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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 141: 10/05/2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we learn from Habakkuk how the people of God can persevere through suffering. In the second reading, we learn about the importance of using our spiritual gifts and spreading the true doctrine of God. In the Gospel lesson, we study three short lessons from Jesus on discipleship.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Habakkuk, like Amos, who we looked at last week, was a minor prophet, meaning his writings were shorter than those called the major prophets. The book's overall theme is how the people of God are to persist during their suffering by focusing on Him. He wrote a bit later than Amos, in the late seventh century BC (610 – 605 BC). This was after the Assyrians had taken the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity in 722 BC and just before the Southern Kingdom fell to the Babylonians in three waves beginning in 605 BC. The context is critical to understand because the Babylonian army was soon to begin its conquest of Jerusalem, the holy city of the southern kingdom of Judah. The

prophet cried out to God, "How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save" (Habakkuk 1:2). The Book records God's answer to his plea.

First Reading:

> *Habakkuk 1:2-3 NAS95 2 How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save. 3 Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises.*
> *2:2-4 2 Then the LORD answered me and said, "Record the vision And inscribe it on tablets, That the one who reads it may run. 3 For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. 4 Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith."*

In chapter 2, verse 4 of Habakkuk, a very important principle for believers is stated. "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith." Other versions state this more clearly, such as the NIV, which reads, "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright– but the righteous will live by his faith." Here we see that one key characteristic of a disciple of God is having faith in Him. Righteous living depends upon faith, but faith must have an object. If our faith is placed in our perceived goodness, the good works we do for the church, or anything other than God, we are "puffed up and our desires are not upright."

Here is an illustration of the importance of placing our faith in the correct object, God. If our mother asked us to go to the store and buy a gallon, she may be amazed if we returned with a gallon of cod liver oil when she desired skim milk! It is essential to have the correct object of faith.

Later in Habakkuk, we found the object of Habakkuk's faith. "The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights (Hab 3:19a, b NIV). Habakkuk's call was to the people of Israel to repent of their sin and return to God, the only true source of possible deliverance from their impending tragedy of the invasion by Babylon. That calling is just as appropriate today as it was to Israel. The righteous shall live by faith in God and not by faith in anything else, including money, success, or good works. For we are saved by grace through faith and not of ourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any person should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We are often unable to understand what God is up to when He allows trouble in our lives. Habakkuk's call to God regarding why He allowed such terrible hardships to happen to the people of God is as essential to his readers as it is to those in our day. When we suffer without seeing any obvious purpose or reason, we too ask God, Why? God's answer to us is, "*But the righteous will live by his faith*" (Habakkuk 2:4c). We are called to live by faith in God's plan, faith that God will work out all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

When I wrote this, I was preparing to travel to the Detroit area to the funeral of a friend who died at a middle age. Over and over, I have asked what I could have done to have prevented his death. I pray that somehow God will use this experience to draw me and others closer to Him, and that I will have the boldness to share the love of Jesus Christ with others through this tragedy. The person who died has been on my BLL (big long list) for many years. I carry a huge burden with the passing of each on this list. What helps me get through it is the half dozen or so people formerly on the list who are now walking with God in faith. Through it all, the message of Habakkuk rings true: "the righteous will live by his faith."

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Second Timothy. The theme of this section is Paul's calling to young Timothy to continue his bold service of the Lord despite tribulation. This is similar to what we learned from the first reading in Habakkuk.

Second Reading:

> *6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. 8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life– not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. 12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. 13 What you*

> *heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:6-13 NIV)*

Paul reminded Timothy to use the spiritual gifts God gave him during his ordination service (v. 6, "laying on of my hands"). He said in verse 13, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus." The caution to adhere to a pattern of sound teaching is a frequent admonition in the New Testament. Doctrine is essential, especially as we will see in today's Gospel lesson, because teaching false doctrine leads others away from the true faith in Jesus. Such a practice, knowingly or not, will lead to much greater condemnation for non-believers engaged in it. This leads us to the Gospel lesson for today from Saint Matthew.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Though today's Gospel lesson covered only chapter 17, verses 5 – 10, we will cover the entire section from verses 1 – 10 to take the context into account.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 JESUS SAID TO his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. 2 It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. 3 So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." 5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. 7Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? 8 Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? 9 Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10 So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' " (Luke 17:1-10 NIV)*

This section of Luke contains teaching on discipleship. It consists of three short lessons and concludes with a parable. In the first lesson, we see Jesus' admonition about the seriousness of sin, especially for the person who leads others into sin. Jesus is saying that sin is severe enough that we should be willing to take drastic actions to overcome temptation. Any teenage boy can attest that girly magazines are a compelling attraction when hormones are raging. However, what Jesus is saying here is that the person who causes others to sin, in this case, the publisher of the pornographic magazine, will receive greater condemnation. The parallel section in Matthew adds this verse, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" (Mt 18:7 NIV). Next, Jesus continues with a second lesson. Here we find that being willing to forgive is a second key characteristic of discipleship to Jesus. He said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him; if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." That was a hard saying to His disciples because their answer was to ask Him to increase their faith. Forgiveness can be a hard thing to do. The call to forgiveness is evident in our Lord's Prayer, recited weekly in Mass, in Matthew Chapter 6.

Jesus' third lesson is about faith, which we found in Habakkuk's first reading. After Jesus spoke about the need to forgive, the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." His use of a mustard seed is significant because it was one of the smallest seeds his disciples would have been familiar with. Jesus' statement meant that even the smallest faith was of great value. If we plant and water a seed, this tiny object may sprout regardless of how much faith we place in it. The seed comes from God, and His concern is how we use it. God doesn't call everyone a spiritual giant; He asks us to use our small faith for His purposes. As we saw in Habakkuk, the just shall live even by their tiny amount of faith, the size of a mustard seed. Even such a small faith may move mountains.

Next, Jesus moved on to a parable, as He had done throughout this section of Luke. This parable was about a master who posed a hypothetical question about his servant. "Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready, and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that, you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told?" The message was clear. As disciples of Jesus, we must serve without strings attached. Our obedience is not a matter of merit, but of responsive duty, though God does honor our Christian service. Although we will be rewarded in heaven for our obedience to God, He calls us to obey Him now, as a servant is called to obey his master. The servant will be rewarded, "after that you may eat and drink" (v. 8), but a servant's work is a duty that does not earn them exceptional merit with their master. God is a faithful Master who will honor us for our service. When we make "sacrifices" to obey God, we should not pat ourselves on the back or look for special paybacks from God. We merely live in light

of the new life He has given us in Christ.

Something exciting happened at a church dinner some years back that helped me gain insights into these passages. Since our name fell in a particular range for this event, we were supposed to bring a large dessert. My wife baked up one of her most amazing treats, peach berry cobbler with freshly made whipped cream. I dropped her off at the church door, and she carried the still-hot cobbler downstairs and the whipped cream dish. When we got inside, the organizers told her to find a table with a dessert and place it there. Frankly, I was concerned that we would not get any of this lovely treat, but I began resigning myself to the fact that we would not be able to enjoy any delicious delicacy. My wife set out to find a table without dessert, but could not find one that already had one. Next, I told her to place the dessert on our table and get on with the dinner as I turned away to speak to someone behind me. As we were about to decide what to do, I suddenly heard a loud crash. As I turned around, I saw the delicious cobbler splattered all over the floor! I was shocked and stood there in disbelief for a minute as our hosts rushed around trying to figure out how to clean up the mess on the floor. I didn't have any cobbler that night!

As we went through the dinner and the following service, I reflected on my heart's intentions during this event. My wife's motives were pure; she wanted to bring the best dessert for whoever received it. Mine were not so pure; I intended to save some for myself all along. God evidently had other intentions by showing me a lesson in allowing the eventual disaster. Serve God with a pure heart, without strings attached, *and He will honor you*.

Reflection Questions

1. The mustard seed, though one of the smallest seeds, can, with proper soil and watering, sprout and grow into a large bush, whether or not we have faith that it will succeed. It's specially designed by God to do just that. Read Hebrews 12:2 and Ephesians 2:8-9 below.

> *Eph 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith– and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God–not by works, so that no one can boast.*

> *Heb 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne*

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of God.

Who provides the seed of faith for which you are called to sow to produce God's fruit in the Kingdom?

2. Refer to your answer above. How can your faith be improved, enlarged, or expanded, with the source of your faith determined? Considering its source, is it productive to feel guilty if we don't have "enough faith"? What would be a more appropriate response?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 138: 09/28/2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we examine a reading from Amos and learn about the dangers of luxurious living when it brings people further away from God. In the Gospel reading, we learn from Jesus through the story of Lazarus and the rich man how important it is to trust in the Lord Jesus as the only source of our salvation before we die. Unless we do it while we are

still alive, it will be too late once we die.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Amos is in the Northern Kingdom (Israel) just before the invasion by the Assyrian Empire that occurred in 722 BC. This was a time of prosperity for the Israelites, who had fallen into idolatry and oppression of the poor people among them. Just one verse before the opening of today's reading God warned them about the inevitable invasion that was to come upon them along with their exile to a land "beyond Damascus" (Amos 5:27). In the reading, God continues His warnings to them about the wrath that he was going to allow to come upon them through the reigning Gentile empire to their north. This invasion from enemies in the north prefigures the invasion that will occur in the last days just before the return of the Lord Jesus. These final events will culminate in the outpouring of God's wrath upon the unbelieving world after Jesus returns to gather His church. Interestingly, some "Pharisaical" people during Amos' time were calling for this Day of the Lord to come (Amos 5:18a, b). God responded to their plea by saying that this day of judgment was one of "darkness and not light (Amos 5:18c, 20). He also told them (through Amos) that it is "as if a man fled from a lion and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him" (Amos 5:19). During times of oppression of the poor and idolatry, God's judgment is *not* something for which anyone should pray for!

