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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-11-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **9-11-2016**. This week in the first two readings we find some very important insights into the nature of God. This then helps us to come to a proper understanding of the Gospel lesson.

Last week we looked at the Gospel of Luke and I gave some insights into what it meant to carry our cross for Jesus. I mentioned that God says, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). One aspect of what Jesus meant when he said in this context to "keep his commandments" is related to the First Commandment. This can be found Exodus 20 which says, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . ." (Exodus 20:3-5a). God through his great love and foreknowledge cautions us regarding the risks in even creating an image of a spiritual nature because this could lead us to attribute special powers to that purely physical object. This is exactly what we will see in the first reading when during the time that Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Law from God the people built a golden calf idol to worship.

Introduction to the First Reading:

This reading is from Exodus and the context is during that 40 days that Moses spent on the mountain when God was giving him the Law. Since Moses was gone for such a long time the people

returned to their former pagan worship practices that they had learned during their last four centuries in Egypt.

First Reading:

Exodus 32:7-14 NAS95 7 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" 9 The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. 10 Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

In the introduction we mentioned how the First Commandment comes into view with the people building a molten calf and worshiping it. From my study of archeology, it is very possible that this was what was known as a "pedestal god" which featured a platform on the top of the icon onto which the god supposedly alighted. Giving them the benefit of a doubt along this line of thinking it's at least possible that their motives were to worship the true God Yahweh. However, we learn from the reading that God knew otherwise for He said the people have "quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them" (v. 8). Regardless of the people's motives their actions were a clear violation of the Commandment previously given to them. God's response was to ask Moses to move away so that "My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them" (v. 10). But Moses pleaded with the Lord on the basis of His special covenantal relationship with them and He relented. The people were those "whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt" and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom God "swore by [Him]self [saying], "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever" (vv. 11b, 13).

Moses' plea for mercy, brought about because of the people's violation of the First Commandment, gives us some insight into the nature of God. Moses reminded God of what he did for the Hebrews by bringing them out of Egypt. He asked God to remember his faithful servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then recounted God's promise to make them a people as "numerous as the starts in the sky" and to give them the Promised Land. God's dialogue with Moses showed that the Father is longsuffering (patient), forgiving of sin, and will never forget his promises (mark this for later in the

study). God cannot act against His nature.

The purpose of Moses' reminder wasn't of course for God, but for us! Moses' insights about the nature of God help us to understand our Father God and this understanding guides us in interpreting the rest of the Scripture. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 regarding the church there, "and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the **wrath** to come " (emphasis added). God forgives our sin and placates His wrath only through what Jesus did for us in dying for our trespasses. Our sins are many and include our worship of *contemporary* idols like money, sports, and etc. Perhaps we don't fall down before a golden calf but we do fall down when circumstances arise in our finances or our health.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Paul's First Letter to Timothy. The context is just after Paul's mention of the dangerous teaching of the false teachers who had made inroads in the church. 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, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith" (1 Timothy 1:3-4).

Second Reading:

1 Timothy 1:12-17 NAS95 12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Saint Paul said in the reading, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I was the foremost. But for that reason I was mercifully treated" (emphasis added). Then, "so that in me, as the foremost [of sinners], Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in Him for everlasting life" (emphasis added). We can see in the reading wo insights into the nature of God. God is merciful. God saves sinners, even the worst of them – as Paul expressed about himself. Why did Paul think that he was the worst of sinners? This was because he persecuted believers in the church to the point of death until his conversion. He understood God's mercy. Finally, God is patient. He goes to great lengths to deliver people from the consequences of their sin.

In the Gospel reading we will see these attributes of God beautifully illustrated, with His patience

and mercy displayed through three parables.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel for today consists of three parables, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (prodigal son). Our emphasis today will be on the last one although one can easily see that the three parables share a common theme. Remember that all three parables in this section were addressed to the Pharisees, the group that we saw this past two Sundays. The Pharisees were a group of Jews that held to a strict interpretation of the Law of Moses. They were legalistic, false teachers who more concerned with outside appearances than with having a heart for pleasing God through faith. They loved money more than they love people (Luke 16:4).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." 11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and

has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

The first two parables concern the celebration that occurs when something that is lost is found. The meaning of these parables is the same and is revealed in verse 7. "[T]here will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Human souls are of tremendous value and all are born into a lost state of sinfulness at birth (Romans 3:23). It is only when souls are "found" by being "born from above" (John 3:3) that they are then transferred into the kingdom of God. Paul said about this, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).

