meant that a rejection of God's prophet John was a rejection of God Himself. In general the prophets were frequently persecuted by their own people. Some were stoned (2 Chronicles 24:21), and some like Jeremiah were persecuted and killed in other ways (Jeremiah 26:7-11, 38:1-28).

Finally, the parable is a prophecy that Jesus would be rejected by the leaders of the Jewish community. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected, but after His exaltation, He became the Chief Cornerstone of the church (v. 42). Jesus told them very clearly about the penalty for their rejection, which was the loss of their kingdom. "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it." In the end, the kingdom of God was given to the universal church made up primarily of Gentiles. This mystery of God's grace wasn't revealed or understood until after it had happened, though in hindsight clues such as this were provided by God.

God, in His grace provided one final warning to the Jewish leaders in verse 44. "And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." Jesus is saying that rejection of Him is fatal. Falling or stumbling upon the Rock will break those who reject the Messiah, for the 2nd advent of the Messiah will be that of Judge who will pronounce everlasting judgment. Anyone that has ever dropped a dish onto a ceramic floor knows the peril of a hard surface. Jesus is the Rock over which the Jewish leaders stumbled. By application, we can see that anyone's rejection of Jesus is a fatal mistake that cannot be forgiven. Rejection of God's provision for the forgiveness of sin through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the only unforgivable sin (Matthew 12:22-32).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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1. What is your response to God's claim of ownership on your life? Would you describe yourself like the vinegrowers who rejected the Son who came to seek payment or would you describe yourself as one who has surrendered to God's rightful ownership of your life? How would others describe you, based on your words, your attitudes, your values and your lifestyle?

2. In the last two readings, we saw God's reasonable expectation that His people bear fruit for Him. We also saw Paul modeling the fulfillment of this, for though he was in very unpleasant circumstances, he pointed the way to have peace in God through connecting to God in prayer. In what ways is God calling you to be His image-bearer in the world, despite your less than ideal circumstances? How can depending on God through prayer be a life-line for you to fulfill your God-given purpose?

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/100514.cfm

First Reading IS 5:1-7

Second Reading PHIL 4:6-9

Gospel Reading MT 21:33-43

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 9-28-2014

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 for 9-28-2014. This week we open with a reading from the Prophet Ezekiel in which we learn about the seriousness of sin. Then we move to the second reading with a continuation of the study in the Book of Philippians. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew.

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. We provided a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Ezekiel in the September 7 edition of Mass Notes. The context of the reading is the Lord's teaching on the seriousness of sin. "The soul who sins shall die," (v. 4d) the text says in the opening section of this chapter. Specifically, God taught on the seriousness of idolatry (v. 6), covetousness (v. 6), robbing the poor (v. 7), depriving the hungry from food and the poor from adequate clothing (v. 7), and charging interest on loans to a fellow Jew (v. 8). Obedience to God's Laws flows from an obedient heart, one that has been changed through embracing the mystery of God's love. Saint Paul said, "[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). God's gift is eternal life but it comes only through faith in Him. In the Old Testament times this meant trusting in what they knew about God and looking forward to their Messiah Jesus' future conquering of sin forever. In a sense, God had already provided salvation because Jesus is called the Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world, although that event was yet future (Revelation 13:8). In a similar way the Kingdom of Heaven is an already, not yet proposition. In our day, we receive eternal life by trusting in what we know about God and looking back to what Jesus did for us on the cross.

A summary of this section is given in the verses that immediately proceed the reading:

> *"Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord GOD, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live? 24 But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die." (Ezekiel 18:23-24)*

With this context in mind let's proceed with the reading.