First Reading:

> Amos 6:1-7 NAS95 1 Woe to those who are at ease in Zion And to those who feel secure in the mountain of Samaria, The distinguished men of the foremost of nations, To whom the house of Israel comes. 2 Go over to Calneh and look, And go from there to Hamath the great, Then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are they better than these kingdoms, Or is their territory greater than yours? 3 Do you put off the day of calamity, And would you bring near the seat of violence? 4 Those who recline on beds of ivory And sprawl on their couches, And eat lambs from the flock And calves from the midst of the stall, 5 Who improvise to the sound of the harp, And like David have composed songs for themselves, 6 Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls While they anoint themselves with the finest of oils, Yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. 7 Therefore, they will now go into exile at the head of the exiles, And the sprawlers' banqueting will pass away.

God warned the Israelites, those Jews of the northern kingdom (v.1, "in the mountain of Samaria") that their self-satisfied living and sense of security was false for they "will now go into exile at the head of the exiles" (v. 7a). God compared them to various Gentile nations whom He had already judged to a certain extent by the prior invasion of the Jewish people into their homelands (v. 2). The mention of the other nations contains a note of sarcasm. The opulent lifestyle of the Israelites (vv. 4-6) would ultimately lead to their downfall.

The people of Amos' day were no different than those who came after them, and those alive today. Jesus warned the rich during His day to turn their hearts to God, for example, His discourse with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18 – 27). Riches aren't bad in and of themselves it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). In the Gospel reading, we will see Jesus teaching on the critical importance of focusing upon God during people's earthly lifetimes because afterwards it is too late to receive forgiveness of their sin. This forgiveness is only available through faith in Jesus Christ while a person is still alive; there is no second chance to earn one's way into heaven.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from 1 Timothy coincidentally picks up after the above verse regarding the love of money. "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:10). This provides an essential context for the following teaching.

Second Reading:

> 1 Timothy 6:11-16 NAS95 11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, 14 that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which He will bring about at the proper time–He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

Paul told young Timothy some fundamental spiritual truths. Instead of focusing on riches, which lead many people to an eternal, spiritual death, believers are to focus on the attributes of God. This includes things like "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness" (v. 11). Paul urged believers to live the Christian life seriously as if it were a battle (v. 12). He concluded the reading by reminding believers about the imminent return of the Lord Jesus, the only One who can give eternal life because he alone possesses it (v. 16). God's kingdom is one of light and immortality. In contrast, as we will see in the Gospel reading, the kingdom of hell is one of darkness and eternal punishment.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel lesson this week, we return to Luke chapter 16 and move forward to verses 19-31 in what some commentators have called "The 'parable' of the rich man and Lazarus. " However, from all the evidence in the text, this isn't a parable at all; rather, it's a story about a true event in history.

In the text in Luke, we covered the past several weeks, where Jesus addressed his teachings to the group of legalistic Jews known as the Pharisees. Notice that the readings passed over verses 14 to 18. Since it's always important to consider the context of any part of the Bible that we study, let me point out some insights from these missing five verses. Luke stated explicitly that the Pharisees were "worshipers of money" and that this group ridiculed Jesus. This prompted Jesus to tell them that they are the ones "who justify themselves before men, but God knows their hearts." He said that what they exalt (money and status, among other things) is an abomination in the sight of God. Jesus used strong words to penetrate the hard hearts of the Pharisees. He said something vital that gives us insight into God's kingdom, which we will discuss later in this Gospel lesson. Jesus said, "The Law and the Prophets were until John, since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it." How may someone attempt to "force themselves" into the kingdom of God? The better question would be, "How were the Pharisees attempting to force themselves into the kingdom of God?" Remember that John the Baptist's call was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:20). John's message was one of repentance and belief in the "one who was to come," Jesus. This was a time of transition, from the Old Testament Law to the as-yet-unseen mystery of the age of grace we now know as the "church age." The Pharisees did not heed John's call to repentance and instead attempted to force their way into the kingdom by establishing their own law. This is clear because Jesus went on to say in verse 17, "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void." Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament Law and usher in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven, also called the Kingdom of God, is often referred to in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus addressed Nicodemus, the one we know as "Nick at Night," because this interaction was in the evening outside the hearing of the rest of the religious leaders. John 3:3 gives a crucial insight into the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said, "You must be born from above to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." He then explained to Nicodemus the meaning of the spiritual birth and how this comes about. Jesus said in verse 15, "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." He continued in verse 16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Jesus said that we enter the kingdom of heaven through belief in Him, which results in our second birth, a spiritual birth. We must believe in Jesus to cross over from the kingdom of darkness (that the Pharisees were in) to the Kingdom of God. In summary, we see from the teaching of the forerunner John the Baptist the call for repentance and from Jesus the means to find eternal life through being born again (or from above) through the Spirit of God, which comes about through belief in Jesus' finished work of atonement for our sins on the cross at Calvary.

Let's read the text and learn what Jesus was teaching the Pharisees about obtaining eternal life through their entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 16:19-31 NAS95 19 Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. 20 And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, 21 and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. 22 Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' 27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house– 28 for I have five brothers–in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' 30 But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' 31 But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'*

Here we see the study of two contrasts: the rich versus the poor in this world, and the kingdom of the dead versus the kingdom of God in the next. The rich man enjoyed God's gracious provisions while he was alive. Still, after he died, he not only didn't have these generous provisions, but suffered torment, while no longer even having a physical body. Yet this man's soul still craved water and relief from the flames. In life, the rich man was prosperous enough to have a wall around his house, which required a gate through which to enter. The walls protected him during his lifetime, but after this rich man's life ended, his soul was bare naked before God. In contrast, the poor man enjoyed none of the rich man's outlandish provisions while living in poverty on the earth. Yet this very same man who spent years begging outside the rich man's gate was in the comfort of "Abraham's bosom," a place of peace and security we call heaven. Clearly, Jesus' teaching in this section isn't a parable but a rare glimpse into the next world, that shadowy place known in the Bible as Hades. Jesus reveals to us that Hades consists of two regions; one is a place of torment and outside the provision of God, the place that we know as hell. The other region is a place of peace that we know as heaven. Between these two regions is a "great chasm" which separates the two realms. The contrast is between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light.

Here is some background that will help explain the cultural milieu. In that culture, a rich person was seen to carry more favor with God than a poor person. This was partly due to the agrarian nature of their society. If a rancher had a herd of cattle and doubled the size of his herd over time, he was believed to carry favor with God. This belief partly stemmed from the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant under which the people lived. Remember that during the period of the Judges, and later during the Kings, the people's prosperity was directly proportional to their obedience to God. When they walked with God, He blessed them with material possessions and a certain degree of peace and safety. However, when they walked away from God, he removed their material goods, peace, and safety. The rich man in this parable told by Jesus had all the perceived blessings from God during his human life. He enjoyed material possessions (called a rich man and clothed in royal purple and fine linen) and safety (a house surrounded by walls). The Jewish people at this time would have viewed him as a man who carried much favor with God because of God's excellent provision for him. In contrast, Lazarus had none of these things and lived a miserable life. He would have been perceived as a terrible sinner in this culture. Once both of them died,

Look more closely at the text in Luke 16. The rich man can communicate directly with Abraham from within his new, humble position in Hades, the place of the dead. But he is anything but humble. He still tries to order people around, even begging them to do his will. Jesus explained that Abraham was "far off." When he speaks to Abraham, he asks for mercy, though God, the only One who can grant mercy, isn't mentioned. Abraham is what is known in literary circles as a "foil." He is present in this story for no other reason than to introduce information that the reader would otherwise have no other way of knowing. Abraham responds to the rich man's request to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his five brothers about hell: "They have Moses and the

Prophets, let them hear them." The rich man replied that they would not be convinced if someone returned from the dead. This is a remarkable request on the part of the rich man, because he is now at Lazarus's mercy to save his brothers from hell. The Scriptures are clear that when Jesus Himself returned from the dead, many people did not believe in him.

Stepping back and looking at the audience of the Pharisees, we ask how a religious person can be sent to hell after they die when they genuinely believe that they merit heaven? This is the key point of today's lesson. One can only merit heaven by repenting and believing that only Jesus merited salvation by dying on the cross for their sins. Pharisees in any age are not willing to enter through the narrow door of belief in Jesus; instead, they choose their own way and attempt to force their way into the kingdom of heaven. This thinking continues today among anyone who believes they deserve heaven because of their good works or church attendance. The predictable end is what we see with the rich man in Hades.

Reflection Questions

1. Based upon what you learned in today's study in Luke, if you were Lazarus and were sent back from heaven to warn your brothers, what would you tell them?

2. We saw in the Gospel reading how you can only cross the great chasm between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light while you are still alive. You may ask, Why hasn't anyone ever told me about this? They have, they're doing it now. Do you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord to the Glory of God (Romans 10:9)? We have written a comprehensive analysis of where spiritual life comes from in an article by that name, located at *Where Does Spiritual Life Really Come From* on the Christians for Christ website.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 135:

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09/21/2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Last week, we looked at the Gospel of Luke and discussed the famous parable of the prodigal son. In the previous section of this Gospel, 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 in life after death. This week, later in this lesson, we will return to the Gospel of Luke, pick up where we left off last week, and cover the parable of the unjust steward.