The third parable of the prodigal son begins with the younger son approaching his father and asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive. Though he was the younger son he could still could plan on receiving some inheritance but not as much as the firstborn son, and then only *after* his father died. So we could say that in some way when he asked his father for his inheritance he was wishing that he was already dead. The fact that his father went ahead and gave him the reward shows the father's great generosity. Then his father let his son go off and "find himself" through wild living in a strange nation, evidently not a Jewish nation because they raised pigs. The father's act of letting his son go shows that the father also allows freedom to his son. Soon enough the son had squandered all of his money and became a slave by "hiring himself out." In today's terms we would call this an indentured servant, but the New Testament would use the term "slave." After squandering his money as a slave to sin the prodigal son became a slave on a hog farm. Even the touching of a hog would have been forbidden back in his home city under Jewish Law. Then the son reached a turning point, something that is known by the theological term "repentance." Since he was already a slave and wasn't being treated even with the basic necessity of food he figured that he would return to his father and become a slave for him so that at least he would have enough to eat. Also he knew the character of his father and that he could trust him as he worked there in contrast to the swine farm owner who didn't even provide him with any food. So the son began his return to his father and this opened the next chapter of the story.

When the son returned his father saw him in the distance and embraced him. But the son evidently had been rehearsing what he was going to say and quickly offered his heartfelt confession. Certainly the father heard this but went on with the festivities of welcoming home his lost son. Just

like in the other parable the lost sheep was found, the lost coin was located and this was cause for celebration! In the midst of the festivities a wrinkle developed when the older son heard the commotion. This elder one expressed deep resentment for his younger brother, and told his father that he had always done the right thing. It seemed unfair to him that his brother should receive a party for returning after blowing his inheritance while he had diligently sacrificed all of these years. The father's reply sheds light on the depth of God's love, mercy, and patience. "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

The key players in the parable are obvious only to a person whose heart has been enlightened to the truths of God. The father is God the Father. Earlier in the study we found that the Father is longsuffering (patient), forgiving of sin, and will never forget his promises (to care for his family). The older son represents the Pharisees. The Pharisee like son didn't trust God's heart and instead saw God as miserly and not generous. The older son missed out on relationship with God yet he was living under the umbrella of His provision. This eldest son believed he was righteous through his good works and sacrifice. As a result of all of his false beliefs he built a heart of resentment and entitlement against his father as well as his younger brother. The youngest son represents a believer in Jesus Christ who trusts in the provision of his Father. He, like all true believers before and after him, express a heart of brokenness, desperation for God and humility.

The big idea in this parable is God is a lavishly forgiving God who goes to great lengths to save people. God gives people freedom to make mistakes but continues to reach out with his grace ready to bring repentant people back to his kingdom. In contrast the Pharisees have self-righteousness at the root of their beliefs. This leads to legalism in which they focus upon the letter of the law but not on the spirit of the law, thus missing relationship with the father. Legalism looks at outward standards of behavior without addressing the heart's motivation. Jesus warns that we can have all of the right religious terminology without the right heart attitude towards him when he said in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Which son are you more like? Where have you placed your faith? Have you stopped depending upon your own righteousness and confessed your need to the Father of His mercy? Or do you identify with the older brother, the Pharisee, who always did everything "right" in this life and yet distanced himself from needing the mercy of the Father? Saint John said in 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." If you are in the former category praise God for what He has done for you. If you are not sure then reach out to God for He is a longsuffering God, patient, wishes that none would perish but all would come to the knowledge of the truth. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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1. This week's readings from the Bible highlighted God's heart of mercy, patience and forgiveness. How have you experienced these attributes in your own relationship with God?

2. Do you have a prodigal son in your family or know of one among your friends or relatives? Is their story one of redemption or are they still working as a slave for a pig farmer as in the Gospel lesson today? What can you learn from this prodigal person?