> *25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? 26 When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. 27 Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die." (Ezekiel 18:25-28)*

The reading is a study in contrasts, first, that of a wicked man that repented of his sin, and second, one that continued in his sin to the point of death. We see in verse 26 that habitual sin can have serious consequences, even to the point of death. Let's back up and look more closely at the difference between someone whose heart has been renewed by God and the person who remains spiritually dead. The Scripture reveals very clearly that there are two distinct classes of people, two different roads with only one of them leading to heaven. Jesus called them the narrow road and the broad road (Matthew 7:13-14, below). The first class is those whose sins are forgiven and who are spiritually alive, born from above (John 3:3). Ezekiel said something about this earlier in this chapter, "All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live" (Ezekiel 18:22). The second class is those whose soul is spiritually dead and whose sin will be held against them for an eternity after they die. This is a crucial point especially since most people in the world are unknowingly on the broad road. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). If a person never truly experiences and trusts in God's saving grace through faith in Jesus then their soul remains spiritually dead during their life on earth. When they die physically, their already dead soul enters the abode of the dead and at some future point they will experience a second death. This fearsome event is enough to scare anyone and is described in the Book of Revelation. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Let's go back to the reading. In verse 27 God said, "when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life." Is

God saying that a person earns their way to heaven by their good works? No, the whole of Scripture is clear that good works flow out of a heart that has been regenerated by God. Yes, nonbelievers can do good works, but their motivation is different from a child of the kingdom. Even though they are spiritually dead, they are still human beings created in the image of God. Whatever they do flows out of their existence as an image bearer of God, but their deeds do not result in them obtaining eternal life. The Scripture shows that works that are pleasing to God flow from a heart that is submitted to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said this plainly in John 6:29. When people asked what they should do to fulfill the works that God requires, Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: To believe in the one He has sent."

Ezekiel's message is reminiscent of an event that occurred in the Book of Acts with a couple named Ananias and Sapphira that showed the deadly result of sin in the rapidly growing, early church. The story best tells itself as follows below.

> *1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? 4 "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. 7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." 10 And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:1-11)*

While not every sin is met with such immediate consequences, we see that sin is a serious matter and believers are called to holiness. As we move onto the second reading, we will see Saint Paul's call to holy living by being unselfish and walking in unity to accomplish God's purposes. The context is that Paul had wrestled with a hypothetical argument whether it was better for him to continue ministering amidst his struggles in prison or go to heaven to be with the Lord. His conclusion was that it was better for the Philippians if he stayed (Philippians 1:24), and that he was confident that he would indeed continue (v. 25). Next, Paul admonished the Philippians to walk in a unified way worthy of Jesus Christ (v. 27). He warned them that they may have to suffer for Jesus' sake (v. 29). All of this leads to the reading for today which opens with the adverb "therefore." Therefore, with these previous things in mind, let's read the text. [Note: Two versions of the reading were provided, we are using the shorter one because we covered the other verses in a previous week.]

> *1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (Philippians 2:1-5)*

Paul is making a hypothetical and rhetorical argument by using four "ifs" in the first verse, the idea is "if then." It is rhetorical because the "if" is not really in question, it is assumed. So they "if" could be read as "because." Because there is 1. Encouragement in Christ, 2. Consolation of love, 3. Fellowship of the Spirit, and 4. Affection and compassion then do the following things. First, be unified for God's purpose (v.2). Second, act unselfishly and humbly (v. 4). Finally, as a means of accomplishing unselfish and humble behavior worthy of Jesus Christ, live with the mindset of regarding other's needs as more important than your own (v. 4). An attribute of a person that has been made spiritually alive by faith in God is that they look out for "the interests of others" (v. 4). The high ideals of this passage can only be lived out if we are in Christ. He is the One who empowers us to let go of selfishness and pride so that we can embrace the new life of humility that Christ lived and gives us.

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew Chapter 21. The context is just after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Matthew 20:7-8), the same way a king would enter a city. Next, Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple in order to purify it (v. 12), healed people (v. 14), and twice contended with the chief priests and scribes in the temple (vv. 15-16, vv. 23-27). An interesting thing happened between Jesus' two visits there. As Jesus was walking by a certain fig tree he saw that it was not bearing fruit so he said to it, "Let no fruit grow in you ever again" (v. 19c). Afterwards Matthew recorded, "And at once the fig tree withered" (v. 19d). The disciples, in response to what Jesus did to the tree said, "[H]ow did the fig tree wither all at once?" (v. 20c). Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (vv. 21-22). Clearly Jesus performed the "miracle" of the killing of the fig tree so that the religious leaders would either see it or hear about it. He was emphasizing the importance of faith that leads to good works. With this context in mind let's read the Gospel passage that Jesus directed squarely at the "chief priests and elders of the people (v. 23a) who had confronted Him while He was teaching.