Introduction to 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 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 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 after dividing 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 760 BC. 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 had the advantage of signaling adjacent cities like Jerusalem. What an appropriate place for a prophet of God to be from, a city that spoke to other cities, not through a smoke signal or lantern, but by the Word of God through their own Amos.

First Reading:

> Amos 8:4-7 NAS95 4 Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, 5 saying, "When will the new moon be over, So that we may sell grain, And the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market, To make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, And to cheat with dishonest scales, 6 So as to buy the helpless for money And the needy for a pair of sandals, And that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?" 7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob, "Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds.

A frequent theme in the Book of Amos was the exploitation of the poor. This was a time of relative prosperity in 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 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 "diminishing 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 on planning how they would gain more wealth, even at the cost of exploiting those less powerful than them. Even if their hearts were with 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 high-energy and have frequently had difficulty focusing on one 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 my worldly cares and concerns into church on Sunday. I have learned that I need to prepare my heart for worshiping God for many hours before arriving at church. This means limiting my coffee consumption that morning and consciously focusing on God to the exclusion of outside thoughts. I have also discovered that praying before church improves my concentration level for spiritual things before I come to church. God knows what is happening 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 minds.

Often, we feel burned out on Sunday morning. Sometimes, when we show up at church on Sunday, we give 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 something for God but 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 it doesn't affect the other areas. When I was teaching business classes inside the walls of several state prisons, I used an illustration to explain this delusion. I drew a circle on the board 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 the everyday 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 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? Compartmentalization is nothing new; we can see this was going on during the time of Amos the prophet.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First Timothy. This is the first of the Pastoral Epistles, consisting of this Book, Second Timothy, and Titus. In the Letter, Paul is ministering to his spiritual son Timothy by advising him on spiritual matters in the church plagued with false teaching. This is evidenced by the opening of the letter in which Paul warns against false teaching in verse 3 of the first chapter. Paul

said, "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines" (1 Timothy 1:3). Today's reading in the second chapter addresses the subject of prayer, but also reveals some timeless spiritual truths.

Second Reading:

> 1 Timothy 2:1-8 NAS95 1 First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. 7 For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. 8 Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.

Paul urged the young Pastor Timothy to pray for everyone, not just believers, including the government officials, "so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (v. 2). Paul had taught earlier in Romans how God had ordained civil leaders. There he said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and God establishes those which exist" (Romans 13:1). Paul's admonition to pray for them in this Letter with his saying "so that we may lead a quiet life" accords with what Paul said just two verses later in Romans. "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil" (Romans 13:3a). Paul affirms that prayer on behalf of civil leaders is ordained by God in verse 3, then transitions to some timeless, spiritual truths.

Paul begins this section by saying how God wishes all people to be saved (v. 4). Next, he affirms that God is the only mediator between Himself and man, something that contradicts the teachings of the false teachers who placed mediators as intermediaries between themselves and God. This was because the Gnostics, among others, who held to these false beliefs, taught that matter was bad and spirit was good. Therefore, there had to be another mediator other than Jesus because Jesus was a man in the flesh. Alternatively, they taught that Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh because, since the Spirit of God is good and the flesh is evil, then Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh. This necessitated various mediators, including angels or ministers who intervened between God and man. This is a key point that Paul addressed with Timothy because another of the heresies being confronted was the Galatian heresy. This false teaching was that Christians were bound to uphold

the Jewish Law and the continuance of a form of Levitical priesthood that mediated between God and man. The emergence of this priesthood directly contradicted God's clear teaching on the priesthood of all believers, as evidenced in 1 Peter 2:5-9. Paul closes this section by affirming his status as a church leader, especially to the Gentile believers (v. 7). Finally, he again calls upon the church to pray together in peace (v. 8).

Two key points of application arise from the reading. First, we are called to pray for all people, including our civil leaders. "All me" means everyone, even our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and those with whom we disagree. Second, we are to come to God directly and not through any intermediary because, as believers, no one stands between God and us. The Holy Spirit said in the Book of Hebrews, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). God teaches us to come boldly to Him in prayer through the one mediator, Jesus Christ who died for us (v. 5).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke is the parable of the unjust manager. As in all parables, we seek to determine the main central truth that Jesus is teaching in light of the surrounding context. In this case, the audience included the Pharisees, who typified unjust managers and were themselves lovers of money (Luke 16:14).

Gospel Reading:

> Luke 16:1-13 NAS95 1 Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 2 And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' 3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 4 I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes. 5 "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 7 "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8 "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this

> age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. 9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings. 10 "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. 11 "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? 12 "And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Many have found this parable puzzling, 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, the provider of all things, both believers and non-believers. The unjust steward is a lazy but creative non-believer who used his God-given creativity to achieve worldly self-satisfying purposes. The children of light represent all believers. The big idea is quite simple. God calls believers to use everything he has given us to build 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. The parable also addresses the trap the Pharisees fell into, for they were lovers of money (see Luke 16:14). As believers, we are to use our money to worship God and not worship money and use God. This was where the Pharisees went wrong; they used God and worshipped money. Again, we are to use money to worship God, not worship money and use God.

I remember an occasion while teaching in the prison where I caught a student cheating on an exam. He had completed the exam using a pencil. When I returned the paper the following week, showing the errors, he came to me after class and said I had made a mistake. He said that I had marked several answers wrong when 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 anyone would try this again, but just to be sure, I ran copies of their exams the next time I gave an exam. 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 he had just returned 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 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 using their God-given resources, but used their creativity to steal from the poor rather than doing what God commanded them to do by helping those less fortunate. This parable gives an example to challenge how we approach our own stewardship of the resources God has given to us. Suppose ungodly people are motivated to use their resources for their 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 and insights shared by my business students when we discussed this particular parable.

- The manager was willing to go to great, creative, and insightful lengths to secure his position in a 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 may 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.

- Sometimes, we may find a church website of grade-school quality, but unbeknownst to us, we have half a dozen web developers who 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 Christians?

- 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. Where do we fall on a scale of worshiping God vs. money? The worship of money is very subtle, so asking this 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 toward true change will only come from God.

- Jesus gave us two metaphors – salt and light- that teach us that Christianity is designed not just to be a minor part of 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 tending toward corruption.

Let me tell a story about a special person in my life. After I moved to Indiana, I met a man who worked in the cafeteria at the local college. He was a gentle and unassuming kind of man, and he had a specific, unusual look about him. I struck up a conversation with him one day and built a relationship with him over a period of years. Dean (his real name) had a learning disorder, but continued to be a 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 a man who, although he wasn't given many talents or treasures, used everything 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 in the children's ministry at his church on Wednesday night and Sunday morning. 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 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 I am aware of; the list goes on.

Well, one day we were at an evening church service, and a lady gave a moving testimony about some difficulties in her life. We all 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, "It doesn't matter because when we get to heaven, we will all be working for Dean anyway."

Dean passed away on November 15, 2017. I was blessed to be able to attend his funeral, where I was able to share this memory.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we saw how in the reading from Amos, there was some teaching on honest stewardship. This dovetailed nicely with the Gospel lesson on the parable of the unjust manager. What are some ways in which people cheat in our modern society? How does knowing and understanding God's high regard for "honest scales" and proper treatment of the poor enable you to counter these modern ways of cheating?

2. God has provided our time, talents, and treasures. With your answer to the first question, 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 most significant 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?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 638: 09-14-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 9-14-2014. This week, we open with an interesting reading from the Book of Numbers in which we see the incident of the fiery serpents inflicting the Israelites during their forty-year wanderings. Then we move on to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians, where we study the theological term known as the "kenosis," which means "emptying." Then we conclude with the Gospel lesson from John in which we see Jesus draw an analogy between the lifting up of Moses' bronze serpent in the wilderness and His crucifixion on the cross.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Numbers and deals with a time when the Israelites were angry with God. The context of the message today is between two military victories of the Israelites. In the

first one, they trusted God and asked Him for a significant military victory over the Canaanites. God had granted them this victory, and the destruction was to such great extent that they named the place with the Hebrew word translated "Hormah," which means "destruction" (Numbers 21:1-3). Their second military victory was over the Amorites, who came after King Sihon of that region refused to allow the Israelites passage through his territory. This was another of the significant battles that occurred along their many campsites, just before their encounter with the infamous false prophet Balaam, beginning in chapter 22. You may remember that Balaam was the one whom God corrected through a talking donkey.
Note: We began the reading at verse 4 to provide some context.

First Reading:

> Numbers 21:4-9 Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey. 5 The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food." 6 The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 7 So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people. 8 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." 9 And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

On the heels of their victory over the Amorites, the Israelites went "around the land of Edom" (v. 4) instead of through it, because the Edomites forbade them to pass through their land (Exodus 20:14-21). The people were angry towards both their leader in heaven and their earthly, visible leader, Moses (v. 5). Their five-count indictment against them is given in verse 5: 1. They shouldn't have led them out of Egypt, 2. God didn't provide them with water 3. They were led to the wilderness to die, 4. God didn't provide them with enough food, and 5. They hated the food they were given, literally "light bread" in the original language. God responded to their accusations with a summary judgment which He then executed by sending "fiery serpents" among them which bit them resulting in many deaths (v. 6). These animals were likely called "fiery" because of their color, the effect they had in causing a burning sensation after they bit someone, or even perhaps as a description of some characteristic of the animal itself either in temperament or some physical characteristic. Regardless of the nature of the beasts, they were sent to execute God's judgment upon the people and draw them to repentance, something that we see happened in verse 7. "So the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and

you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.'" Moses, a type of Christ, was the one the people turned to intercede for them. Evidently, Moses spoke to God and then instructed Moses to construct a model of the fiery serpent, place it on a pole, and then put it before those afflicted by the reptile it represented. When the people looked at the bronze serpent, they were healed (v. 9). God gave the people an antidote that required faith in the object and showed that God possessed power over the fiery serpent represented by the object. The object they looked at was very similar to the image of the snake on a pole that can be seen today in many medical establishments, including hospitals and ambulances. God didn't take away the serpents; instead, He required the people to turn to Him in faith for healing once the cursed creation had deeply inflicted them.