Readings for the Week

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/091116.cfm

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 132

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Keywords:

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-6-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **3-6-2016**. This week we open with a reading from Joshua. The successor to Moses, Joshua was one of only two of the original multitude that left Egypt who entered the Promised Land. The conquest of the land was accomplished under his leadership with victories, defeats, and noted events. The Apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth is the source for the second reading. These verses reveal God's wonderful plan of reconciliation (a big theological term) in its twofold aspect: for ourselves and through us for others. The final reading from Luke's Gospel includes stories of losses, a sheep, a coin, and a wayward son. The emphasis is on what we refer to as the "Prodigal Son." From all three readings we can learn a lot about God and His loving relationship with His people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first five books of the Bible are sometimes referred to as Law. The sixth book introduces the historical books, capturing the continuing story of Israel from their entrance into the Promised Land (under General Joshua) to their captivity and removal from the Land. In this first history book, Israel is taken into the Land, experiences ultimate victory (with significant defeats along the way), and comes into a period of rest. Chapters 1-4 detail the crossing of the Jordan River and the initial arrival in the land of Canaan. Today's reading reports on a divine encounter with God and the renewal of certain rituals.

First Reading:

Joshua 5:9-12 NAS95 9 Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. 10 While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the

produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year.

God appears to Joshua in this passage to encourage him. Having completed the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Joshua is fully aware that only he and Caleb were among the original emigrants from Egypt. The long wilderness journey was as a result of the sin and disobedience of God's people, particularly their refusal to enter the Land when they first arrived there. What a tragedy! Literally hundreds of thousands of Israelites died on the journey. God in verse 2 seems to be telling Joshua that now the reproach of Egypt's opposition and the sin of the people were all in the past. The name "Gilgal" in the Hebrew language sounds like "roll." So their formal reproach was rolled off. This was a new, fresh start for His people.

Two startling events occur next. First, the people observe Passover. The Passover celebration is a vivid reminder of the deliverance of the people from Egypt. You can read about it in Exodus 12. God sent the death angel to kill the firstborn of the Egyptian families and their cattle. The Israelites were *passed over* if they splashed a bit of the blood of a slain lamb on the door posts and lintels of their houses. It's a magnificent illustration of the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus would make as the Lamb of God when He gave His life for the salvation of all who will by faith accept His work on their behalf and commit their lives to Him.

The second startling event occurred on the very next day. You will recall that for their entire wilderness journey, the people were provided manna (and later quail) for their daily food. It was a marvelous provision for the people, but how tedious it must have been to have the same diet day after day after day! So, here the people are finally in the Promised Land that was said to be a land of "milk and honey." On this day they were able to eat of the fruit of the land they were given. After that, the manna ceased, and from then on they could enjoy the produce of their new homeland.

How wonderful is God's provision for those who trust Him! More than mere physical food, He offers a personal relationship with Him that is made possible by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Trust Him!

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians dealt with numerous problems that had arisen in the young church: disunity, sin, false teaching, to name a few. This second letter, in part, is a defense of his apostleship, for there were some who questioned his authority. He also writes to encourage the faithful and to strengthen their faith. The earlier portion of chapter 5 includes important teaching regarding the trials of life now for the Christian but the wonderful expectation for the future. Although we may struggle and ultimately die, he notes that "to be away from the body [is to be] at home with the Lord" (v. 8). Then today's passage takes us into some deep but precious truths.

Second Reading:

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 NAS95 17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Paul's statement that anyone in Christ is "a new creature" is astounding! He goes on to explain why that is true. The person who is "in Christ" is one who has confessed Jesus as lord and has by faith accepted His finished work on the cross as sufficient to cover his sin and make him right with God. Elsewhere Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." So, the believer is not only "in Christ," but Christ is in him. The born-again Christian (John 3:3) discovers that the things of his old life are no longer of dominant interest. Everything is seen in a new light; everything has changed.