> *28 But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' 29 "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this,*

did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him." (Matthew 21:28-32)

Jesus said that there are two groups of people, those who believe and do the work of the Father, and those who don't believe and don't accomplish the Father's work. Jesus told them that they did not follow John the Baptist's calling to repent and believe, as did the first son in the story.

This is a story of contrasts between two sons. First, the sons have different degrees of fruitfulness in accomplishing the works of their father. The first one bears fruit and the other one does not, like the fig tree in Jesus' previous story. Truly, both sons at first refused to work when directed to do so by their father. However, the first son repented and accomplished the will of his father. One son is a child of their Father God; the other son is shown through his works to be a child of a different father. Jesus explained this paternal relationship while addressing the Pharisees in John's Gospel. He told them, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Though these were harsh words, Jesus was telling them the truth in order for them to have an opportunity to repent of their sin and turn to Him in faith.

As was explained earlier, there are two roads. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). The narrow road is the one on which the godly son who repented of his sin traveled. The broad road is the one on which the ungodly son made his journey.

Finally, there are two ultimate destinations as well. Jesus said earlier in Matthew's Gospel, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21). Jesus points out that you can have the right theology and pay lip service, but that is not the criteria for being in the kingdom of heaven. The destination is heaven for the son that repents and becomes a child of Father God, and hell for the son that does not repent and turn to do the will of the Father. Proverbs 14 says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death" (v. 12). This is the broad road, and a person doesn't realize that they are on this pathway until they are confronted with the reality of their sin in light of the Holy Scriptures. God in His grace desires for everyone to repent of their sin and believe in Him for eternal life (2 Peter 3:9).

Let's summarize what we have studied so far this week. As we saw in the first reading, God places a high value upon repentance. In that reading we saw the contrast between a wicked man that repented and another that continued in their sin to the point of death. In the second reading we also saw a study of contrasts, that of a humble believer that looked out for the interests of others and an implied person that did not. In the Gospel lesson we saw a contrast between two sons, one a child of God and the other a child of the world. There were two roads and ultimately two final destinations.

I had an encounter a few weeks ago that helps to illustrate the two paths about which the Scriptures

speak. A few weeks ago I attended a funeral for a dear Christian woman and ran into a friend of mine from high school at the luncheon that was held afterwards. I remembered that I had shared with her the plan of salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. As we talked she joyfully told me how she had recently acquired some sort of floating cooler gizmo for her pool so that she didn't have to leave the pool in order to get a new drink. As she was telling me the story I noticed that something clicked in her mind at which point she suddenly began backtracking and downplaying the importance of this new gadget. I wrapped my short visit at her table and wished her well as I left. Even though I never objected to what she was saying I noticed that her conscience seemed to speak to her. I wanted to ask her what she did when she needed to go to the restroom but I held it in. I hoped that she could do the same (pun intended). Instead I thought that it might just be better to excuse myself and continue visiting with people at some other tables.

People everywhere are on one of two paths. The people who are on the narrow path through faith in Jesus Christ exude a certain holiness as they go about their lives which has a certain repelling effect to the ones unknowingly on the other road. As believers we can rejoice in the fact that our ultimate destination is heaven, even if we have to make the hard choices associated with walking along the narrow road. The Scripture is clear that God is "a rewarder of those that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Those people who honestly seek God **will** find Him. This is clear from a principle found in Jeremiah 29:13 though it's addressed to the nation of Israel.

May you continue to seek God as you journey this week.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the Gospel lesson we talked about two sons, one a child of God and the other a child of the world. Read the following passages and then answer the questions that follow.

> *Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*

> *Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

> *Acts 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."*

> *1 John 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

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> *Romans 10:9-10 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.*

A. What does God say about whether or not we are a sinner, regardless if we have faith in Jesus Christ?

B. What does God tell us about how we can be sure that we are on the narrow road since the Scripture said that you are a sinner?