Have you ever found yourself angry with God for no other reason than you knew in your conscience that it was His fault? I remember once when I was a child, out playing in the sandy field behind my house, that something happened with something I was building, and I became extremely angry. I don't remember if it was some earthen tunnel I had dug that had collapsed, or whether some imaginary structure couldn't be completed. However, it is only now, some fifty-plus years later, that I can confess that at that moment I cursed God. Deep down, I knew that cursing God was the very worst thing that I could do. Even many years later, I remember there was power in it! Even though I was an altar boy and went to mass every Sunday and holy day, I knew it was God's fault. A few minutes later, I knew I had done something terribly wrong and begged God for forgiveness.

There was more to the people's sin than may be obvious in a temporal reading of the text. Their sin was tantamount to rejecting God, their Savior, which is the only unpardonable sin in the Bible. The theological principle from the reading was that when the people believed that God had the power to heal them by viewing the bronze serpent, they were healed. In the same way our sins are forgiven when we turn in faith to God through our one mediator Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). Paul said in Romans "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

As a side note, was what was going on with Moses with the construction of the serpent a violation of the Second Commandment as given in Exodus 20:4? God had told them, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). No, it was not, for two reasons. First, it was God who forbade the people from making the sign. In this case, God commanded Moses to create the bronze serpent. Second, the serpent didn't represent something in heaven. One can wonder about Moses' reaction to God's command to build the graven image of the serpent. Did Moses have any misconceptions about building the bronze serpent because he anticipated what would happen to the image after the Israelites passed through the wilderness?

You may wonder what became of the bronze serpent? Just as it may be anticipated, it became the object of worship. This is recorded in 2 Kings 18 as follows:

> 1 Now it came about in the third year of Hoshea, the son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king. 2 He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. 3 He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. 4 He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan. (2 Kings 18:1-4, emphasis added.)

There was nothing new under the sun in those days in Israel. We need to be careful not to trust in a physical object, as if it has the power to heal, save, or provide for us. Only God is worthy of our hearts' deep trust and worship.

Introduction to the Second Reading

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians. This Book is one of the Prison Epistles written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome and addressed to the believers in the city of Philippi, the first town in Macedonia where Paul established a church. The Book's central theme is Paul's expression of the ideal for believers to achieve Christlikeness. This is evident in the verses leading up to the reading in which Paul said, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

Second Reading:

> Phil 2:6-11 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed

> on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul said that Christ willingly emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes during His earthly ministry. This is known by the theological term "kenosis," which comes from the Greek word for "emptiness." The "kenosis" is a very difficult theological principle to understand. How could Jesus do miracles yet at the same time have emptied Himself of his divine attributes? Jesus was (and is) always God, but when He came to earth, he willingly submitted Himself to His Father's plan, including not using His divine power **independently** of the Father's will. Jesus emptied Himself and took the form of a servant and was obedient to God the Father to the point of death, even death by the most outrageous form possible, the cross (v. 8). Paul affirmed that there is no other Name higher than the Lord Jesus (v. 9) and that everyone, including nonbelievers, will one day confess that Jesus is Lord (v. 11). People who seek Jesus and believe in Jesus through faith are saved in a similar way that the Israelites looked at God's symbolic serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. As we move to the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus referred to that incident.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from the Gospel of John and contains the famous verse often held up on signs at sporting events, John 3:16. The context of reading is that it deals with a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin (John 3:1). Nicodemus met with Jesus as night (Nick at Night) likely because he was concerned about the reactions of his colleagues. During the dialogue, Jesus cut to the chase and told him, "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3). Jesus then explained the necessity for a person to be invisibly and supernaturally born spiritually after their obvious natural birth in order for them to become a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used the analogy of the wind, which in the Greek is the same word as "spirit" (pneuma). He said, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (v. 8). Unlike the natural birth, which is evident to all, a person's spiritual birth is a mystery that comes about through faith in the only object capable of saving anyone, Jesus Christ. Saving faith must have an object, and that object is Jesus Christ.

As you read, take note of the ups and downs you encounter in the text.

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Gospel Reading:

> *John 3: 13-17 13 No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.*

Jesus said that He was the only Man that ever came from heaven (v. 13). Though as we saw in the second reading that Jesus allowed Himself to be lifted up on the cross in humiliation, He was triumphant in winning salvation for anyone who looks to Him in faith for eternal life (vv. 14-15). God didn't provide Jesus' sacrifice because of our goodness or merit, but because of His great love for us (v. 16, Ephesians 2:8-9). God sent His Holy Spirit to be the judge of sin in the world, but sent His Son so that through His death, those who believe may be saved through faith in Him (v. 17). The way that Moses lifted up the bronze serpent is similar to those who hold signs containing Bible verses at sporting events. Though some may chide the people who lift up signs reading John 3:16, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is critical.

Just how important is all of this theological discussion in our lives? Let me provide an illustration to show how it can be a life-or-death matter. I used to frequent a particular restaurant for breakfast on my way to work in the morning. One day, I sat down at one of the stools on the lunch counter next to a man whom I had never seen there before. I felt a certain nudging in my heart, so I conversed with the man. We began talking, and I learned a bit about his life and how his wife had recently passed away. As we continued to talk, we began to build a friendship and agreed to meet again the following day. I met with him over the next several weeks and discussed God and the Bible. One afternoon, after we had met, he reached the point where he knelt down and expressed his faith in the Lord Jesus. As the tears began to flow from his eyes, I looked up and he told me something that shook me to the core of my being. He asked me if I remembered the morning that we met. I said yes, and he continued. He told me that this was the morning on which he had planned to end his life. He had written a note and was driving to where he would carry out his plan, but had decided to stop for one last meal. After we met that morning, he told me that he knew that God had spoken to him and that he had changed his mind. Belief in Jesus Christ can be a life-or-death matter.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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1. We noted that one of Paul's driving motivations in the Book of Philippians was to urge believers to become Christlike in their behavior. In the introduction to the Gospel lesson, we mentioned how believers were born spiritually through God's invisible hand in their lives. In light of these concepts, how does one know that they have been born in the spiritual sense? What are some attributes that you should expect to see in a person who has been born in a spiritual sense?

2. In the second reading, we discussed the concept of the kenosis and how Jesus emptied Himself of His independent use of His divine attributes. Can you recount a time in which you were in a position of authority, but instead of using this authority, acted humbly and chose a different plan of action, even though you would have been rightfully justified in exercising your power? How does this relate to how Jesus "held back" during His earthly ministry?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 129: 09-07-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we learn about forgiveness from Paul's Letter

to Philemon. Then we study Jesus' teaching on the cost of being His disciple. Have you ever acted like an idiot? We are going to talk about that today in the context of forgiveness.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom.

> *WIS 9:13-18B Who can know God's counsel,*
> *or who can conceive what the LORD intends?*
> *For the deliberations of mortals are timid,*
> *and unsure are our plans.*
> *For the corruptible body burdens the soul*
> *and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.*
> *And scarce do we guess the things on earth,*
> *and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty;*
> *but when things are in heaven, who can search them out?*
> *Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given wisdom*
> *and sent your holy spirit from on high?*
> *And thus were the paths of those on earth made straight.*

This reading confirms some things that we know in the Bible, such as the fact that we are imperfect and need God's Holy Spirit to guide us. God enables us to follow His wisdom and learn His ways through the study of His word in the Bible. Praise God for granting us this provision.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The Book of Philemon is a story about a servant named Onesimus, who, having stolen from his master Philemon, met up with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. Upon meeting with Paul, Onesimus' heart was changed by God, and he repented of his former sins. The Book opens with Paul's address to Onesimus, who was obviously a fellow believer and church leader and whom he

called "our beloved brother and fellow worker" (Philemon 1). Today's reading is a portion of Paul's appeal to Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus back.

Second Reading:

Note: Includes verses 11-12 that were omitted from the reading.

> *Philemon 1:9-17 NAS95 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you –since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus– 10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, 11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.*

Paul made a heartfelt appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a "beloved brother" (v. 16) for the sake of love (v. 9). Paul told of how useful Onesimus' ministry had been to him in prison and appealed to Philemon to accept his former servant back because during the time Onesimus had been gone he had become a brother in the Lord. Paul asked Philemon to do so willingly if he "regard[ed] [him] as a partner" and to "accept him as you would me" (v. 17). We know that as a function of Paul's leadership position in the church he could have commanded Philemon to forgive his servant, but rather he asked him to do so without compulsion. We also know from looking past today's reading that Paul promised to pay back anything that Onesimus owed (Philemon 18-19).

Each week in mass when the Lord's prayer is recited, you say these very important words from the Lord Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6:12, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." With this in mind, the big idea in the reading is God's calling to forgive people of their trespasses against them, and especially their Christian brothers and sisters, because of their positions relative to the Lord. Paul's appeal to Philemon provided an excellent illustration of forgiveness in action. Although he appealed to Philemon on the basis of grace (unmerited favor), he also recognized the physical debts incurred by Onesimus and offered to pay for these expenses. Sin

has consequences, and although they can be forgiven, there still may be consequences that have to be taken care of.