As mentioned earlier, the next verses reveal God's wonderful plan of reconciliation (a big theological term) in its twofold aspect: for ourselves and through us for others. The term is more easily understood if we think of the frequent practice of reconciling our bank statement. The bank reports our balance is X number of dollars, but our checkbook may show a different number. We have to bring those figures into balance; that's called reconciliation. Verses 19 and 20 tell us how it has happened when we are reconciled with God. He did it through Christ. We had a debt to pay because of our sin. ("All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul wrote in Romans 3:23). Jesus paid that debt by accepting the punishment due us and satisfying God's demand for justice, so that he is "not counting [our] trespasses against [us]." So, we can be reconciled with God when we accept God's gracious provision.

Paul continues to show us that, having been reconciled to God, we now have the responsibility of taking that message of reconciliation to those who have not yet been restored to God by faith. He says that message has been "committed" to us. In fact, he calls us "ambassadors for Christ." When we share God's truth with others, we are officially representing God; we are authorized and commissioned to do so. It is not a responsibility we can shirk or take lightly.

The final statement in today's reading is mind-boggling. The whole matter of reconciliation (or salvation in the broader sense) is because of the willingness of Jesus to "be sin on our behalf." It's beyond human imagination: the perfect, sinless, holy Son of God, who experienced life as we do but without sin, was willing to take our sin, bear it and its penalty for us so we can experience God's righteousness. If you have not yet accepted this gracious gift of God, do so now and begin living as that new creature he spoke of earlier.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Luke 15 includes three parables, all about lost things. Parables are stories with familiar images and characters that illustrate important truths—truths that are made clear by the telling of a simple story. Often, no interpretation is necessary; the application is obvious. At other times Jesus uses parables that are understood by His disciples but are not clear to hearers who are not sincerely looking for truth. Note that in this instance, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining that Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them." They were the audience that Jesus taught using these three stories.

Gospel Reading:

Note: Verses 4 – 10 that were omitted from the reading are included below for context.

Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying,

4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 "Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 "And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' 20 "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 "And the son said to him,

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 "But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

The first parable is simple to understand. For a shepherd to lose one of his flock is disastrous. He will go to almost any length to find that single sheep. When he finds it, he rejoices and calls his friend together to rejoice with him. Jesus makes an interesting application to the story. He likens it to the rejoicing in heaven when a single sinner repents and is reconciled to God.

The second story has a very similar concluding statement: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." In this story a woman has lost one of her ten coins, perhaps the total of all her assets. Like the shepherd, she goes on a serious search, checking every nook and cranny of her house until she finds the missing coin. She, also, calls her friends to come and celebrate the find.

One can readily conclude from these two stories that God is in the search-and-rescue business. As Peter put it, God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). All of heaven's beings rejoice when a rescue is successful and a lost one repents and returns to God. But Jesus tells one more story, this one in great detail that emphasizes God's great love for a lost one. It is commonly referred to as the story of The Prodigal Son.

The reader is probably familiar with the story. The younger of two sons asks his father for his inheritance. He doesn't give a reason, but the succeeding events indicate that he wanted out from the confining influences of home so he could live life as he wanted to. Surprisingly, perhaps, the father gives him what he asks and does the same for his older brother who remains at home and continues his usual life working the homestead with the father. The younger son goes far from home geographically and in every other sense, as well. He spends his inheritance in "loose living," wasting it all on his selfish desires. His dream of fun and fulfillment was burst by his wastefulness that became acute in the midst of a famine in the land he had fled to. Life became a nightmare, and he was disgraced to take a job feeding pigs (exceedingly distasteful to faithful Jews).

"When he came to his senses," he realized that the servants at his father's house had it much better than he was experiencing life, so he vowed to return home, humble himself, and beg to live as a servant. Apparently, he had come to a full appreciation of what he had lost and that it was his own sinful pride, greed, and desire for the "good life" that had brought him down to the gutter. We can't be sure about what he expected of his father. Surely, he hoped for acceptance back onto the farm as a lowly servant, but he probably would not have anticipated the response of his father to his return.

