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

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass, November 3, 2013 – 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time



It was a very windy midsummer day in northern Michigan as I raced my windsurf board across the Straits of Mackinaw on my way back from Mackinaw Island, Michigan. Earlier, I sailed between the towers of the mighty Mackinaw Bridge and then returned to the shore of Lake Huron to make a few adjustments on my sail.

Next, I sailed seven miles across the Straits to Mackinaw Island and was on my way back towards the campground where we were staying. At this point the wind began calming and shifting in a direction that was going to make it very difficult to return to the spot from where I had launched. Eventually I made it back to the sandy shore on Lake Huron, but was a few miles down from where I launched. I walked up the hill, borrowed a cell phone from someone, and called my wife to pick me up. I heard a strange silence on the other end and she said, "You're alive!" As it turned out someone had given some bad information to the police who then called the Coast Guard thinking that I had gone down somewhere in the Straits. This led to a series of cascading events including a large manhunt with a helicopter, rescue divers, and local police operating from a command center in a marina in Mackinaw City. Evidently, a fellow camper had been watching me from the shore and at some point, she couldn't locate me. She then proceeded to tell one of the authorities at the campground who then called the police. The police then alerted the Coast Guard and the manhunt was on! The whole affair began by one piece of bad information. [*If you are interested you can read the story online here:* http://www.cheboygannews.com/article/20130720/NEWS/130719421]

In the same way that a false report led to a series of cascading events that day while I was windsurfing, false information in the church can lead to a plethora of serious effects in the Christian church. This was the case in the second reading today from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians. This was Paul's second written communication to this group of believers who had believed some false information concerning the timing of and events surrounding the return of the Lord Jesus. The overall purpose of the letter also included the encouragement of the believers in Thessalonica during their ongoing persecution for their faith.

Read the text including verses 3 – 12 which were skipped in the lectionary and are necessary understand the context and the points which Paul were addressing.

> *11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. 12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2:1 Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 6 And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, 10 and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (2 THES 1:11-2: 12 NIV)*

The key verses that revealed the context of Paul's address in this section were chapter 2 verses 1-2. "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come." Evidently, the people had believed a false report from a forged letter reportedly written by Paul that Jesus had already returned. This news was very disturbing to the Thessalonians because they were enduring persecution for Jesus and if He had already returned then they had possibly been suffering for nothing. Paul had explained in his first letter to them how believers would meet the Lord Jesus upon

his return. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). The phrase "caught up" in the original language is the word "harpazo" which means to snatch or take away. The same word translated in the Latin is "rapturo." Although the timing of this biblical event is unknown, Paul's teaching provided hope for the Thessalonian believers who were undergoing persecution. Paul was clear that Jesus' return wasn't something that they possibly could have missed since every single believer would be affected.

The Day of the Lord (DOL) is a very significant topic in both the Old and New Testament. The DOL is the time when Jesus will return for His Church and the Father will pour out His wrath on unbelievers. The interpretation of the meaning of DOL depends upon the theological grid from which you view the events of the end times. Most scholars believe that the DOL occurs in the middle of what is called the tribulation period, what the Book of Daniel calls this period the 70'th week. "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city" (Daniel 9:24). The DOL marks the beginning of the second half of the period known as the Great Tribulation. Joel said about this period, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand–a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come" (Joel 2:1-2). He also said that this was a time of redemption, for many people (especially Jews) will come to faith. "And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls" (v.32). Like the "catching up" from 1 Thess 4:17, the DOL wasn't something that the believers wouldn't notice. The purpose of Paul's writing to the church in Thessalonica was to correct this erroneous belief.

Paul continued with a very detailed explanation of the series of events that would lead up to the return of the Lord Jesus to carry away His Church. Paul said that a "man of lawlessness" would be revealed, a future world leader known throughout the Scripture as the "Antichrist." This satanic person would "oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (v.4). The lawlessness of this end time will be held back by the power of God until the time that the man of sin is revealed (vv.7-8). The man of sin will be accompanied by "the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (v.9). The people that remain on the earth during this time will "refuse to love the truth and so be saved" (v.10b). This leads to a terrible conclusion. "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (vv. 11-12). The powerful delusion is partly the counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders brought about through satanic powers that are allowed to rule the earth during this terrible period of time. The satanic deception of the Antichrist, the person known as the False Prophet, and Satan constitute an unholy trinity that will wage war upon the people left on earth during the end times. To read about these

three evil personalities read Revelation Chapters 12 and 13.

After the believers in Thessalonica read Paul's prophecy about what would happen around the time of the Lord's return they would have been comforted to know that they hadn't missed Jesus as they had heard among the rumors that had been circulating. Paul's teaching about the end times helped them to view their suffering in light of the epic battle that would rage in the era when the Lord Jesus really did return. The "battle" though is no battle at all, for "the Lord Jesus will overthrow [him] with the breath of his mouth" (v.8). That shows us the undisputed ruling power of our Lord, which should bring us hope and comfort, just as it did for the Thessalonian Church.

Our take away from this passage is to heed Paul's warning. Don't be deceived – the Day of the Lord is still to come. Therefore, love the truth and let it lead you to safety. Many books have been written on the subject of the end times and we hope that everyone investigates these matters for themselves by carefully reading and studying the Bible. The brief introduction that we gave today perhaps raises more questions than it answered! We will close this brief introduction to *eschatology*, or the study of the things of the end, and move onto the Gospel lesson.

The Gospel lesson for today was from Luke Chapter 19. It is essential to survey the context of the verses we are studying today in order to understand the full context and therefore the meaning of the text. If we back up to Luke 18:18 – 27 we found an occasion where Jesus was confronted by a certain person that was both a ruler and chief tax collector. This ruler asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 18). Jesus explained to him the requirements of the Jewish Law, and then addressed wealth, the particular obstacle to finding God that existed in the ruler's heart. "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (18b). Read the subsequent verses in this section.

> *23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, 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." 26 Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:23-27).*

Jesus mentioned the impossibly of a camel being able to pass through the eye of a needle. Throughout the ages, a story circulated that goes something like this. Somewhere along the wall in Jerusalem there was a gate called the "eye of the needle" which required a man to dismount his animal in order to pass through at night when all of the other gates were closed. As the saying goes, the existence of this certain gate meant that when Jesus spoke of a camel going through the eye of a needle he was referring to this particular feature in Jerusalem. The legend went on to say that in this Gospel story Jesus wasn't actually saying that it was impossible for a rich man to enter heaven because he was referring to this certain pint-sized entrance along the wall of Jerusalem. What he meant was that for a man to be saved he would have to prostrate himself before God and crawl on his knees in the same way that he could fit through the tiny gate. God does require a humble and prostrate heart in order to come to faith and to a certain extent, this legend is helpful if interpreted

that way. Many people have researched this matter and have found that no such gate has ever existed in Jerusalem. Jesus gave an even better explanation of the whole matter in the text itself. Jesus knew that this young man was relying heavily upon his wealth and that it would be very difficult for him to lay it down in order to rely only upon Jesus for salvation. Jesus clarified that it wasn't impossible for rich people to be saved, but this could only happen through the power of God.

With this context in mind, let's move onto the Gospel lesson in Luke Chapter 19 in which Jesus encounters an unusual rich man that *does* receive salvation through the power of God. He didn't even have to locate the fictitious "eye of the needle" in Jerusalem!

> *1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. 7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" 8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Luke 19:1-10*

Zacchaeus' statement about giving away his wealth and repaying those he had cheated provided a glimpse into the true condition of his repentant heart. Jesus, who through the power of the Holy Spirit was able to read people's minds, understood that Zacchaeus truly did turn from pursuing wealth as his god rely upon God for his salvation. With the exhibition of his faith, Zacchaeus revealed that he was saved through belief in God. Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house" (v.9b). Once again, we saw that Jesus chose someone to pursue whom everyone in the community knew was a lost sinner, to "save what was lost" (v.10b). As we have pointed out in last week's study notes, good works and intentions do not make us a Christian, they merely reveal the condition of our heart. In this case, Zacchaeus' good works indicated that his heart had truly been changed by God's power.

What does it take for a person with power, privileges and wealth to become a Christian? The story about the Philippian jailor in the Book of Acts helps to shed light on what it takes for a person of authority like Zacchaeus in Luke's Gospel to be saved. In this particular story, the gates of the prison flew open after an earthquake, and the jailor feared for his life because he was responsible for the security of the men inside. If one person escaped, it might mean the death penalty for him. After the jailor awoke from the earthquake, he was sure that the prisoners were gone. Instead, he found Paul and Silas inside. "He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved– you and your household'" (Acts 16:30-31). Rich people and people in positions of authority such as this jailor can have a very

difficult time coming to faith in Jesus Christ. However, through the power of God even the hardest hearts can be broken. The conclusion of the story is as follows. "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God— he and his whole family" (Acts 16:32,34 emphasis added). The Philippian jailor was saved in the same way as Zacchaeus, through faith in Jesus Christ by the hearing of the Word of God.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Paul told the Thessalonians not to be deceived but instead to love the truth that will save them. Read the following list of false beliefs. With which of these false beliefs can you identify? Pick one and then study the corresponding verses such that you understand the corresponding truth.

A. False Belief: All religions lead to God. Anyone that acts according to their conscience, even if they don't trust in Jesus, will go to heaven.

> *John 3:16-21 NIV 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."*

> *Acts 4:8-12 NIV 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

> *John 14:6 NIV 6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

Matthew 13:40-43 NIV 40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Mt 25:41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

B. False Belief: God doesn't provide salvation to people who "just" repent and believe, salvation can only come through the authority of the Church.