I remember one windy morning when I was visiting a friend in Florida to escape the cold up north, I took advantage of a windy day to load up my windsurfing equipment in my friend's very large van to go sailing on the ocean. After we pulled into a parking spot next to a nice retired couple parked there in a nice but older four-door sedan. As I began to open the door, the wind was much stronger than I anticipated. As it came from directly behind the van, the door became a giant sail, propelling itself into this nice couple's very clean-looking car. As I got out to survey the damage, my friend called me something like an idiot, and I got control of the door and spoke to the man about the damage. The door from our van had placed a small dent in his door. I told him how sorry I was and explained that after a short while, to please give me his name and address so I could pay for the repairs. I also left him with my name and address and tried not to let this occasion ruin both of our days. He was very gracious, and although he did give me his address, he seemed quite pleasant about the whole thing. The moment I got home, I sat down and wrote an apology to him and asked him to send me the repair bill. Some weeks later, I got a nice note back from him thanking me and saying that he did not want me to cover any of the repair costs. His compassion deeply moved me and I have always remembered what happened and how gracious he was to me, even though I acted as my friend said, "as an idiot."!

As I have reflected upon the parking lot incident over the years, it has caused me to be more compassionate with other people's mistakes. Jesus said, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37e), foreshadowing the ultimate forgiveness that would come through His offering of Himself on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. This is one of the main "takeaways" that we can walk away with from Paul's message. The more we grow as Christians, the more we learn to forgive others like our Father in heaven has forgiven us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week, we continue in the Gospel of Luke and come to some more difficult passages. Often, we may assume that Jesus' teachings are good moral messages. But again, this week, we move into God's teachings, which demand a response in how we live out our daily lives. The title above this section in my Bible is "The Cost of Discipleship."

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 14:25-33 NAS95 25 Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, 26 "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. 28 For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? 32 Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."*

It's obvious from examining the whole of Scripture that we should not literally hate our father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even ourselves, as this says if taken literally. What Jesus means is that we are called to love him above everyone else, even ourselves. Love plays out through our thoughts and also our actions. Our love for Jesus plays out in a myriad of ways through our daily making of decisions grounded in scriptural principles. The most basic scriptural principles God calls us to keep are the Ten Commandments, even the hard ones from that short list. We can find the entire list of commandments in Exodus chapter 20 in the Old Testament. Turn there yourself and read them as a refresher. Verses 3-5 read, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above, in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord God, am a jealous God." How many times are we tempted to rely upon some physical representation of God to help us feel His presence? But we are commanded not to even make such an object. God in His wisdom knows that we are weak and that to create such a thing would quickly become a stumbling block for us. How far any of us can push this commandment is unknown at least until we begin to go past a point of no return. Yes, we reflect upon the cross in our churches, but we don't worship the cross.

In the next section of Jesus' teaching, he introduces the concept of carrying our own cross. The Scripture is clear in Matthew 11:30 that "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus said outright that the burden of being a disciple wasn't a heavy one, so is he contradicting Himself? Clearly not. What Jesus is saying is explained in the subsequent section, where He tells of the wisdom of a builder to make a plan before he builds a tower and a king planning a battle. Jesus' disciples didn't understand that he would be crucified on a cross, even though He had already told them about this prophecy. When we read this section and hear the word "cross," our mind jumps to Jesus dying on the cross. However, in this context, Jesus referred to what the disciples would have understood about the cross. They would have understood that the cross beam was carried to a

person's own execution. The cost of the cross for that person was their own death, and Jesus was foreshadowing the fact that for many of His disciples, the cost of their cross would be their lives. This remains true in many parts of the world, and especially in the Middle East. Likely, most of us won't have to give our lives for our faith in Jesus. Carrying the cross for Jesus in our lives is a bit more complicated than what God calls us to do for Him through our daily thoughts and actions.

Here is the bottom line: what Jesus is saying is this. Consider the cost of being a disciple in various circumstances in advance so that when these conditions do arise, you will be ready with a well-reasoned response, especially when you have to answer instantly. You may wonder how it could be possible to consider every possible circumstance that might happen. It's not, and the Scripture says in 1 Timothy 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The message again is to be prepared in advance, so when it happens, we are ready. Consider the most common situations that could arise. In today's age, that means confronting the issue of homosexuality, same sex marriage, gay rights, single moms, and divorce – such issues as we should expect to find around us on a given day.

I managed a computer consulting company, and one of my clients was a multi-national telephone company. The manager of a certain department with whom we did about half a million dollars of business a year came to me and asked if I would donate to a charity called the Triangle Foundation. This organization advocates for the gay, lesbian, and transgender community. He never implied that not making this donation would harm our business relationship, but there was, of course, a strong chance that this would happen. What did I do? I searched the Bible and found that it treated homosexuality as a sin, but not necessarily as any greater sin than the other ones listed, including drunkenness, lust, and pride. I liked this particular customer, and he had always been fair with me, but making a donation to a group that advocated a certain sin greatly troubled me. In a sense, I could have been asked to send a donation to a group that supported the rights of men who chose to view pornography. After much discussion with one of the other managers, I prayed about the situation for a long time and decided that we would not make the donation. I decided to tell our customer that we were choosing not to donate, but did not give a reason for our decision. To his credit, the customer did not push the point and dropped the whole matter. A few months later, the employee left the company, which ended the matter. Was this some sort of test that God allowed for me?

As Christians, there will undoubtedly be times during which God will require us to count the cost. Sometimes it may be obvious to us, like if confronted by an Islamic terrorist asking us to deny the Lord Jesus. At other times, it may be less obvious, like paying the repair costs for a car you hit because the wind caught your door, even though it wasn't explicitly your fault. Perhaps you will run into an ethical situation at work.

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Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets" (Luke 6:22-23). Jesus went before us as the extreme example of divine forgiveness. Jesus not only forgave those who sinned against Him but also bore the penalty for their sin. Through His example, we can persevere in our Christian lives to forgive those who sin against us.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of a time when you graciously and boldly forgave an "idiot" in your life? In what ways does knowing how God forgave you of your sins (past, present, and future) help you to forgive others?

2. When was a time that you encountered a situation in which you had to count the cost of being a Christian? How does what you learned from Jesus today help to inform you about your past choice? In light of what you learned, what would you have done differently?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 123: 08-24-2025

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, our first reading is from the final chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah. The passage is prophetic in nature; it touches on events in the last days of God's plan for redemption. The second reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews deals with the challenging subject of discipline and how God uses it in the lives of His children. Finally, we read more about Jesus' teaching ministry as He traveled through Israel. In this passage, He includes some tough lessons that are important for us to understand.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The book of Isaiah is like a small Bible. Chapters 1-39 speak of Israel amid the nations (like the Old Testament, consisting of 39 books in many versions). Chapters 40-66 speak of comfort in the revelation of Christ (like the New Testament's 26 books). This last section begins with John the Baptist, climaxes in chapter 53 about the sacrifice of Christ, and ends with the Millennial Kingdom. Today's portion was written to educate Israel about the distant future of the Messianic Kingdom of God and the ultimate restoration of the nation.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 66:18-21 NAS95 18 "For I know their works and their thoughts; the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory. 19 I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Rosh, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. 20 Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the LORD, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. 21 I will also take some of them for priests and for Levites," says the LORD.*

In these verses, Isaiah moves from speaking of God's judgment upon those unfaithful to Him to announcing a future gathering of all nations. Representatives will come into God's presence and be introduced to His great glory. Then, they will be sent out to the countries of the world that have not known God. Someone has called this the Great Commission for Israel (similar to the Great Commission to the Church in Matthew 28). These "missionaries" will declare the glory of God to the nations.

The result will be a great migration, multitudes coming to Jerusalem, described as "My holy mountain." The text tells us they will come in various ways: "on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and camels." Notably, God will choose some of these new believers to be priests and to be used in serving capacities for God.

One might ask, "When will these things come to pass?" The answer would require a meticulous study of prophetic Scriptures—Old and New Testament texts—to be definitive. The Bible often speaks of a great tribulation in the end times. Many believe it is the saints (believers) who come out of that tribulation period who will be the messengers to bring to God those who had not yet heard of His love and grace and who, as a result of this witness, come into a relationship of faith in God.

No matter the timing of this prophecy, the recurring theme in this passage is God's glory. What is God's glory? "Glory" is difficult to define because it does not represent a concrete object. It means a quality or essence, much like "beauty." God's glory reflects His beauty and perfect nature, manifesting His unique and sought-after presence. Glory is the positive reference to His attractive reputation, which is manifested in who He is and displayed in what He does. We get a sense of God's glory by the loving dynamic within the three persons of the Godhead, with His generous and gracious interaction with humankind (as recorded in Scripture), and in His display of exotic beauty and intricate design in nature (general revelation). God's glory has been on display for all to see in creation, so that Saint Paul says: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His

eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse . . . Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man . . . " (Romans 1:20, 22-23).

Responding to God's glory and living in light of this reality is an integral part of a well-lived life with eternal qualities to it. In the passage of Isaiah, it is the distinct privilege of people to declare His fame and reflect His glory to those who do not know. In our lives, we have the privilege to live for God's fame, and not our daily. We can choose to order our lives around giving glory to God, or we can exchange this opportunity to glorify self, honor the finite things of this world, or value what was created over the Creator Himself. Though the results are not always immediate, this passage reminds us that God's glory is worth pursuing.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The central theme of Hebrews is Christ's preeminence. It involves some fundamental and profound theology and includes efficient ideas about Christian living. In fact, the last three chapters provide valuable teaching about walking in faith (ch. 11), walking with hope (ch. 12), and walking in love (ch. 13). Today's reading provides a helpful lesson about the value and necessity of discipline, which often may be painful but always serves God's good purpose.