2. Each of the passages help to create a robust picture of true faith. True faith expresses itself in following the will of God out of a repented heart. Spend some time with the Lord asking Him if there are any packets of resistance in your heart about which you need to repent and turn towards God.

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/092814.cfm

First Reading EZ 18:25-28

Second Reading PHIL 2:1-11 or PHIL 2:1-5

Gospel Reading MT 21:28-32

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Keywords:

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday 9-21-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 9-21-2014. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Isaiah in which God provides an evangelical calling to everyone in the world. Then we continue to study in Philippians by backing up to Chapter 1. Finally, we move to the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew on the parable of the workers in the vineyard in which we see a picture of God's marvelous grace.

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The context is the section where God was telling of His free offer of salvation to everyone, not just the Jews to whom Isaiah was writing. God said, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1). God was clear that His calling was for everyone as we see in verse 5. "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you." As you read, keep in mind this universal offer of salvation that God made to the world some seven hundred years before Jesus was born.

> *6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)*

The message is a general evangelistic calling that also gives us some insights into the nature of God. First, God is compassionate and forgiving of sin even though He is far above people in His ways and thoughts. Second, God calls everyone to repent of his or her sin and place their trust in Him. Third, people must not wait to place their faith in God as it may easily become too late when they become hardened by sin and the opportunity for them to believe passes. Finally, God reminds us that His ways are far above our own. In context this means that the way that God brings sinners to repent of their sin and place their trust in Him is beyond our understanding, it is a mystery of God (John 3:8). This is what we discussed a few weeks ago when we studied Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John Chapter 3.

The second reading is from Philippians. Paul and Timothy (Philippians 1:1) opened the letter by proclaiming to the believers in Philippi their confidence in God's work in their lives and in the lives of all believers. They said, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (v. 6). Paul then went on to testify how God had been working in his life in spite of and even through the hardships that he had endured in prison (Philippians 1:12-13). Note that we included all of the verses from 20 – 27 including the ones omitted from the reading in the lectionary.

> *20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. 27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . . (Philippians 1:20-27)*

Paul spoke about the inner conflict that he was having on whether it was more important for him to stay in the world to minister there or to join God in heaven, although the choice would of course be up to God. Paul said that regardless of what happened to him, he realized his life found meaning only when it was connected to the purpose of exalting God, "for to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21). Paul undoubtedly suffered greatly in prison. Perhaps during the time he wrote these passages he was experiencing something very difficult. In spite of his hardship, Paul said that his choice was to remain doing his work (v.25). Next, he went on to state his overarching theme of the Book of Philippians, the call to become more Christ like. He said, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (v. 27a). Throughout this Epistle Paul urged the believers to become more and more like Christ in their behaviors and attitudes. Paul closed this section with a call for unity among the believers in the Philippian church (v. 26). He told the Philippian believers to "[stand] firm in **one** spirit, with **one** mind striving **togethe**r for the faith of the gospel (v. 27b-c,

emphasis added). This too was a call for Christlikeness as Jesus also prayed for unity in the church (John 17:21).

When we stand back and look at what Paul said, which of us would have the strength to say what Paul did while he was sitting in prison? In spite of his circumstances, Paul continued to spread the Gospel, even when his life was in turmoil. Paul helps us to see that everything doesn't have to be perfect in our lives for us to minister to others and share the Gospel.

The Gospel lesson is a parable from the Gospel of Saint Matthew. The context is that Jesus was talking to the crowds that were following him in the region of Perea, known as "Galilee beyond the Jordan" (Matthew 19:1). Some Pharisees also came to "test" Jesus by asking him a question about the legality of divorce (v. 3). Next, Jesus had a conversation with a rich, young ruler during which Jesus made the statement, "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 24). The text says His disciples were "astonished" and asked Jesus, "Then who can be saved?" (v. 25). Jesus' answer helps to shed some light into the mystery on how anyone comes to believe in God. He said, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). With this introduction in mind let's read the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

> *1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first." 9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." 13 But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last. (Matthew 20:1-16)*

Many people who live in large cities such as Los Angeles know how to hire workers by going to their local building supply store in the morning and selecting from among the men that gather there to find work each day. This was a common practice in Jesus' day. The workers would gather in the marketplace with hopes of being hired for the rate or one denarius, which was a typical day's wage

with the day lasting from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.