Luke 23:32-43 NIV 32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals– one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." 36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." 38 There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

C. False Belief: I'm basically a good person. If I go to church every Sunday and Holy Day as well as adhere to most of the teachings of the Church, I will go to heaven.

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 gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor

> *slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

> *John 14:6 NIV 6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

> *Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

> *John 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*

2. Now that you see these false beliefs contradict the truth, meditate on the following scripture. Then, take some time to talk to God, confess any false beliefs that you may hold, and ask God the Father to help you love the truth.

> *Romans 10:9-13 NIV 9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. 11 As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile– the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

For Further Study

Sam was a devout Jew who was a gifted piano performer. He was very religious on the outside, however on the inside, his heart was bent on sin and he knew something was terribly wrong. Listen to Sam's compelling story (25 minutes, Words to Live By radio program):

http://words.net/2013/10/25/no-man-in-human-history-ever-said-words-like-that-sams-story/

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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/110313.cfm Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading

WIS 11:22-12:2

Before the LORD the whole universe is as a grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth. But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook people's sins that they may repent. For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you? But you spare all things, because they are yours, O LORD and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things! Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O LORD!

Second Reading

2 THES 1:11-2:2 (Plus skipped verses 3-12)

11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. 12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.

Skipped verses:

3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 6 And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, 10 and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

Gospel Reading

Luke 19:1-10

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1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. 7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" 8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Source(s):

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

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Study Notes for the Sunday Mass, October 27, 2013 – 30'th Sunday in Ordinary Time



It was the classical dark and stormy night as I (Jim) flew the instrument approach into snowy Saranac Lake, New York with two friends nestled warmly in the seat behind me one night in March.

As I made the necessary turns and altitude changes, I manipulated the aircraft's radar system downwards such that it revealed the two mountains on either side. These showed up in bright red on the screen, although my passengers were oblivious to the danger. Later they told me that what they perceived was a methodical series of a dozen button presses and knobs being turned followed by the plane emerging from the clouds and being greeted with flashing runway lights welcoming us to New York. As we taxied off the runway, they congratulated me on a great landing and we headed for the terminal to pick up our rental car. As we made our way towards the resort at which we were staying in Lake Placid I settled down for a relaxing drink in the lounge. What a great trip!

Then the terror hit me.

I had forgotten to cancel my flight plan with air traffic control! As I frantically called air control on my cell phone I knew that I was in a lot of trouble. I knew that since this was a flight performed under instrument flight regulations that once I did not report on the ground after a few minutes of signing off from the in-flight air traffic control that search and rescue procedures would have been initiated immediately. The flight service station answered on the first ring and I explained that I had made a huge mistake and had forgotten to cancel my flight plan. In my state of utter shock, I begged for forgiveness and prayed at the same time. The controller explained that the sheriff had indeed been called and had launched a search for the plane. The first place that they looked was in the aircraft parking area where they had already located my plane safely tied down. I knew that I deserved punishment since the typical response to such an infraction would be at a minimum the suspension of my license for a period along with a hefty fine. But the controller said, "Never mind, it's OK. We are just glad that you are safe. Have a good evening."

Have you ever been in a situation where you deserved punishment and even knew it was coming but got off the hook? What if I had acted proudly and told the air traffic controller that it wasn't my fault. Do you think that he would have let me off the hook easily by confronting him this way?

That is what we are going to talk about in our Gospel lesson today. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus told a parable about two people who approached God with completely different hearts. The New International Version entitled this section, "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector" since it was evident from the context of the previous chapters that the first man in this parable today was a member of the group known as the Pharisees. We have frequently discussed this group in past lessons, here's a review of their primary traits. The Pharisees were people who held to a strict interpretation of the Jewish Law but also added requirements known in the New Testament as traditions. Their doctrine evolved over several hundred years until the observance of their traditions became more important to them than obeying a basic interpretation of the Jewish Law. Jesus said in Mark's Gospel regarding the Pharisee's traditions, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:9). Jesus summed up his feelings about them by saying several chapters earlier in Luke, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside

you are full of greed and wickedness." The Pharisees approached God with a proud heart compared to the tax collector who we will read about in the next parable today.

The Gospel lesson today was a parable through which Jesus illustrated prayer through the contrast of two different types of people, a religious Pharisee and a humble tax collector.

> *9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*
>
> *14 I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke 18:9-14 NIV*

It was helpful in this study to step back and survey the context of this text. This parable was sandwiched between the parable of the persistent widow (that we studied last week) and an incident in which a group of children who approached Jesus were scolded by the disciples (Luke 18:15-17). The point of the first parable was that believers are always to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1). The persistent widow expressed grownup, godly faith and never gave up seeking justice. The point of the story of the children coming to visit Jesus was to illustrate the value of possessing childlike faith. Jesus closed the section by saying, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." It was useful to understand this context because the parable we are studying today deals with the same subjects addressed in the two surrounding stories, prayer and the condition of a person's heart while praying. It was with these truths in mind that we approached the central text being studied today.

This parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector was a study of contrasts between the proud heart of the Pharisee and the meek heart of the tax collector. Luke began with a summary statement about the condition of the Pharisee's heart. They were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else (v.9). On the other hand, the tax collector referred to himself as a sinner (v.13b). The Pharisee's prayer was nothing more than a boast about his perceived goodness. His prayer was similar to a eulogy which he gave himself! The Pharisees' works were substantial since the Law only required fasting once a year and tithing only upon crops and animals. But his boastful prayer never made it up to heaven to the one who could answer it, though this man never actually asked for anything. It was evident that the Pharisee believed that he obtained righteous standing with God through his religious works or perceived goodness. The tax collector on the other hand perceived that righteousness came only through God's power. His prayer reflected a humble and contrite heart. The deep contrast between the two men in the story illustrated the central truth of the parable. God calls believers to be reconciled to Himself through humble acceptance of their

sinful position before Him. They are unable to earn their way to God but must accept Jesus' finished work on the cross in order to be found righteous before Him.

One of the defining doctrines of the New Testament is justification by faith and not by works. The topic of justification is found this in verse 14, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home *justified* before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The key word is "justified." This word in the New Testament is a legal term that means "a declaration of one to be innocent or just." A way to remember the biblical application of the word "justified" is the phrase, "Just as if I'd never sinned." When a person is declared just in the eyes of God they are considered righteous such that they don't receive their rightful *penalty* for their sin. The source of a believer's righteousness is foreign, which means that it doesn't come from any of their own works or self-perceived goodness. God's righteousness can only come through the gateway of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. God has declared the universality of sin. Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He explained further in Romans that the proper payment for a life of sin was death, meaning eternal separation from God. However, with this bad news he also brought good news, literally the word in the New Testament translated as "Gospel." "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Paul explains that faith in Jesus is the mechanism through which the gift of eternal life is imparted to the believer. "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, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Good works are important in serving the Lord and provide evidence of salvation but they are not the *source* of our justification. Righteous standing before God can only be granted by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Some questions may arise after this very brief study of justification. Some may ask, "Can we just keep on sinning since we believe and are going to heaven?" Paul answered quite succinctly in the Book of Romans. "1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (6:1-2). What about the role of works in our salvation? The Scripture is very clear that we cannot earn our salvation through our works, but works are very important because it's the method through which we serve the Lord Jesus. Finally, others may inquire, can we *know* that we have received salvation through faith in Jesus, isn't that being presumptuous? The Disciple John said, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may *know* that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). Yes, you can know that you have received salvation. The Holy Spirit testifies to this fact. Paul said in Romans, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (8:15-16). Having questions is normal and reveals that a person is really seeking the truth of Scripture. Paul said about this, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you–unless, of course, you fail the test?" (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Let's examine the second reading for today from 2 Tim. 4:6-18:

> *6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*
>
> *Skipped verses (9-15): Personal Remarks*
>
> *9 Do your best to come to me quickly, 10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 12 I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.*
>
> *14 Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.*
>
> *16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

This passage comes from the Apostle Paul's last known letter, written to Timothy, his son in the faith. Last words bring a sober realization of one's life and values. Here we see Paul's values being consistent with his message of salvation through faith in God's grace. The first section points to these important truths about biblical Christianity:

$1· Faith is not easy—Paul said he was being poured out like a drink offering (read "sacrifice"). He also likens faith to a fight and a rigorous race. While he feels spent on behalf of his call, he realizes that the sacrifices have been a special offering to the Lord.

$1· Faith is worth it! Paul looks back with satisfaction that he has kept the faith. He is not implying that one can lose his or her salvation. He is marveling that God has kept him faithful in the midst of great opposition.

$1· Faith provides us with hope for the future. Death is not the end of the story. Paul states that there is great reward on the other side for him—specifically a crown of righteousness. Why is this so valuable to Paul? Righteousness, being right with God, is the entrance requirement for heaven. Paul knew that he was not right with God based on his own performance in life. So to think that at the end of his earthly life he would be rewarded by being in right standing with God

was a treasure he cherished.

$1· The Lord is righteous in his judgments, which means that his perspective and rulings are the final word and they are right. There will be no arguing with or manipulating the Lord, the righteous judge, at the end of our lives. His say is final. This should give us motivation to get on the same page with Him now, so that we will not be surprised in the life to come.