Second Reading:

Note: Includes verses 8-10 omitted from the reading.

> *Hebrews 12:5-13 NAS95 5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; 6 FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES." 7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us*

> *for our good, so that we may share His holiness. 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. 12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

The section begins with a reminder that discipline comes from God, and it happens in the lives of all Christians ("every son," v. 6). In fact, the very reality that God disciplines someone proves that person's sonship; he indeed belongs to God, because parents don't discipline someone else's children. It should be noted here that the words in the text express discipline and chastisement, not judgment and punishment. There is a difference.

Most people do not like pain and suffering, and we pray fervently to be rid of them. But, whatever the reason for the pain—whether it's the discipline of God or the consequences of natural infirmities, God can use the suffering for His good purposes. One writer, who has suffered a debilitating disease for many years, wrote:

"If my parents could have stopped me from being afflicted by this disease, they would have. But God didn't, and He's the perfect Father, knowing what will make me a better person. Because of their love, my parents would most likely have insulated me from some of the greatest lessons of life that I could learn only through my suffering. Because of God's love for me, He dare not withhold the pain and suffering."

But why is it necessary for God to discipline His children? What are God's motives? Unfortunately, many of us have been disciplined by an earthly parent out of impatience, sometimes to show us who's boss, or to get us to cooperate with their plan, with no interest in our nurture. Some of the tactics that earthly parents wrongly use are guilt and shame, producing in us a fear of punishment and a surface compliance to the desires of the one with authority. If we view God like our earthly parents, then we have some soul work to do to trust God in the midst of His discipline.

God does not discipline His children to comply begrudgingly or even to get even with the wrongs we have done. God lovingly disciplines His children to help shape a worldview in our hearts that pries our fingers off self-reliance, independence, and autonomous pride; and in exchange, opens our arms to embrace a God-reliant walk with Him. Saint Paul wrote of a time when he was under so much affliction that he even despaired of life itself. As a result of this time of discipline, Paul internalized a deep reliance on God, saying: "We had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not

trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

In our immaturity (just like a child), we do not know how much we need our Father. We often live as if we are in charge and give a quick nod to God when we want to do well on an exam, need a new job, or feel like we are in a bind. But God, in His kindness, knows this is low-level living in Him. Through having the proverbial rug pulled out from underneath us, He helps us to live in light of reality and recognize that we cannot do life on our own. In our disorientation and desolation, we desperately seek God's abiding presence and find our consolation in Him (not in our sense of control or carefully arranged circumstances). We begin to internalize His value system in our soul by living in dependence on Him, which is a "severe mercy" on God's part. God's motive is to bring life that is truly life (John 10:10) to us amid His strategic and loving discipline.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

We hear a lot today about intolerance. We are urged to tolerate almost everyone and everything that someone might believe or do. Moral standards of right and wrong seem to have evaporated in modern society, and common sense has been replaced with personal preference. But, there is a standard; there is a right way, and everything contrary to that must be wrong. Jesus and Christianity are often criticized because of their claim that there is only one way to God. Today's reading emphasizes that truth in the teaching of Jesus Himself, who claimed to be the way (John 14:6).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 13:22-30 NAS95 22 And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem. 23 And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.' 26 Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; 27 and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.' 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out. 29 And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. 30 And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last."*

Luke records essential lessons from Jesus' teaching as the Lord makes His way to Jerusalem, where He is to suffer and die. He had told His disciples about His destiny, although they did not fully understand His plan of salvation until after the promised resurrection. Some had understood His teaching about the necessity to come to God through Him, and one asked Him specifically about it. Are there, he wonders, only a few that will be saved? Jesus answers by describing the entrance to faith as "the narrow door." His further comments can leave no doubt about the exclusiveness of the way to God.

Not all who feel entitled to enter can do so. The "head of the house," no doubt a reference to God the Father, surely has the right to open and close the door to His own house, and knocking on the door will not achieve entrance if you are unknown to the householder. He clarifies that the past physical association with Him (eating and drinking, for example) is insufficient. People also claim they listened to His teaching in their streets, but this is still insufficient. Those entitled to enter are those who enter through the "narrow door." What is this narrow door that Jesus is referring to?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus answers the question by metaphorically referring to himself as the door to the sheepfold. Inside the sheepfold, the sheep are safe and find refuge. He said, "Truly, truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:7-10). It is clear from this and other parts of Scripture (John 14:6, Acts 4:12) that Jesus is the only entry point to eternal life.

It is clear, then, that there is no salvation apart from genuine trust in the grace of Jesus and His finished work on the cross, evidenced by His resurrection. He indeed is the only way to God. Those who reject the opportunity to trust Him will weep and gnash their teeth when they see Israel's fathers and prophets in the kingdom, and they are left out. These words should bring them to repentance so they can "recline at the table in the kingdom of God." The last—the down-and-outers, the ones who do not feel entitled—will be first in the kingdom because they have accepted the lordship of Jesus in their lives.

Reflection Questions

1. The pinnacle of God's glory is displayed in His work of salvation accomplished through Christ's

perfect life, His death, and His resurrection. How has God's glory changed you from pursuing the corruptible things of this finite world to orienting your life around the incorruptible beauty of God's nature? Where do you see God's glory displayed in your life's choices, attitudes, and values? Where would you like to see God's continued work in your life and through your life to reflect His glory?

2. How did your parents discipline you as a child? What tactics/motives reflected the heart of God, and what tactics/motives did not reflect the heart of God? What parts of that experience do you need to exchange to embrace God's loving discipline in your life? What seasons of discipline do you need to revisit in your mind and mentally process with this new perspective of God's heart for internalizing His value system in you? How can this perspective on God's discipline being part of our sonship encourage you and those you love to stay faithful to God amid suffering?

3. Since Jesus spoke metaphorically of entering through the narrow door, what does it mean to do this spiritually? How does this metaphor get lived out in your life? It might require a first-time decision to follow Him if you have never articulated your allegiance to Christ or daily moments of trust to show your allegiance to Him as Lord. What would it be worth to you to recline at the table in the kingdom of God and be with the Old Testament saints for eternity? How might you grow in valuing this eternal reward over short-term gratification that gets in the way of reflecting God's glory?

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

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

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

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

> *and alms atone for sins.*

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

The author greatly contrasts God's covenantal relationship with believers in the Old and New Covenants. The idea expressed is the difference between the terrors of God revealed on Mount Sinai

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

Consider this parable that Jesus gave directly to the Pharisees and the context as you read it. Imagine yourself sitting with Jesus among the Pharisees, a group who strived to please God by observing the Law and holding to their oral traditions. We also need to carefully consider that the reading for this week omitted verses 2-6 in Luke chapter 14. This is unfortunate because these verses very clearly describe the context of Jesus' teaching. The audience also included a man suffering from abnormal body swelling in the missing five verses. The Pharisees proceeded to ask Jesus whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, which was the day all of this took place, Saturday (the Jews' Sabbath was always the last day of the week, not on Sunday as is celebrated by Christians). Jesus responded to their question with a question (as Jesus often did!). He asked the Pharisees what they would do if their child or ox fell into a hole on the Sabbath, would they pull them out immediately? The implied answer is, of course, yes. Anyone knows through pure common sense that you would pull your child or ox out of the hole on the Sabbath Day. Jesus then took hold of the man and healed him, which caused great anger among the Pharisees. They were likely thinking something like, "You just broke the Sabbath Law, and for this lowly scum of a man with a bloated face and who is ceremonially unclean." The question is, what was this man with dropsy even doing there at the prominent Pharisee's house? According to the Law, he would be ruled unclean and unable to enter the temple, but here he was at the home of the prominent Pharisee. Were the Pharisees not already bending their rules to allow this unclean man to be at the meal? Or were they being hypocritical, or was the man able to wander in because of the typical open configuration of the ancient Near Eastern home? The text does not say. Now with this context in mind, let's look at the parable.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 14:1 NAS95 1 It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely.*
> *Omitted Verses:*

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

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

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

To apply today's reading in our lives, we can pray to God to help us see ourselves as servants to those who don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We can ask God to show us how to see ourselves

"washing their dirty feet," helping to heal their sickness, and serving them by praying for them. We can ask God to give us the courage to speak to them about the forgiveness of sins offered only through believing that Jesus Christ died once and for all on the cross for their sins, through a sacrifice that can never be repeated.

Reflection Questions

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 120: 08-17-2025

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, the three readings focus on the persecution of believers and the need to assess our allegiances and alliances with those other than God. We believers should expect persecution because others who walked with God before us experienced these things.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading is the harsh imprisonment of Jeremiah for the second time. This was as a result of the administration's "kill the messenger" approach, as God brought the truth to the southern kingdom of Judah about their certain destruction at the hands of the Chaldeans unless they repented. After he had been held in the dungeon (Jeremiah 37:15-16), King Zedekiah sent for him there. He spoke with him before releasing him to the "court of the guardhouse" (v. 21). In the reading, we will learn about the increasingly harsh treatment given to God's prophet Jeremiah. Reading the text, we understand why Jeremiah became known as the "weeping prophet."