In this story about God's value system in the Kingdom of Heaven, the workers were all hired at different times, but in the end were given the same wage. Those who worked a full day were given the agreed upon wage for the day. Those who worked less than a full day didn't know what they would receive, but they figured it would be better than nothing. How surprised they all were when the last workers received the same wage as the first workers. The landowner provided for them all, even though their effort was different.

Jesus' point is clear: No matter when a person comes to be part of God's work in the world, God provides generously to all. The Jews thought that since they were God's chosen people since the time of Abraham, they should receive special "compensation" for their labor. After all, they reasoned, they had borne the brunt of the labor in the heat of the day. Why should they be lumped in with all the death-bed conversions and get the same eternal reward as the Gentiles? What incentive would there be to surrender your life early and follow God? Wouldn't God's radical grace encourage a sense of licentiousness and living for oneself?

Jesus' rationale, here, is interesting. We surrender our lives because the landowner is generous (we can trust Him) and it's actually good to be in His presence for as long as possible. The ones who had been away from the landowner for much of the day had suffered enough. While those who come to Christ late in life are given the same eternal destiny as those who committed their lives to Christ early on, Jesus reminds them that the reward of being with God in His presence is generous already. And those who labor for the Lord are not really "sacrificing" anything—they have the benefit of a longer history with the landowner. Can we not trust Him and be thankful that He provides for all who put their faith in Christ: Jew or Gentile, life-long Christian or death-bed conversion?

Let's highlight some of the key insights this parable implies about the nature of God. First, God is persistent in calling people to Himself. The landowner went out no less than five different times to call workers including early in the morning (v. 1), about the third hour (v. 2), about the sixth hour and ninth hours (v. 5), and finally about the eleventh hour (v. 6). Second, God is very generous. The landowner gave the exact same wage to those that had started working much later in the day. Man, who was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), has a strong sense of judgment that was violated when all of the workers received the same wage regardless of how many hours they worked that day. The wages that the landholder paid to the workers that worked less than a full day is what we call "grace," which means unmerited favor. Third, God is sovereign (v. 15). The landowner said, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?" (v. 15a). Finally, God calls the workers His friend (v. 13), though we see that this is conditional upon believing. Jesus said in John's Gospel, "You are My friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

In summary, God is persistent in calling people to Him, is generous, is sovereign, and calls believers His friend. Although His ways are above understanding, He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. It is there that we discover that He is full of grace and patient in calling sinners to repent and believe in Him. Saint Paul said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of

yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The parable of the workers in the vineyard clearly illustrates the grace that God provides in calling each person in the world to trust in the finished work of His Son Jesus Christ. As we saw in the first reading, God calls everyone to believe in Him. And we saw in the second reading that God calls us to minister and spread the Good News even when our circumstances aren't perfect. Let us worship our wonderful, generous, persistent God with our whole lives.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. A strong theme in this week's reading was on God's abundant grace which is able to forgive all of our sin. If you have received God's saving grace, what sins are you still trying to "pay" for by your good works? How might the truth of God's compassion and abundant pardon (Isaiah 55:7) and His provision of grace (from the parable of the generous landowner) help you to embrace the fact that you don't have to pay for your sins?

2. Another strong message in the reading was the surrender that happens in us when we realize who God is. Each of the readings called for life-change to happen as a result of realizing:

> God's ways are not our ways
>
> To live is Christ
>
> The last shall be first, and the first last

Where do you need to integrate these realities into your own life, surrendering to our trustworthy and generous God?

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/092114.cfm

First Reading IS 55:6-9

Second Reading PHIL 1:20C-24, 27A

Gospel Reading MT 20:1-16A

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Keywords:

grace, sovereignty of God, Isaiah 55, Philippians 1, Matthew 20