$1· Faith is equated to longing for Jesus' appearing. We may wonder how these two concepts connect. Longing for Jesus' appearing implies faith, since we long for things we love. Longing for Christ's appearing is an expression of our relational intimacy, affection and value system bent towards Christ. The treasure of a crown of righteousness can be ours as well, if we, like Paul, long for his appearing.

Although verses 9-15 are skipped in the Mass Reading, they are important for establishing Paul as a real person with real relationships, in real messes, expressing real faith. The application for us is that we can be encouraged to know that real Christians have real struggles with circumstances and people that our out of our control, but are very much still under God's control.

The last section tells how Paul got through his struggles and the open opposition he felt against the message of Good News. He attributes his success to the Lord, who stood by his side and gave him strength. This strong trust in the Lord is what allowed him to forgive others who deserted him. He was not compelled to pay anybody back for the wrongs they had done to him. He could let them off the hook because he trusted the Lord to defend him. What a vision for us—to have such deep roots in the Lord that painful offenses and hurts can be released and brought into perspective.

I (Christy) remember a time when I was deeply hurt by an individual who claimed to love me. His desertion in my time of need left a large wound that I could not, in my own strength, forgive. Up until this point in my life, I had been able to easily forgive others of their offenses. But curled up in fetal position on my bed, crying from the emotional pain that would not go away, I asked the Lord to help me forgive. While the feelings of forgiveness did not happen overnight, eventually, I was able to release this person from the debt that their offense had incurred. I imagine that Paul, too, had to work through feelings of bitterness, resentment and anger, in order to not hold these hurts against those who deserved severe consequences. Like the story of the tax collector, when one sees the great debt that has been forgiven on our behalf, it is difficult to feel justified in withholding forgiveness from others.

Paul ends with a sense that the Lord will rescue him and bring him safely to his heavenly kingdom. So no matter what obstacles or trials we face, we can trust that because we are in Christ nothing can ultimately harm us. No wonder Paul breaks out in praise: "To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." What a place a deep, abiding rest and assurance that God will take care of His children, no matter what!

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Justification through faith in God's grace is an important concept. Summarize your understanding of what justification means, why it is necessary for salvation and how one can be assured of their just standing before the LORD.

2. If you recognize that you, like the Pharisee, have been trusting in your good works to get you into right standing before God, take a moment and confess this wrong attitude in your heart to the LORD. First John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleans us from all unrighteousness."

3. Review the bullet points about biblical Christianity from the discussion on the second reading. Which of the points address a specific question, concern or fear of your life? How does this truth provide you with comfort, hope or direction?

4. In what real relationships and real messes are you finding it hard to exercise real faith? How can Paul's example of fighting the good fight, longing for the appearing of the Lord, and forgiving those who hurt him be an inspiration for you? Take a moment and talk to the Lord about your situation. Ask him to stand by your side and give you strength, so that you too might say—"To him be glory for ever and ever"!

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/102713.cfm Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading 1 SIR 35:12-14, 16-18

The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites. Though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet he hears the cry of the oppressed. The Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint. The one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens. The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right, and the Lord will not delay.

Second Reading 2 TM 4:6-8, 16-18

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Skipped verses (9-15): Personal Remarks

> 9 Do your best to come to me quickly, 10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 12 I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.
>
> 14 Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading Luke 18:9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Source(s):

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

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Study Notes for the Sunday Mass, October

20, 2013 – 29'th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Once upon a time there was a woman who enjoyed an abundant life with many friends and material blessings. Even the weather smiled on her as she lived in a region where it was nice most of the time. This lady went to worship services every week and enjoyed fellowshipping with her friends from the community. One of the things that she enjoyed most was shopping at the market near the largest and most beautiful lake in the country. This person felt loved and accepted and was very thankful for all that God had granted to her.

One day, things began to change. This blessed woman started getting very weak and was troubled by a wound that no matter what she did just wouldn't stop bleeding. She went to the local doctor and when he couldn't find a cure she spent more money and went to all of the doctors in the region. However, no doctor was able to solve her chronic medical condition. This was very troublesome for her because as time went by it became common knowledge around town that she was sick from this certain disease. Because her faith community considered blood to be unclean those with whom she worshipped began to consider *her* unclean. In fact, the leaders prohibited her from even entering the worship center until she could find a cure. The people in her faith community wouldn't help because remember, she was considered unclean. She longed to go down to the market and buy the things that she used to. To make matters worse she had spent so much on the doctors that she didn't have much money left to buy food there anyway. She had no one to turn to except God. Every day she poured out her heart in prayer and begged Him to heal her. Years passed yet she continued to slide deeper into despair.

The situation for the women in the story was dire. If we consider our own lives, how bad do things have to get before we pray? What circumstances would have to arise in order for us to pray for others? We shared the story because it helps set the stage for the Gospel lesson later in this week's study.

The story of the woman with the incurable disease is found in the Bible in the Gospel of Saint Luke, Chapter 8.

> *43 And a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone, 44 came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. 45 And Jesus said, "Who is the one who touched Me?" And while they were all denying it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing in on You." 46 But Jesus said, "Someone did touch Me, for I was aware that power had gone out of Me." 47 When the woman saw that she had not escaped notice, she came trembling and fell down before Him, and declared in the presence of all the people the reason why she had touched Him, and how she had been immediately healed. 48 And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." (Luke 8:43-48 NASB)*

The Bible says to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17) regardless of the circumstances. How hard do you think the woman in this story prayed for help? Since she had nowhere else to turn it's easy to imagine that she was very persistent in her calling upon God for help. Certainly, God allowed these dire circumstances in the woman's life in order to bring her to faith in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of her sins. Perhaps the woman was always faithful to pray, even before she became afflicted with the disease. How bad do things have to get before <u>we</u> pray? Regardless of our circumstances, **God has called us not to wait until troubles come our way, but to be faithful and pray in order to obey**. This includes praying not only about our needs but also for the needs of others.

The woman in Luke 8 was a person who turned to Jesus in faith. Another great person of faith in the Bible was Moses. The Scripture says that he, "chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Hebrews 11:25). Let's move to the first reading to see an instance of how this godly man prevailed through a close walk with God in prayer. The context was a battle with the Amelekites just after God's provision of manna for food and water from a rock in the Wilderness of Sin, an appropriate title for the way the people had been behaving! "Why now have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst" (v. 3)? Did the Hebrew exiles really believe that God didn't know that they needed water to drink and for their animals?

> *Exodus 17:8-13 NIV 8 The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. 9 Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands." 10 So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. 11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. 12 When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up– one on one side, one on the other– so that his hands remained steady till sunset. 13 So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.*

In the story Moses acted as what is known as a "type" of Christ. A "type" is a theological term for people, statements, or events prefiguring or superseded by antitypes. In this case, Moses' actions through praying with his staff and outstretched arms prefigured the *antitype* Jesus Christ, the one to whom people would eventually look to for their ultimate victory of sin and the devil. During the battle the people were compelled to look to Moses for victory or face certain annihilation. Moses was a type of Christ who acted as an intercessor between the people and God. In Deuteronomy 18 Moses said, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him (v. 15, emphasis added). Moses knew to whom this verse pointed, the future Savior that we know as Jesus. Moses acted as God's appointed leader for His chosen people during this tremendous time of trouble. As long as the people of God looked to Moses with his outstretched arms calling out to God they were victorious in battle. However, when they shifted their focus away from Moses (and God) the advantage moved to the enemy. In the same way we must focus our attention upon God, both in prayer and through the dedication of our thoughts and actions. Prayer and reading of the Bible are the two main ways in which we communicate with God.

Moving onto the second reading for today we find some remarkable truths about the source and value of Scripture. Understanding Scripture is important for us because the more we know the Bible, the better we understand God! Prayer is about deepening our relationship with God. Memorizing is also important because we don't always have a Bible available at the times when we may need it. Let's read from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy.

> *2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:2 NIV 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage– with great patience and careful instruction.*

In the reading today Paul provided some foundational principles for living as a Christian. He said that the source of Scripture was from God the Holy Spirit, the breath of God (v. 16a). He affirmed that salvation was through faith in Jesus (v. 15). The result of learning the Scriptures was that they "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (v.15), and "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (17a). Paul called believers to minister to people through the Word of God, whether it was convenient or inconvenient, and said to do so with "great patience and careful instruction" (4:2b). Paul's foundational teaching was very important to the church at this time because it revealed the great value of Scripture, something for which believers in the early church had to be willing to die.

Let's move onto the Gospel lesson from Luke 18:1-8. This is another in a series of parables and

happened after Jesus' return to Jerusalem from Samaria where he had healed a group of lepers that we discussed last week. As you read, see if you can catch the rhetorical method Jesus used known as "arguing from lesser to greater."

> *Luke 18:1-8 NIV 1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

Let us back up a bit and briefly look at how Jesus taught using parables. His method for teaching through this genre was to provide a simple story in order to illustrate a significant spiritual truth. We have to be careful to try to make a parable "walk on all fours." Instead, our objective must be to search for the single intended meaning. There may be multiple applications in our lives with the single meaning gleaned from the parable. In this particular story, Jesus made it very easy for us in that he stated the spiritual meaning before he told the story. "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (v.1). Jesus call was to be persistent in prayer while waiting on God's timing. The theological application of this spiritual truth was that God is faithful by teaching us the necessity of prayer.