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First Reading:

> *Jeremiah 38:4-10 NAS95 4 Then the officials said to the king, "Now let this man be put to death, inasmuch as he is discouraging the men of war who are left in this city and all the people, by speaking such words to them; for this man is not seeking the well-being of this people but rather their harm." 5 So King Zedekiah said, "Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you." 6 Then they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchijah the king's son, which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud. 7 But Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, while he was in the king's palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. Now the king was sitting in the Gate of Benjamin; 8 and Ebed-melech went out from the king's palace and spoke to the king, saying, 9 "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet whom they have cast into the cistern; and he will die right where he is because of the famine, for there is no more bread in the city." 10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, "Take thirty men from here under your authority and bring up Jeremiah the prophet from the cistern before he dies."*

Zedekiah's ungodly officials advised the king to put Jeremiah to death because of his discouraging words (v. 4). In their wicked eyes, Jeremiah committed treason by supposedly weakening the war against the invading Chaldeans by calling for them to surrender rather than to resist. At this point, the king surrendered Jeremiah into the custody of the "officials," using the term loosely. Once King Zedekiah surrendered his authority over God's prophet, the people, he then took drastic actions against Jeremiah by lowering him into a cistern, an action obviously intended to bring about his death. It took the actions of a Gentile, Ebed-Melech (whose name means "servant of the king"), to bring about Jeremiah's rescue.

There are many parallels between Jeremiah's suffering and that of Jesus during His earthly ministry. Jeremiah, a type of Christ, pointed the way to the future suffering of our Lord Jesus at the hands of the officials of His day. Because they persecuted God and His prophets, we should also expect persecution in our lives when we act against the ungodly officials in our day. Just before his death, Stephen said, "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become" (Acts 7:52).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study of the Book of Hebrews and picks up after the section known as the "Hall of Faith." Today's reading relates to what we read about in Jeremiah concerning hostility against believers of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 12:1-4 NAS95 1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. 4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;*

Taking into account what we learned from chapter 11 ("therefore," v. 1a), we are called to focus upon the ultimate goal of Jesus Christ and forsake our sinful ways (vv. 1-2). We are to do this by using Jesus as our example. By focusing on Jesus' illustration of resisting sin, we too can be faithful in accomplishing God's purposes. However, in the same way that Jesus and the prophets were persecuted, we too should expect to experience trials when we stand up for the things of God. The author of Hebrews makes it abundantly clear that by taking the testimony of Jesus and the great cloud of witnesses into account, we can persist through the inevitable trials that will come upon us. The reading closes by saying that we haven't taken outrageous measures to eliminate sin in our lives (v. 4). This points the way to the subsequent teaching, where the author explains how God brings chastening into the lives of believers because, as sons of God, this correction is for our ultimate good (Hebrews 12:5-11). In the same way God allowed persecution in the life of Jeremiah, He may also allow it in our lives. As we move to the Gospel reading, we will see similar teachings from Jesus on assessing our alliances in light of God's plans for us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke follows a theme I will call "Forsaking allegiances and alliances for Jesus." Jesus was clear that His ministry would be one of division. For John said in the infamous verse regarding the division of the people over Jesus, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). In today's reading we see another of Jesus' 6-6-6 moments, this time in the teaching to His disciples after Peter drew near to him amongst the crowds to ask Him a question. Peter had asked Jesus regarding His telling of the Parable of the

Wedding Feast whether this parable was addressed to just His disciples or to the crowd as a whole. As Jesus was fond of doing, he didn't answer Peter's question directly, but did so by asking another question, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?" (Luke 12:42). Jesus then provided yet another parable about the absent master and the behavior of the slaves while he was away (Luke 12:43-48). Jesus' teaching at this point culminated with an extremely important principle. The punishment of the wicked will be according to the degree of knowledge that the person possessed (v. 48). This was obviously addressed to the Pharisees among the crowd, and Judas the betrayer, who would have been among the twelve disciples. By application, the teaching leading up to today's reading brings with it the idea of everyone's call to exercise godly stewardship of the resources which they have been given. The call to godly stewardship may even involve the forsaking of friends and family for the sake of the Gospel.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 12:49-53 NAS95 49 "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished! 51 Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; 52 for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

In the very first season of the television series *Survivor*, Richard Hatch orchestrated the idea of a voting alliance. The "Tagi Alliance," as it was called, was a brilliant strategy that paved the way for future seasons of the program and showed the necessity of working together to accomplish the impossible in dire conditions. One of the most notable things about an alliance in general and this one in particular is that it excludes members outside of it. As viewers saw in the series, the Tagi Alliance resulted in considerable controversy with non-members as the show played out. In this case, the issue that comes into play is that as the season winds down, the ultimate conclusion requires banishing alliance members from the island. In today's reading, we see how Jesus warned about the dangers of stubbornly clinging to an alliance which, in effect, makes a pledge of allegiance to someone other than God.

Jesus told His disciples, along with a large crowd, how families would be divided from now on because of Him. By application, true followers of Jesus are called to examine their alliances and allegiances and be willing to forsake anything that leads them away from following God's plan for their lives. This may include stepping back from any relationship in which the other person attempts

to lead you astray spiritually while praying for the opening of that person's eyes to the light of the Gospel.

Muslim background believers (MBBs) are one shining example of a group who would readily identify with Jesus' teaching, as well as what we learned about persecution in the first reading. Many MBBs have been forced to forsake their mother and father and even their own lives in order to follow the true teaching found only in the God of the Bible. Some readers of Mass Notes will also be able to identify with Jesus' teaching when they, too, found themselves marginalized or even outright rejected by family members (and others) for their faith in Jesus. All three of today's readings point to a single verse from the second reading in Hebrews. "For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3). God calls us to focus upon Him to the extent that we are willing to assess any alliances or allegiances we may have that call us away from His plan. This may mean leaving the fellowship of a certain church or losing a relationship with a loved one. Through it all, God calls us to never lose our focus upon Him.

Would you be willing to share your testimony for posting about the alliance or allegiance you were forced to break on the website? There is a form you may fill out by following this link.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do the things that happened to Jeremiah in today's reading mirror the Lord Jesus Christ?

2. What is a particular situation in your life in which you felt called by God to break an alliance or allegiance in order to accomplish God's purpose?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 117: 08-10-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we learn about the Hall of Faith in the Book of Hebrews and about Jesus' call to serve Him while He is away in Heaven.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the apocryphal Book of Wisdom. When this was written, during the Intertestamental period (or silent period, as no prophets were active), the Jewish people faced unprecedented opposition from their enemies, including one called Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This evil ruler attempted, much like Adolph Hitler, to annihilate the Nation.

First Reading:

> *Wisdom 18:6-9 The night of the passover was known beforehand to our fathers, that, with sure knowledge of the oaths in which they put their faith, they might have courage. Your people awaited the salvation of the just and the destruction of their foes. For when you punished our adversaries, in this you glorified us whom you had summoned. For in secret the holy children of the good were offering sacrifice and putting into effect with one accord the divine institution.*

The Passover was a momentous event in the early life of the nation of Israel for many reasons. The writer of this reading recorded how the Jews looked back to God's miraculous deliverance of their people from the death angel who "passed over" the Hebrews homes that were marked by the blood of the lamb slain among the families as a sacrificial offering (Exodus 11:4-7, 12:23). During this time of great persecution, the writer looked upon the destruction of their enemies as a way that God showed favor to them, while they were forced to practice the worship of God through the one true religion in secret.

We know from looking back how the blood of the lamb slain during the Passover represented the Ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins. Although God calls us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), many will agree that we don't wish our enemies well if we are honest. We can only achieve this higher calling through God's power, because Jesus has delivered us from our enemies. We have the power of the Holy Spirit of God, who dwells inside of us, something to which the Jews during the time the Book of Wisdom was written could only look forward to (see Exodus 36:27).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The reading from the Book of Hebrews is from the section referred to as the "Hall of Faith" or "Faith Hall of Fame." The reading records the faith-filled events of some very important men and women of the faith. After reading the definition of faith in the first verse, look for repeating patterns in the second section.

Second Reading: The verses (3 – 7) omitted from the reading are set apart below.

> *Hebrews 11:1-2 NAS95 1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the men of old gained approval.*

Omitted:

> *Heb 11:3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. 4 ¶ By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. 7 By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.*
>
> *Hebrews 11:8-19 NAS95 8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. 13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18 it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19 He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.*

Prior to launching into the Hall of Faith, the author defined this significant term, one that we may easily take for granted during the reading of the Bible. They say, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (v. 1). Reread this definition: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." As Christians, we understand intuitively that the context of faith is God. However, faith isn't an object in itself; rather, the object of faith is God, for having spiritual faith in anyone but God is vain. Nonbelievers may say, "I have faith that I will get through this," and then rather be guided by their circumstances than God, although God is sovereign

over all people and events in the world.