Examine the parable more closely. The story was about a widow who through her constant pleading finally convinced the "unjust judge" to agree to her request. Widows were one of the lowest of people of all the social classes in the Bible. God has commanded throughout the Scripture to care for people in this lowest of social classes, along with orphans and aliens (not people from Mars). Jewish Law included many provision for widows including the right to glean crops from the corners of the field left un-harvested for this purpose. The fact that someone with no social standing could convince a judge to rule in their favor provides evidence just how persistent this particular woman must have been! Jesus didn't mean that God was an unjust judge. Instead he used a rhetorical method of arguing from lesser to greater. Jesus used a very similar method in another parable in Matthew. "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11 NIV). What Jesus meant in Luke's parable was that if the unjust judge was able to be swayed by the persistent pleading of someone from the lowest level of society, how much more would God delight to grant answers to *our* prayers as believers in Jesus and part of the family of God?

A second but very important point arose indirectly from the parable, something that was often repeated in the Bible. God not only called us to be persistent in prayer but also to wait for His timing. Psalm 37:7 says, "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him." Psalm 27:14 said, "Wait for

the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." Paul said in Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Hebrews 4:16 said, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Patience is essential in prayer, as only God knows the best timing to answer our requests!

What are some practical ways that we may improve our level of persistence in prayer? Here are some methods that have worked for me, although they may not be suitable for everyone.

$11. Write your prayer requests down on a 3×5 card. Carry this with you and as you find time pray throughout the day. It's helpful to categorize your requests, such as "Healing" or "Come to Faith in Jesus."

$12. Construct a kind of "prayer maize" in your head by assigning the people for whom you are praying to a geographical map of where they are located. For example, you could begin with praying for people in your home town, then move on to prayers for those located in the western part of your state, then to the north, east, and so on. This has proven very helpful to me since many times I pray for people during my daily exercise where I would not have access to cards on which I had listed prayer requests.

$13. Finally, pray! Ask God to show you ways to improve your prayer life. Remember what we discussed several weeks ago in the section on Luke 16:1-13. The application of this text was that God has called us to use our talents and ingenuity in order to lead people to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Pray and ask God to energize your prayer life through the use of your time, talents, and materials possessions. This includes using our technological devices like smart phones and computers.

I bet that some of you are mighty prayer warriors and that your prayer lives came about because of certain circumstances that God allowed. Others may just need a bit of encouraging from time to time about keeping up with the discipline of prayer. Remember, God has called us not to wait until troubles come our way, but to be faithful and pray in order to obey. We shouldn't do this out of guilt or obligation, but to deepen our relationship with the Father.

In closing, let me tell you a story about the result of someone like the persistent widow from the Gospel reading being faithful in prayer.

> A young man grew up in a large, Catholic family in the Midwestern US. At around the age of sixteen this man noticed, among other things, that his prayer life was dead. He felt that Mass was just a religious ritual, though he sensed that he earned some merit from God by attending each week. In his early teens, he began dating a woman that motivated him to begin reading the Bible on his own. Over time, he became aware of his need for salvation from his sin, poured out his heart to God in prayer, and asked Jesus to become a much larger part of his life. This young man went off to college and continued his growing devotion to God. After college, he married (a different woman) and began a family. He continued

growing in both his faith and professional career.

One day he was attending a Bible study at his church and the leader gave him a challenge. The challenge was to think about the most difficult person that he knew who could ever come to a true faith in Jesus. This young family man pondered the question for the only the briefest of moments as he knew immediately for whom he was being challenged to pray – his brother. This particular brother had become very immersed in the world. He owned an airplane and flew around the country for the poorest of reasons, such as to find the best ski hill or the best tasting coffee. This older brother actually went to Mass but his lavish lifestyle didn't encourage any godly attributes.

Ten years went by and this man continued to pray for his older brother. One day he received a phone call from him who said that he was reading the Bible and had come to believe in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. His brother said that he had given his life over to the Lord and wanted to tell him about all of the important changes that had been happening in his life.

Now, as Paul Harvey used to say, here is the rest of the story. I (Jim) remember well the day that I made that call to my little brother back in 1999. As I moved from small talk onto the description of my spiritual awakening, the other end of the phone line got very quiet. Evidently, He was crying. My brother was very glad to hear from me that day!

It has been just short of fifteen years since that day I called my brother with that special news of my discovery of Jesus through studying the Bible. My life has never been the same. One of the largest changes has been the deeper relationship with God that I sense through prayer. God placed a calling on my heart to pray for a list of people each day. Although I haven't seen much fruit yet, I pray that God may continue to grant me the strength and encouragement to persist.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Ask God to reveal to you the "Jims" in your life. Who are the lost causes in your life whom only God could change? Write down their names and as God leads pray for them like the persistent widow.

2. We said that prayer and reading of the Bible are the two main ways in which we communicate with God. What are some others ways that God communicates with us?

For Further Study

Do you have a story to share about the power of persistent prayer? You can email me at jim@christiansforchrist.org.

Recommended Readings on Prayer:

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

"A Journey to Victorious Praying" by Bill Thrasher (Moody, 2003)

"Prayer" by Ole Hallesby (Augsburg, 1994)

"The Way of the Heart" by Henri Nouwen (Ballantine, 1981).

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/100613.cfm

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading

Exodus 17:8-13 NIV 8 The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. 9 Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands." 10 So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. 11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. 12 When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up– one on one side, one on the other– so that his hands remained steady till sunset. 13 So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

Second Reading

2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:2 NIV 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage– with great patience and careful instruction.

Gospel Reading

Luke 18:1-8 NIV 1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see

that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Source(s):

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

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Study Notes for the Sunday Mass, October 13, 2013 – 28'th Sunday in Ordinary Time



It was a dark, moonless night as I looked around my campsite out in the middle of a forest in an area known to have a decent population of bears. I had driven up to the north country to get away from the city in order to come to an important decision about a sense that God was calling me into ministry. How could I make this life changing decision in light of all of the obstacles that I faced?

Last week in the Gospel lesson we read Luke 17:1-10 where Jesus taught several different lessons and concluded with instructions regarding forgiveness and faith. That dovetails nicely with the next lesson in Luke this week in which we will again be discussing the topic of faith. First, let's review what we covered last week.

In Luke, we found that God doesn't call everyone to be spiritual giants, He just asks us to use our small faith for His purposes. We saw that God calls us to serve Him with a pure heart without strings attached. In the study questions, we read some verses from Ephesians and Hebrews which pointed out that the source of our faith is God. Since God gave us our faith, we should not feel guilty if we sense that we don't have *enough* faith. Although we can ask God to increase our faith, as did the disciples, the main issue is that God calls us to walk **boldly** and **humbly** in the faith as servants of God using the faith that we have already been given.

The first reading today is from the Book of Second Kings and is the story of the foreign warrior Naaman's miraculous healing from leprosy. Leprosy is a disfiguring and possibly fatal skin disease that plagued the ancient world. The cause was only discovered in the late 1800's as a certain bacteria. A cure was developed after 1940 and subsequent resistant to the treatment required the development of new therapies that only became available in the 1980's. The Jewish Law contains very detailed procedures (Leviticus 13 and 14) for dealing with those afflicted or possibly afflicted with leprosy. A portion of Leviticus 13 is as follows.

> *Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons the priests. And the priest shall look at the mark on the skin of the body, and if the hair in the infection has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is an infection of leprosy; when the priest has looked at him, he shall pronounce him unclean. But if the bright spot is white on the skin of his body, and it does not appear to be deeper than the skin, and the hair on it has not turned white, then the priest shall isolate him who has the infection for seven days. And the priest shall look at him on the seventh day, and if in his eyes the infection has not changed, and the infection has not spread on the skin, then the priest shall isolate him for seven more days." (Leviticus 13:1-5 NASB)*

The text continues for many verses. It is very significant that nowhere in this chapter or anywhere in the Bible does it say that leprosy could be treated or cured outside of a miracle. Once it was determined a person had leprosy they were pronounced unclean. "And the priest shall look, and if the scab has spread on the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is leprosy" (v.8). Once the pronouncement of being unclean was made another whole set of Laws kicked in. They would have been considered ceremonially unclean but also physically unclean and as such would have been subject to quarantine which meant that they would have to live outside of the city. Lepers were required to live alone and announce to everyone, "Unclean! Unclean!" (v. 46) while they were still at a distance. Some lepers in Syria were evidently treated differently as we will see in the case of Naaman in the first reading today from 2 Kings. Naaman, perhaps because of his position as a

valiant warrior, wasn't quarantined and forced to live outside the city gate.

Since today's reading is the climax of the story, here are the events leading up to that point. "Now Naaman, captain of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man with his master, and highly respected, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man was also a valiant warrior, but he was a leper" (2 Kings 5:1). The context is that Naaman was instructed by the Prophet Elisha, a renowned man of God, to go and wash seven times in the Jordan for the purpose of being cured of his leprosy. The whole idea of the healing began through the plea of a little Israeli girl that had been taken captive and had become a servant to Naaman's wife. This little girl, someone who was on the bottom rung of the social ladder, told her master about Elisha and that he could cure his leprosy. "And she said to her mistress, 'I wish that my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! Then he would cure him of his leprosy.'"(v. 3). This little Israeli child believed that Elisha could heal her master's husband Naaman. Next the King of Aram sent a letter along with a large sum of money to the King of Israel King Joram, and he made the arrangements for Elisha to intervene on Naamaan's behalf.

Now let's read the first reading for today which is the story of the healing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:14-17.

> *14 So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean. 15 When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now." 16 But he said, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will take nothing." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. 17 Naaman said, "If not, please let your servant at least be given two mules' load of earth; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the Lord.*

It is likely that Naaman expected something of a royal treatment when he arrived in Israel for his healing appointment since he came with a large sum of money and a letter from a very important foreign king. Perhaps he expected a religious ceremony with the waving of hands, pronouncements made to a god, animal sacrifices and whatever else would have been the norm back in Aram. Naaman was likely very surprised when we was instructed to go wash in the swirling, swift waters of the Jordan. "What good would that do," he may have thought. Nevertheless, he responded in faith and began the baptismal process as instructed by Elisha. One dip, two dips, three, four. On he went. He could have stopped at that point but being a warrior he was probably good at following instruction. Five, six, and finally seven. Whoosh, he came up out of the water and was healed! Naaman responded in faith by following Elisha's instructions and God provided the miracle of healing.

The New Testament says in the Book of First John:

> *14 And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to*

> *His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him (1 John 5:14-15).*

Meditate upon this for a moment. If we ask anything according to God's will He hears and we may have confidence that our prayer will be answered. God's answer may be yes, no, or wait. But we, like Elisha, and even a person outside of the Jewish race like Naaman, may have faith that our prayers will be answered.

However, how do we know God's will? Here are some general guidelines for finding God's will that were adapted from Discipleship Tape Ministries (dtm.org). First, study the Bible and determine if any **biblical absolutes** apply regarding your decision. This would include things like do not lie, kill, steal, or commit adultery. If the insight you were seeking from God was regarding whether you should burn a copy of a music CD for a friend, there is a clear biblical absolute prohibiting this action (i.e. do not steal). Second, study the Bible and locate any **biblical principles** that cast light upon your decision. This includes things such as God's calling to fulfill the Great Commission by witnessing to nonbelievers and discipling believers (Matthew 28:16-20). An example in this second category could deal with a decision to break away from a healthy group of believers because of conviction or some sin in our life. This would result in us becoming more of a lone wolf Christian in contradiction to a principle in the Bible not to forsake the assembling of ourselves (Hebrews 10:25). The final step in the decision making process is the confirmation and peace of God. Although this is not a hard fast rule, the peace of God generally comes only after the consideration of two things, personal circumstances and godly counsel. As we found in the story of Naaman, did God clearly orchestrate your circumstances leading you towards a particular decision? Have you considered the counsel of other godly people in your community of faith?

Let me tell you the rest of the opening story to help illustrate the steps in biblical decision making. Back in 2004, I sensed that God was placing a calling upon my life to enter the ministry. I began a period of intense prayer and fasting. The Bible was full of biblical principles which I seemed to meet (see 1 Timothy 3) that I found through my own Bible study and the reading of the book "Decision Making and the Will of God" by Maxson and Friesen (which I recommend). Though the biblical principles were clear I met with several Christian men with whom I had been close to over the recent years. They agreed to pray about it and counsel me. God had been orchestrating my circumstances by bringing a clear exit to me at my work. The company at which I worked had just lost a major contract and was being forced to cut back. After much debate and prayer I decided to make some applications at various seminaries in the region. I continued in prayer and fasting, and was accepted at two seminaries. Then the day came to make a decision. I wish I could say that I had the peace of God in my life at that point, but I was pretty entangled in the world. I owned a house in a large city and an airplane that I needed to sell. Going to seminary meant moving to a different state several hundred miles away. In desperation, I packed up my truck and headed out to camp in the forest a couple of hundred mile north, completely away from civilization. It was a moonless, overcast night and if I didn't have a flashlight I could have easily become separated from my campsite if I wandered away very far. The threat of running into a bear was running through my mind as well. As I sat around my campfire that night without all of the distractions of the city, I

came to an amazing realization. The door was open either way; the decision was up to me! At that point, I just weighed my options and decided on the most prudent course of action. Once I made up my mind doors began opening and I began to sense that I was walking in God's will. **I had the peace of God after studying the counsel of God, listening to the people of God and the circumstances from God**.

The second reading is from 2 Timothy 2:8-13 in which we find a call to walk in faith:

> *8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, 9 for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. 10 For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory. 11 It is a trustworthy statement:*
>
> *For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; 12 If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.*

The "trustworthy statement" at the end was the basis for a hymn in the early church and is a an excellent verse which to memorize. "For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; 12 If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." The statement is in the form of a series of cause and effect phrases:

> **If** we died with him, meaning that we are born from above spiritually (John 3:3) through belief in Jesus, **then** we participate in the life of Jesus through his Holy Spirit living in us.
>
> **If** we endure **then** we reign with him. This has the sense of "already, not yet." We enter the kingdom of heaven through belief and are born from above (John 3:3 again, "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven). So in a sense we reign as a believer on earth. But yet we will reign with Jesus in the future when we go to heaven, this is the sense of "not yet."
>
> **If** we deny him **then** he will deny us, meaning that we are free to reject his free gift of eternal life.
>
> **If** we are faithless **then** Jesus remains faithful because it's a logical impossibility for him to neglect someone who belongs to him.

The big idea in this text is that perseverance isn't an option but is a quality of a true believer.

Before we move onto the Gospel lesson from Luke 17:11-19, here is some context and background. In the story, Jesus was traveling through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. Along the way, he encountered a group of ten lepers and at least one of them was a Samaritan. There are two cultural

conflicts in this story that would have created tension in the minds of the Jewish disciples of Jesus. First, there is the whole issue of leprosy as we discussed in 2 Kings. Second, there is the issue of the Samaritan race. These were inhabitants in the region of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. This mixed race consisted of two groups; the first was foreign immigrants brought there from the Assyrian empire after the deportation of the Jews to Assyria in 722 BC. The second group was those Jews left behind during that Assyrian invasion. Over the centuries, these groups intermarried in defiance of the Jewish Law and adopted their own unique worship practices. The Samaritans were considered "half breeds" and therefore unclean according to Jewish Law. They had 800 years to develop aberrant theology. Jews that needed to journey through this region would often go many miles out of their way to avoid them.

Read the text and as you do jot down the points that jump out after your first glance.

> *11 While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; 13 and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed. 15 Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, 16 and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? 18 Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" 19 And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well." Luke 17:11-19*

It seems that this group of lepers had heard about Jesus' miraculous ability to heal. The ten men set out with some amount of faith that they would be healed because as we saw in the Law they could only present themselves to the priests *after* they had been healed. Next, the men were healed as they walked on their way to wherever the priests were located. At least one of them was a Samaritan, considered a half-breed and unclean by the Jews. A person with leprosy would have been on the lowest rung of the social scale and a Samaritan man with leprosy on the absolute bottom. It seems possible that the other nine men were more concerned about restoration of their social standing in the community and keeping the Jewish Law than in returning to thank Jesus for the miracle. The officials in the synagogue would have been very surprised to meet ten men who had been healed from leprosy. Even though the Law contained provisions for the procedures to be taken in such a case it's almost certain that none of the priests would have encountered anyone that had ever been healed from that awful disease.

However, one man, a Samaritan, turned back to thank Jesus. It's very likely, as in the other cases of Jesus healing people, that Jesus healed more than just this man's physical condition. This person seems to have received salvation and healing, evidenced by his "glorifying God with a loud voice" (v. 15c). His natural response to this gift that he knew could only have come from God was to praise Him! This is what set him apart from the other nine. He evidently had no other choice than to turn around and praise God for this mighty miracle. His heart and his body had been healed and his

natural reaction was praise.

There are three key points of this Gospel teaching. First, Jesus isn't a respecter of persons, he offers saving faith to anyone from any race or position of life, even those at the very lowest position on the social scale like the Samaritan lepers. Second, if we expect God to act we must ask in faith and then walk according to God's instructions. For us, God's instructions are primarily contained in His Word, the Bible. We should only trust our conscience if it aligns with the will of God revealed in biblical absolutes and principles. We may obtain verification of our intended decision through godly counsel. Finally, we are called to consider all that God has done for us and to praise Him! Our rightful response any time we consider all that God has provided for us should be praise. The outward manifestation of the inward reality of faith is glorifying God.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

Key Point #1: Jesus offers saving faith to everyone.

A. If we are going to live like Jesus, consider the society and socioeconomic strata of the region where you live. What are two groups of people that are on the lowest rung of society, the Samaritan lepers of the age?

B. Consider the biblical decision making process outlined in the study today. What are some biblical absolutes and biblical principles in the Bible that speak to how you could minister to people in the two groups you listed above?

C. While I was in middle school, I succumbed to peer pressure, looked down upon and said mean things to a certain unattractive, poor girl in our class. I began to call her names without regard to her feelings. At some point, our paths diverged and I moved on with my life of college and a new career as an engineer. In my middle thirties God began working on my heart to look up this woman and apologize to her. With the advent of the Internet, the task was quite easy so I connected with her on Facebook and begged for her forgiveness. I was pleased to find out that she was a Christian and was willing to forgive me! As I looked back, I wish that I had the insight to "adopt" this unfortunate woman as my friend. After thinking about her, I issued this challenge to my nephew. I challenged him to think about some unfortunate class mate that he had been looking down on, picking on, or others were doing such things. I asked him to set down his pride and come alongside that person as a friend.

Is there someone that needs you as a friend?

Key Point #2: If we expect God to act we must act in faith and the walk according to God's instructions.

A. In what areas of your life and you being called to exercise faith?

B. What biblical instructions do you need to obey in order to walk in faith?

Key Point #3: Praise is the outward manifestation of the inward reality of faith.