The second section of today's reading begins with, "For by it the men of old gained approval," and then moves to use the repeated phrase, "by faith [name]" followed by a commendation of the person's faith-filled actions. In the omitted verses, we see that this follows the general chronology of the Bible, beginning first with Abel (v. 4), then Enoch (v. 5), and Noah (v. 7). The reading then moves to the person known as the "father of faith," Abraham, in verse 8. Saint Paul affirmed this commendation of Abraham in Romans 4:16. Although we see that Abraham certainly wasn't the first to walk by faith in God, he, along with his wife, was the one to whom God dedicated a substantial section for commendation in the Hall of Faith. The first portion of verse 8 reads, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by…" The subsequent verses chronicle his and Sarah's faithful actions, including leaving his known land to go to an unknown place. In verse 17, we see how Abraham passed, perhaps the ultimate test of his faith, by his willingness to offer up his one and only son as a sacrifice to God. This example of faith lived out by Abraham closely parallels God's willingness to offer His Son Jesus on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. In Abraham's case, God stopped short of requiring the ultimate sacrifice of Isaac by providing the lamb himself for the sacrifice. However, we know that in the case of Jesus, God provided the ultimate sacrifice through the sacrifice of His one and only Son. We read in the Book of John, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

So much can be said about the reading that concludes with, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises" (v. 13a). How faithful were the men and women of God by following what He told them to do, but without them ever receiving the promises that He made to them! The "Hall of Faith" is a testimony of how we, as men and women of the faith, are also called to walk by faith in God's promises without expecting to see the ultimate answers during our natural lives. God calls us to walk in faith the same way the people in the biblical examples did, not just the ones listed in today's reading. We do this by understanding God's promises to us and walking by taking both baby steps and even giant steps of faith as we sense God's calling. God may call us to leave the land we know and proceed to a place we are unfamiliar with. Or he may contact us to take lesser steps, such as caring for the needy or praying for others. When we doubt our faith, we can turn to this section of the Book of Hebrews to see how those before us obeyed God and were commended. We can expect that if we obey God, we will one day be commended by God in our own "Hall of Faith."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The second reading from Luke concerns the subject of readiness. Here, we will see how Jesus calls us disciples of Him to be ready for His imminent return by accomplishing the works that He has given us.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 12:32-48 NAS95 32 Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 35 Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. 36 Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. 38 Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 39 But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 40 You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect." 41 Peter said, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" 42 And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. 44 Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 45 But if that slave says in his heart, 'My master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; 46 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers. 47 And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, 48 but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.*

Jesus called His disciples to fulfil the greater kingdom purposes for their lives by seeking first the kingdom of God as reflected in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:33). He told the disciples that the place on which they focus their investment reveals the true condition of their hearts (v. 34). Next, He provides them with a parable concerning a master who left his servants in charge while he was away (vv. 36 – 40). In the case of this parable, the Lord Jesus uniquely provides the interpretation of it before and after the giving of the parable itself. His disciples are to be ready for the imminent return of their master, even though they do not know when he will return. By application, this means that as believers, we are to be accomplishing the works of our Father God,

even though we do not know when Jesus will return.

The second section of the reading proceeds along the same line of reasoning, but using an example with a contrast between a godly servant waiting for the return of his master (vv. 42 – 43), contrasted with that of an ungodly one who beat his slaves and got drunk while waiting (vv. 45 – 48). The application of these verses is that nonbelievers who commit great sins will be punished less than nonbelievers who commit great ones. All believers are totally forgiven of their sins through the finished work of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:14). However, applying the reading as a whole doesn't just apply to nonbelievers, as we see in the concluding verse. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (v. 48d-ff). The big idea is that God calls all people to exercise godly stewardship of the gifts that He has given them. As people in the unique small set of believers (Matthew 7:13), we are to live with patient expectation that God could return at any instant while going about accomplishing the things that God has asked us to do. First and foremost, this means completing the Great Commission, making disciples and teaching them all things (Matthew 28: 16-20).

Reflection Questions

1. How would memorizing the author of Hebrews' definition of faith in God help you combat future weaknesses in your own faith? "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." How does reading the Hall of Faith help you through these same weaknesses?

2. How does understanding the gifts that God has given you help you exercise better stewardship of the things in your life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 114: 08-03-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we begin with a reading from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, written by Solomon, king of Israel and the wisest man of his time. Although God inspires it, as is all Scripture–it is written from the perspective of a frustrated man seeking answers to life's hard questions. The second reading is from Paul's epistle to the early church in Colossae. Its theme is the Christian life centered in Jesus Christ and how that is lived out in everyday life. Finally, we look again at the Gospel of Luke and hear Jesus speak about the dangers of human greed.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Ecclesiastes is a hard book for many readers to understand because, at times, it seems to support ideas contrary to other biblical teachings. For example, "There is a time to kill" (3:3). Context is all-

important in interpreting Scripture, so we must remember that the author, though the wisest of all men, is looking at life from a purely secular perspective. He uses the expression "under the sun" more than two dozen times in the book.

First Reading:

> *Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 NAS95 1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."*
> *Ecclesiastes 2:21-23 NAS95 21 When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. 22 For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? 23 Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.*

The authorship of this book is made clear from the very beginning. He is the third king of Israel, under whom the nation reached the pinnacle of its world prominence, especially regarding wealth. God had spoken to Solomon on at least two occasions and asked him what he wanted. Solomon asked not for riches or fame but for wisdom, and God granted his request (1 Kings 3:5-12). And it was Solomon who built the temple for God to dwell in by His Shekinah Glory.

To read the exploits of Solomon is to discover a man of great talent, having written three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs (1 Kings 4:32). He failed to keep his promises to God, however, and he took numerous foreign wives and accumulated thousands of horses in direct disobedience to God's commands. As a result, Solomon questions life's realities. What is life all about? What is its purpose? What good is it for a man to work hard when he gains little and cannot rest?

Today's reading records those questions and the completely unsatisfactory answers in Solomon's judgment. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity," he writes. Another translation of this conclusion is "Completely meaningless! Everything is meaningless." We must remember, however, that this is not the end of all things. Solomon concludes this writing by acknowledging that his search "under the sun" has produced nothing, but a lesson must be learned. He writes, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind (12:13). Today, then, despite the apparent hopelessness of life sometimes, we are to keep God's commandments. That will give us the peace that Solomon was searching for.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Whenever a paragraph begins with the word "therefore," you must ask what has preceded and how it relates to what follows. As a consequence of what Paul has taught in Chapters 1 and 2, the believer should follow the instructions he is about to give. In other words, because the Christian recognizes that Jesus is God in the flesh (2:9), has "received Jesus as Lord" (2:6), and has been "made alive with Christ (2:13), he or she does not need to submit to the rules of the world that are controlled by Satan and his evil system (2:20).

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 6 – 8, which were omitted from the reading, are included below.

> *Colossians 3:1-11 NAS95 1 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. 5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. 6 For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, 7 and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, 10 and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him– 11 a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.*

Instead of following the worldly way, the believer is to have a different motivation. The Christian has been raised with Christ and is to "keep seeking the things above" (3:1). His incentives should be spiritual, inspired from above, not worldly. Believers are to focus on "things above not on the things … on the earth (v. 2). The apostle uses the phrase, "set your mind," which reminds us of what he wrote in Romans 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters . . . Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (verses 1-2). It's a matter of the mind—what we think. Instructions like this have less to do with emotion and more with sound thinking and proper conduct.

How is all this possible? Paul makes it clear that the believer "has died" (to sin), his life is "hidden with Christ in God," and one day Christians will be "revealed with Him in glory." It begins with acknowledging these facts as accurate, considering our bodies dead to the evils that the writer lists (v. 5). Paul recognizes, as the Christian will, also, that we once walked in such sinful behavior. Still, now we are to put off all those sinful traits.

Since Christians are part of the body of Christ, the church, they must put off sinful behavior and put on the new characteristics of the believer who is born again of God and has a new nature. Paul concludes this portion of the reading by reminding us that when men and women come into a relationship with Jesus Christ by faith, they join a host of believers whose prior differences are of no significance now. The family of God is distinct in itself, but it no longer involves ethnic origins, religious distinctions, social positions, or any such differences. We are all in Christ, and He is the center of all things and the head of the body.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Jesus was speaking to a large crowd, "many thousands," the text says (Luke 12:1). He speaks first to His disciples, warning them about impending dangers. Even though there will be some who will try to kill them, they are not to fear because they belong to God. He encourages them to realize that God cares for every sparrow and that they are much more precious to Him than the birds. As Jesus was telling them what would occur, He was interrupted by a request from the crowd. It's a personal concern that Jesus addresses and uses to teach essential principles about possessions and greed.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 12:13-21 NAS95 13 Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." 14 But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." 16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. 17 And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' 21 So is the man who stores up treasure for*

himself, and is not rich toward God."

The request: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Without responding to the specific request, Jesus uses it as a springboard to reveal real-life principles that are not widely recognized or practiced (either in His day or today). Good teachers, by the way, will wisely take such opportunities to launch a lesson with much broader application than the personal request or the question of an individual inquirer.

Jesus begins by saying, "Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." Then, as He often did, Jesus tells a parable, a story, to illustrate His point. He tells about a rich man who could think only of how to accumulate more riches and how to hoard them. He felt that he would then be able to enjoy a life of ease and plenty. The rich man's plight sounds a lot like many of our 21st-century citizens in more affluent countries. To look at the size of people's houses and their overflowing garages, one might think that Jesus was wrong. "Stuff" does seem to be of great importance. Yet, as the Broadway play says, "You Can't Take It With You." So, we should consider our spiritual condition more than the abundance of things we own.

Jesus went on to share the climax of the story. God intervenes in the rich man's life and enlightens him—and us—of the insignificance of life if it is all wrapped up in what we have. There are two dire consequences of the rich man's plan. First, he has not thought of the future in eternal terms. His soul is lost forever. Second, he has not considered his possessions in terms of their actual value. What happens to them when he's gone? Perhaps we should also recognize that he did not consider how those possessions could be used for wider benefit than his enjoyment.

Jesus concludes, applying the lesson to all his hearers (and readers of the text today): "The man who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God" is doomed, as was the rich fool. So, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21).

Reflection Questions

1. What are one or two ways you are storing up treasure **on earth** for yourself? In what ways does

Jesus' teaching inform your heart as a defense against this?

2. What are one or two ways in which you are actively storing up treasure **in heaven**?