A. Make a list of some of the way in which God has worked on your behalf.

B. Thank Him for these things and share your praise with others.

Readings for the Week

First Reading

2 Kings 5:14-17

14 So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean. 15 When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now." 16 But he said, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will take nothing." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. 17 Naaman said, "If not, please let your servant at least be given two mules' load of earth; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the Lord.

http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20kings%205:14-17&version=NASB

Second Reading

2 Timothy 2:8-13

8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, 9 for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. 10 For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory. 11 It is a trustworthy statement:

For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; 12 If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny

Himself.

http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20TM%202:8-13&version=NASB

Gospel Reading

Luke 17:11-19

11 While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; 13 and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed. 15 Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, 16 and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? 18 Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" 19 And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well."

http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=LK%2017:11-19&version=NASB

You may also refer to: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/101313.cfm

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Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Sunday, September 22, 2013

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



Last week we looked at the Gospel of Luke and discussed the famous parable of the prodigal son. We saw as in the previous section of this Gospel that Jesus addressed the parable to the Pharisees. Remember that these people were the religious group who believed in strict adherence to Jewish Law, at least as they interpreted it, and also in life after death. This week later in this lesson we will return to the Gospel of Luke and pick up where we left off last week and cover the parable of the unjust steward.

Let's look at the first reading. We cannot know God apart from His revelation. One form of this revelation is the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. The reading for today is from Amos who is known as a "minor prophet." This is not because he was inferior to the others but because his book is shorter than some of the other prophetic books like Isaiah who is referred to as a "major prophet." Read the opening verse of Amos to get an orientation to the text.

> The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa– what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel (Amos 1:1).

The text says that Amos was a shepherd prophet, and that he spoke about "what he saw concerning Israel" and this was "when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel." From this we know that Amos' prophecy occurred during the time after the division of the people into the kingdoms of Judah in the south and Israel in the north. The split was brought about by the arrogance of King Solomon's son Rehoboam and as a result the ten northern tribes formed their own kingdom. Scholars date the events in Amos to around 760BC. Tekoa is a village located 5 miles south of Bethlehem, in the Kingdom of Judah, and was set upon a hill. Cities set upon hills were easy to defend and also had the advantage of being able to signal adjacent cities like Jerusalem. What an appropriate place for a prophet of God to be from, a city which spoke to other cities, not through a smoke signal or lantern but by the Word of God through their own Amos. Read

the text from Amos 8:4-7.

> Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land! "When will the new moon be over," you ask, "that we may sell our grain, and the Sabbath, that we may display the wheat? We will diminish the ephah, add to the shekel, and fix our scales for cheating! We will buy the lowly for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!" The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Never will I forget a thing they have done!

A frequent theme in the Book of Amos was the exploitation of the poor. This was a time of relative prosperity in the nations of Israel and Judah. The poor were evidently being taken advantage of by the rich. What was being pointed out here was that even during a holiday, which is what was meant by "when the new moon is over," and on the Sabbath day, the rich were plotting their future sleazy business deals. At a time when God called them to take time away from work to reflect upon Him they were plotting how to cheat the poor by "dimish(ing) the ephah" The ephah was the unit with which they measured grain. They were also plotting other ways such as cheating on the scales and adding to the value of their money. These people were the ultimate among unjust stewards. Even though everything that they ultimately came from God, including the holidays, the Sabbath day, and all that they owned, they even used their worship time to plot how they might defraud the poor. Their minds were not on God during their worship, but were instead focused upon their planning of how they were going to gain more wealth even at the cost of exploiting those less powerful than they. Even if their hearts were on God during their worship they would still have been guilty of defrauding the poor. These people were poor stewards of not only their physical resources but also their immaterial resources. This includes things like their intellect, influence, and power.

I am a high energy person and have frequently had some difficulty in focusing upon one certain thing at a time. My behavior doesn't end when the work week finishes and I head off to church on Sunday. No, I am guilty of frequently bringing all of my worldly cares and concerns into church on Sunday. I have learned that I need to begin to prepare my heart for worshiping God many hours before I actually arrive at church. For me this means limiting my consumption of coffee that morning along with consciously focusing upon God to the exclusion of outside thoughts. I have also discovered that praying before church tends to improve my concentration level for spiritual things before I come to church. God knows what is going on in our hearts when we go to church. Part of being a good steward of our time, talents, and treasures involves the stewardship of our mind.

Often we feel burned out on Sunday morning. Sometimes when we show up at church on Sunday we have given all we have to our employer during the week and we really need that time to rest, just as God designed that day. But what about the rest of the week, do the pressures of life wear us down so much that we never get around to doing much to build God's kingdom? Have you ever felt like you really needed to do some certain thing for God, but you just never got around to doing it?

When we consider the stewardship of our mind, meaning the responsible planning and management of our mental resources, we need to consider a common fallacy that has come upon the people of

America. The fallacy is that we can compartmentalize one activity in a part of our life while thinking that it doesn't affect the other areas. Back when I was teaching business classes inside the walls at several state prisons I used to use an illustration to explain this delusion. I drew on the board a circle and divided it into compartments each holding a little square. The geniuses in the class soon recognized that my crude drawing was a waffle. Next I started writing in each compartment of the waffle common activities with which the men may be engaged during any given week. I wrote things like "Go to class," "Go to lunch in the mess hall," "Read my Bible," and "Go to church on Sunday," all things that the men did while in prison. Then I wrote some other phrases, like "Look at a dirty magazine," and "Gossip about a classmate." Do we honestly believe that we can put sin into a little compartment and not have it affect the other activities in our life? Compartmentalization is nothing new, we can see that this was going on during the time of Amos the prophet.

Now let's read the Gospel lesson from Luke 16.

> Jesus said to his disciples, "A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property. He summoned him and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.' The steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.' He called in his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, 'How much do you owe my master?' He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.' Then to another the steward said, 'And you, how much do you owe?' He replied, 'One hundred kors of wheat.' The steward said to him, 'Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.' And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. "For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon." Luke 16:1-13

This parable has been puzzling to many, but the interpretation is really quite simple. Had we read the next two verses we would have found that the Pharisees to whom this was addressed understood the parable quite well.

> The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.
>
> He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows

your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. (Luke 16:14-15)

The rich man in the story is God who is the provider of all things, both to believers and also non-believers. The unjust steward is a lazy but creative, non-believer who used his God-given creativity to achieve his worldly self-satisfying purposes. The children of light represent all believers. The big idea is quite simple. God calls believers to use everything that he has given us to build up His kingdom. If non-believers are creative for worldly purposes then believers are called to a higher standard of stewardship for the kingdom of heaven.

I remember an occasion while teaching in the prison during which I caught a student cheating on an exam. He had completed the exam using a pencil. When I handed back the paper the following week showing the errors, he came to me after class and said that I had made a mistake. He said that I had marked several answers wrong when really he had entered the correct choice on the multiple choice questions. I could see that he had neatly erased his answer and circled the correct one. He showed great ingenuity in his cheating. I didn't think that anyone would try this again but just to be sure the next time I gave an exam I ran copies of all of the exams. Sure enough the same student approached me with the same complaint. Imagine his surprise when I pulled out the copy of his original exam and compared it to the one that he had just handed back to me! Some people are creative for worldly, sinful purposes. In contrast imagine God's joy when we use the talents that He gave us for the greatness of His Kingdom.

God calls us to use the ingenuity that He granted to us in the same measure that was given to us. He also calls us to use our talents to further His kingdom. The business people mentioned in the Book of Amos evidently believed they could compartmentalize their thinking and succeed in using their creativity to steal from the poor. God condemned them not only for their actions but also for their thoughts. These "unjust stewards" were creative in the use of their God-given resources but used their creativity to steal from the poor rather than in doing what God commanded them by helping those less fortunate. This NT parable gives an example to challenge how we approach our own stewardship of the resources God has given to us. If ungodly people are motivated to use their resources for their own selfish benefit, how much more should Christ followers use their resources (material and immaterial) for higher purposes and God's glory?

Examine some insights that I put together as well as insights mu business students shared when we talked about this particular parable.

- The manager was willing to go to great, very creative and insightful lengths to secure his position in some future job or living situation. As spiritual people are we willing to go to these great lengths to grow the kingdom of God?
- As believers in Christ we must be aware of the struggle between God and money, we can't worship two gods, only the True God. Money can become our god, and compromise our way of life.
- As Americans we struggle with compartmentalized thinking. We may practice the things of God on Sunday but not give them much thought the rest of the week. How many of us read

some devotional materials this morning? We put the things in God in several compartments but they don't "flavor" or run over into the others like work, school, driving to work, working out, relating to our family members, and how we spend our free time and money.

- Often times when we look at a church website we will find something of grade-school quality, when unbeknown to us we have a half-dozen web developers that attend our church and would never let something like this get posted on the web while at their workplace.
- We should not be surprised to find out that our boss was a Christian, this should already be evident to us. If we ran into him at a church event we should not be surprised. The same should be true in reverse about us, do others KNOW that we are a Christian?
- We should be willing to go to great lengths to grow the kingdom of God using whatever worldly resources are available.
- We should evaluate how compartmentalized our lives are, and where do we fall on a scale of worshiping God vs. money? The worship of money is very subtle, so asking this so directly is not helpful because we defend ourselves and say, "of course we don't do that."
- These changes come about through God, we must pray and ask Him to deliver us from our false thinking. We are new creations in Christ, and old things have passed away. Any empowerment that we have towards true change will only come from God.
- Jesus gave us two metaphors – salt and light, that teach us that Christianity is designed not to just be a minor part of the society, but the defining part. Salt permeates! It flavors! It arrests corruption! Similarly, Christianity should influence everything it touches and arrest the decay of a society that is tending toward corruption.

In closing let me tell a story about a special person in my life. After I moved to Indiana I met a man that worked in the cafeteria at the local college. He was a gently and unassuming kind of man and he had a certain unusual look about him. I struck up a conversation with him one day and over a period of years built a relationship with him. Dean had a learning disorder but continued to be a very diligent employee at the college and is one of the longest serving members of the school. As I got to know Dean I realized many valuable lessons. Dean was man that although wasn't given very many talents or treasures used everything that he had to serve God. He worked hard in the cafeteria and was a friend to many students. He volunteered to film every basketball game and served the team in other ways. He worked at his church on Wednesday night and Sunday morning in the children's ministry. Dean began volunteering for the local jail ministry and used his excellent singing voice to praise God to the men in the county jail. This requires his attendance at an early morning meeting on both Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday he goes to the local retirement community to sing at their afternoon church service. Dean also offers his house for a very nominal rent for students to stay. These are just the things about which I am aware, the list goes on.

One day we were at an evening church service and a lady gave a moving testimony about some difficulties she was having in her life. All of us sat there listening with what we thought was deep compassion but Dean got up and walked out. Everyone wondered why he would interrupt the focus at that critical time by leaving. He came back a minute later and walked up to the woman and handed her a couple of tissues with which to dry her tears. That says it all about Dean. Dean uses his time, talent, and treasure in serving God. If anyone in the community tried even half as hard as

Dean they could change the world. I tell my wife that, "It doesn't really matter because when we get to heaven we will all be working for Dean anyway."

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. The second reading today was from 2 Timothy 2:1-8. Though we did not discuss this in today's lesson reflect upon this section of the text which coincidentally is one of my theme verse for this series.

> For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as ransom for all.

Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Considering these verses together, since Jesus is our only mediator and God instructs us to approach Him boldly, who should we pray to when we find ourselves in a time of need?

2. God has provided our time, talents, and treasures. With your answer to the first question in mind, pray that Jesus would show you what He would have you do for His Kingdom as a steward of those three areas. After you pray record your thoughts in your journal. What are some things towards which God may be calling you to action? Here are some thought starters:

Time: Where are you spending your time each day? What are the largest time wasters in your life?

Talents: What talents has God given you?

Treasures: Where are you spending your money or using the things you have or inherited?

For Further Study:

If you are interested in better understanding your talents you can complete an online spiritual gifts test at: http://tinyurl.com/spiritualgifts

Investigate how God is using very creative people to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the Internet. A group of brilliant people have formed an organization called Global Media Outreach which uses a series of over a hundred web pages along with pay per click ad campaigns to reach people with the Gospel. Millions have been reached in only a few years. Read about it online at: http://www.globalmediaoutreach.com/

Readings for the Week

Source: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/092213.cfm

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 135

Reading 1 AM 8:4-7

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy

and destroy the poor of the land!

"When will the new moon be over," you ask,

"that we may sell our grain,

and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat?

We will diminish the ephah,

add to the shekel,

and fix our scales for cheating!

We will buy the lowly for silver,

and the poor for a pair of sandals;

even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!"

The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:

Never will I forget a thing they have done!

Responsorial Psalm PS 113:1-2, 4-6, 7-8

Reading 2 1 TM 2:1-8

Beloved:

First of all, I ask that supplications, prayers,

petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone,

for kings and for all in authority,

that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life

in all devotion and dignity.

This is good and pleasing to God our savior,

who wills everyone to be saved

and to come to knowledge of the truth.

For there is one God.

There is also one mediator between God and men,

the man Christ Jesus,

who gave himself as ransom for all.

This was the testimony at the proper time.

For this I was appointed preacher and apostle

— I am speaking the truth, I am not lying —,

teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray,

lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument.

Gospel LK 16:1-13

Jesus said to his disciples, "A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property. He summoned him and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.' The steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.' He called in his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, 'How much do you owe my master?' He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.' Then to another the steward said, 'And you, how much do you owe?' He replied, 'One hundred kors of wheat.' The steward said to him, 'Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.' And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. "For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? No servant can serve two

masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon."

Or LK 16:10-13

Jesus said to his disciples:

"The person who is trustworthy in very small matters

is also trustworthy in great ones;

and the person who is dishonest in very small matters

is also dishonest in great ones.

If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth,

who will trust you with true wealth?

If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another,

who will give you what is yours?

No servant can serve two masters.

He will either hate one and love the other,

or be devoted to one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and mammon."

Kenneth's Testimony



I used to be a person of the world, wallowing in the pleasures and desires of the flesh and laziness. I would sleep with my girlfriend, masturbated just to pass time, watched pornography, engaged in sexual talks with others, flirted with other women, lusted after many others, bought sex toys, over ate, and cursed like a sailor; (whilst calling myself an adult). I was obsessed with the sex, like it was a drug or something (lust) and I was also always wondering if someone wanted my girlfriend and became enraged. (envy). I also didn't much care for the scripture at all (I was afraid that it'd cause me to stop sex). I talked my girlfriend out of her walk towards Christ for that very reason. As a result, she started loving me more than God. Heck, I had my beautiful girlfriend who I planned on marrying (6 year relationship), I didn't have to worry about rent and became arrogant/filled with pride, was abusive to the special needs kids at my job for fun (wrath), had friends who were almost as bad as me, and was satisfied to let others do for me. I became content and stagnant; no longer seeking more out of life or putting forth any effort to go places (sloth). I was just some over weight sinner (gluttony). I was arrogant and proud (pride).

Then, it all happened in 2011. My past brain tumor grew back (the doctor said, "if you don't get it operated on, you WILL die.") That's pretty scary coming from your doctor)., the surgery was a success but my life was again threatened with my head pumping out too much CSF (google it). So, I had another surgery to put a shunt in. That shunt failed, so another was installed. I had radiation treatments (30}. got fired from the hotel I worked in, and I got fired from a school I worked at later in the year, Then, the truly crippling thing happened. I came down with radiation side effects which caused swelling in my brain and a loss of some cognition (balance, memory, nystagmus in eyes, left eye stuck staring left, drooling, slurring speech like my mouth was full, could not swallow food so it came out through my nose, could not get an erection, double breathing at times, mild hallucinations

of a bright light behind my eyes that shined, and feeling like my eyes were moving around my face) On top of that, I lost all of my friends, but not my girlfriend. No one else could understand me when I talked, but she could. That is still so precious to me. Sadly, she broke up with me from being stressed out at my condition (I believe this to be a lie and she broke up because she was "setting me free"). Ultimatly,she told me goodbye when I explained that my love for her will never die. I was upset. I was depressed and hurt. I tried to accept the fact that she was gone, but then I felt something. I loved her, that went without saying, but what I felt was a love that was more powerful than anything ever (a love that makes you do anything for that other person regardless of you or what happens), true love. I knew that she is the one.

I was lost. I didn't understand what happened. Here I was, happy and on top. Now, I was this broken and disabled guy. It was sad. I wondered why God had this happen? Why was I being punished? I thought that he hated me. I started going to church for guidance, looking for some solution. I needed to know "Why was this happening to me?" Shortly after that, I made a decision to get my own bible, understanding that God hates no one, and things happen for a reason. About a day after I had it, my speech improved a little.

I read passages, scriptures, verses, and started living a more Christian lifestyle, meanwhile slowly getting back my physical traits that were gone (speech nearly returned to normal, balance has gotten much better, and everything else is recovering). I joined a church in my neighborhood, and look forward to Sunday service. Meanwhile, I read my bible daily, no longer cuss, don't masturbate (nearly for 2 years so far), I've lost 60 pounds, attend college, and am I great man of faith.

Now, all that remains is her. I am waiting on her to come back. God told me to just wait, to "Stay" and endure my situation. I've had visions and signs from God that point to her return to my life. So with faith, I'll wait for her. I still love her very much after all, and I can say that with a big smile. I may have lost all my friends, I may be in a home situation that I'm not pleased with right now, but I have faith and hope that it will get better.

Janine's Testimony: Salvation, Falling Away, and Recovery



I got saved at the age of 12. Not by a prayer that I had to say. I got saved while I was reading a Christian book my grandma told me to read. Before the person reads the book the author prays over the person in the book and asks God to let those that are blind see. It happened to me. After a some months though I wasn't on watch and I fell astray. It was a very dark moment in my life. My addictions that God set me free from came back and worst. I was watching porn, masturbating, all the resentment that God freed me from came back. I wasn't doing good in school and i started losing friends. I started drinking and smoking weed trying to fit in. I was constantly going to court with my mom. I also started getting panic and anxiety attacks. I hit rock bottom.

"But God." He cared about me still after I back slide from Him. He brought me back and made me repent. I wanna give hope to those that might have back- slid from God also. He will accept you again. I'm not going to lie. It will be hard coming back to God. You might feel dry but if you hang on to Jesus eventually in time if you continually seek Him and faint not the relationship, and the joy of salvation and fellowship with Jesus Christ will come back! I'm a witness of it and God has taken me to places I never dreamed of! Hallelujah!

Janine

Terri's Testimony: Finding Truth Outside of Roman Catholicism



I was raised Catholic, parochial school, (5 brothers- 1 sister), had a good education, taught by nuns as you may have heard, quite strict, but learned a lot. Priest came in once a week to teach Catechism, but never did I hear about salvation all those yrs. Then I knew about Jesus, but didn't know Him as my Savior until 1971, by then I was an adult. Nothing seemed to change in the church, same things were said which was nothing to do with the Bible, of which we were told not to read, nor listen to anyone on the radio (then) or the TV, had to listen and believe what they told us and of course, the Pope. This went on for a lot of yrs; the not knowing, I was married in the Church, had three children. We did attend church, but again, nothing. They went to CCD classes when asked what they learned about Jesus; not much, either colored or played games. So I stopped taking them and taught them myself. We were going to a church but again, not getting anything new.

My blessed day was when I started to go to my friend, she had a hair salon in her basement. Several ladies would come with their Bibles. After a while, she invited me to a Bible Study and I said "no." I thought I knew a lot, as any Catholic would think, but found out I knew nothing. The saying is that "Catholics are the hardest nuts to crack," I was one of them. I did start going once a week, learning every time, and enjoyed them so much. I looked forward to them each week. I was not reading the Word exactly as we were told not to, instead I would stay up until the early am hours reading starting with the Old Testament. Then I was invited to her church, Assembly of God. What a difference! The people were so friendly, shook hands and even hugs, you didn't see that in the other Church and the singing was something else. I had never heard those songs and took it all in – the praise and worship as never before. So my children and I looked fwd to going, they got involved with

the classes, were so happy too for the change, it changed our living.

After a while, the minister asked me to teach Sunday school, told him I didn't know enough of God's Word, said I would learn from teaching the children. I did and taught there for 5 years, but then due to the business we moved to a different state. Of course by then I had gone to a Bible study previous to all that accepted the Lord as my Savior and felt so clean, as though I had gone through a wringer washing machine and from then on it was wonderful to know more about who Jesus was, and He is more than we think He is! The children had also accepted the Lord, my husband too, but he fell away after a few years and started living a not so good life. He died in the early 1980's and was only in his late 40's. So after that my two children were married, one girl at home. But I was not provided for so I went back to work where the Lord blessed me. I will not share much about that it wasn't easy, but can I say that the Lord brought me through it all. I did struggle but knew He was there for me all the way.

I had left the Catholic church in 1972 and had a whole new life and am still going. When we moved to a different state we attended another Assembly of God church, again taught Sunday School for another 5 years. Myself and my older girl attended Bible School for 2 years and loved it. I learned more and was quite happy. She graduated in 1981, I did in 1982, and the blessing there too was the pastor took a group of church people, plus I was as happy to go too, we went to Israel. What a glorious trip, from Dan to Beersheba, went everywhere the Lord was. It is a place you never ever forget where you had been and what you saw. It has been a while, but seems like only yesterday.

Now I am attending a wonderful church and it is great, the praise and worship is wonderful. So that is my testimony, but a lot more "in-between" things; as I said shared all this with a certain Catholic friend, praying that he will think about how he can serve the the Lord. I pray for him daily, to open his heart and mind and come to the Lord, give up that way of life, which is not God's way as we know. He is the only way…so I know that God has heard our prayers, is in control, up to him to follow through and serve the Lord in a better way instead. Of all that church stuff which doesn't mean a thing.

I realize my testimony is long, but could not share only a little.Thanks again, Lord Bless.

Testimony of Steve Homola formerly of Decatur Michigan from Prison



I was married at the age of 15, divorced at the age of 18, with two beautiful daughters. I was a self-employed carpenter since the age of 15 and owned my own renovation business. Both my daughters lived with me at my mom's since the age of 11, and I would say we had a good relationship. I was into drugs, smoking, gambling, and pornography since the age of 13, this is not all I was into but for space I am going to use this now. The older I got the more drugs I did and the deeper I fell into pornography. It was not long before I was doing everything and anything to get high on. I became so obsessed with pornography that I was spending hundreds of dollars a week on it. My obsession for this kind of behavior was fueled by my drug use, and the drugs gave me the courage to do things I would not do if I was sober.

As I look back now I was living in a fantasy world, and because of this behavior I am now serving a 37 to 70 year prison sentence, and have now been incarcerated for the past 20 years in a Michigan State Prison.

I was in the Van Buren County Jail awaiting trial for 14 months on the crime I am now serving time for. I was on 24 hour suicide watch for most of that time for making threats on my life. I no longer desired to go on living at that time. My lawyers kept telling me that the best deal they could get me was 20 to 40 years in prison for a crime I did not think deserved that much time. This had me in a deep depression, and I was having deep withdrawals from all the drugs I had been using. The chaplain from Forgotten Man Ministries would visit the jail once a week and would try to get me to read the Bible and attend the service they held in the lobby, but I would always tell him that Christianity was not for me, but on December 31, 1993, the chaplain and a friend came to my cell and invited me to the midnight service they were having that night. I felt that tug in my heart so I

attended. (John 15:16).

This was the greatest day of my life that has changed the way I think and look at life. The pastor that was speaking that night spoke on putting your hope and trust in God and that no matter what man says, God has the final say so. This had to be what I need to hear and was looking for. That was the night I gave my life to the Lord and have been faithfully seeking Him with all my heart since daily through His word, in prayer and studying of His word and serving Him where ever I can. Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 2:1-3, Psalm 37:5-6, Colossians 1:21-23.

Since I have made God the Lord of my life, my life has changed dramatically. I now look at life so much differently now. I no longer take thing for granted anymore. It's not about me anymore. The Lord has delivered me from smoking, a foul mouth, gambling, drugs, pornography and so much more. He has filled me with His Love and compassion in my heart towards all people, even people that I should be at war with in here. Being in a controlled environment, I cannot just get up and walk away from issues that arise. I have learned to trust in Him and use His word to guide me. (Psalm 119:105) I have grown in my relationship with the Lord through correspondence courses since the day I accepted Jesus into my heart. Every day since I gave my life to the Lord I have been seeking Him daily in prayer and His word. I am thankful for being alive and set free spiritually even in prison. Thank You Jesus!! God has worked miracles in my life for healing many injuries over the years according to His word in 1 Peter 2:24, Isaiah 53:4-5, and Jeremiah 30:17. God continues to pour out His blessings and goodness in my life as I continue to grow in my relationship with him. Thank You Jesus for saving me!

Note from the Editor: As of this posting (June 2013) Steve was incarcarated at the Chippewa Correctional Facility in Kincheloe, Michigan. He can be reached by email at jpay.com, search for Steve Homola. His ID number is #19041.

Arynn: The Diary of a Young Christian



I gave my life to Christ at the age of 7, and at that moment I would never fathom the paths life would lead me down, and how that would affect my life with Christ. At that time I was shrouded in an innocence that comes with being 7.

I could have even called my life "perfect" until the age of 17. As a junior in high school I thought Id found the love of my life and I gave him everything I had, including my virginity. Now us all being Christians we know sex before marriage goes on the list of "no no's" and especially being a young Christian girl growing up in a house of devout Christians I was supposed to know better. So this became an even bigger "uh oh" in my eyes. Somewhere the line between love and lust became dangerously crossed and I committed what I consider my first major sin against God. Now we know there is no sin bigger then the next, but I was a girl who had gone through life playing by the rules with barely an ounce of rebellion in my body. I had put myself on a pedestal and idolized myself as the ultimate picture of perfection. I was the perfect teenager until I came tumbling off my pedestal and landed on the harsh cold ground of reality. I looked around and realized I was better than no one else, and for the first time I saw myself through God's eyes as a sinner. For the next three years I inflicted my self with spiritual fasting making endless promises to God to never mess up again. Each time I would feel better as if I somehow restored my own sense of perfection, to only fall short and begin the tumultuous cycle all over again. As I entered college things only seemed to worsen spiritual for me. I was having a spiritual identity crisis and I felt so separated from God. I felt like I hadn't heard God's voice in ages. I thought that that he abandoned me in one area of my life, but still made his appearance in other parts of my life. It took me all the way until second semester freshman year to stop trying to fix everything or recreating perfection and instead surrendering myself to God. My pastor once told me that God will use your sin and work your consequences back into his will. For some reason I only saw that on a macro scale at first, like for girls who got pregnant and their pregnancy was the consequence, and their baby the blessing of Gods life and creation. Once again I

was wrong it works on all levels. My spiritual torture and facing the music of my own sinful nature was my consequence, but also my blessing. It was only in the aftermath of that storm that I was able to accept my role in the relationship between God and myself. I finally saw God for the all controlling, powerful, loving and mostly FORGIVING God he is. I saw God's strength, warmth, and gentleness, and I experienced it. Once I let go of my own sense of perfection, pride, and need to play god I could finally experience him. I stood in my own way and blocked myself from Gods grace and loving relationship.

I'm telling this story because we all often feel abandoned by God as youth especially when we are trying to traverse everything life is throwing at us. But once we stop focusing on the roadblocks and our own short comings and look up at the God who wants to so desperately help us through these moments, I promise your spirit will get 8000 times lighter. He wants to be our father and best friend so open yourself up and let him. Leave your comfort zone and grasp onto his hand and he will lead through ever moment or misstep you'll encounter in the future.

I am no way a perfect Patty now, I still have things I struggle with but now I have a budding relationship with my closest friend God to help. I don't want to ever be perfect again if that means I would lose what I have with God now. God never said a walk with him would be easy, but he did promise it would be worth it. Every obstacle, struggle, and moment is worth it for me. And as I continue to fumble my way through young adulthood and the rest of my life ill have the steady grip of God to hold my hand. My name is Arynn and this is my testimony.