What follows is an amazing illustration of the unfathomable love and grace of God. It seems that the father had been on the lookout for his son, and he hastened to greet him, to welcome him, and to present him with multiple tokens of his love and forgiveness. And like the first two stories, a celebration follows the son's return, and there are a banquet, gifts, forgiveness, and rejoicing. Oh, but there's a catch—not everyone rejoices. Now we are re-introduced to the elder son, who, perhaps, is the real prodigal. He has been faithful in his work for the father, but apparently, his heart is not open to receive or forgive his brother. The elder brother had enjoyed his home and work, and he had his inheritance. Why should he be upset? Why couldn't he rejoice at the return of his brother? Perhaps Jesus was drawing a verbal picture of some in His audience that day. Was He thinking of the Pharisees and scribes, who like the older brother were deceived in their own self-righteousness?

The three parables clearly illustrate the value of every human being. Like the sheep, the coin, and the son, God highly values the lost ones, and he deeply loves those who have not yet repented and accepted His gracious offer to reconcile them to Himself.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. With which of the sons in the story of the prodigal son do you identify with most, the elder or the prodigal himself? Why?

2. How do you feel about the reaction of the father upon the return of his youngest son? Do you feel that the youngest go what he deserved, or what he didn't deserve? In what ways does the father's love for his son(s) emulate the characteristics that we see of God the Father in the Scriptures?

Readings for the Week

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/030616-fourth-sunday-lent.cfm

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday 7-12-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-12-2015**. This week we open with Amos 7: 12-15 as Amos, a simple farmer, is called by God to prophesy in Israel. Then we move to Ephesians 1:3-14 where Paul explains all the blessings that are available to those who are in Christ. Finally we conclude with Mark 6: 7-13. Here Jesus sends out His disciples to minister and instructs them to trust God for their daily needs as they call people to repentance.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Imagine you are an ordinary farmer, minding your own business, tending your sheep and your crops. Suddenly God commands you to go to a neighboring land and pronounce judgment on its rebellious people. No one wants to be the bearer of bad news. Yet sometimes God called men to be prophets, foretelling God's plan and delivering God's words of warning and judgment. God's intention was never to simply punish people. His ultimate desire was to restore His wayward children back to Himself. Amos, however, was not a prophet, nor even the son of a prophet. He was simply a farmer trying to make a living in Judah during the time of the divided kingdom.

You may remember that the twelve tribes of Israel were divided into two kingdoms due to the sin of King Solomon. Ten tribes became the Northern Kingdom and were collectively called Israel. The remaining two tribes made up the Southern Kingdom and were known as Judah. In a strange twist, God called this farmer from Judah to go to Israel and prophesy against them.

At first, Amos pronounced God's judgment on Israel's enemies. No one objected to that. But then he began to recite the sins of Israel. Amos first reminded them of all God had done for them. He had released them from bondage in Egypt, defeated their enemies, given them land, and raised up prophets among them. Yet Israel rebelled. It wasn't that they had completely forgotten God. They still performed their religious rituals. But while claiming to belong to God, Israel oppressed the righteous, deprived the poor of justice, worshipped idols, and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

Religious ritual unaccompanied by love for God and concern for the oppressed does not impress God. He despised Israel's religious hypocrisy. When He used His plumb line (standard of holiness) to evaluate Israel, her crookedness was revealed. Amos warned them that God's judgment would surely come. Their king Jeroboam would die by the sword, and Israel would be taken captive by its enemy.

In the First Reading, Amaziah, a priest of Israel who should have been open to the message of the Lord, instead commanded Amos to cease prophesying and go home. Though Amos conceded he was a farmer and not a prophet, he knew God had called him to prophesy. He would prove faithful to that call despite opposition.

First Reading:

Amos 7:12-15 NAS95 12 Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Go, you seer, flee away to the land of Judah and there eat bread and there do your prophesying! 13 "But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence." 14 Then Amos replied to Amaziah, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. 15 "But the LORD took me from following the flock and the LORD said to me, 'Go prophesy to My people Israel."

We are prophets in a sense, bringing God's message of salvation to those around us. This message is a mixture of bad news and good news. The wages of our sin is death, St. Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, and if we continue in our rebellion against God, we will surely die. That is very bad news. But the good news is in that same verse: "*…the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord*." God has called each one of us to bear this news to the whole world. Will we be faithful to the call?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

I enjoyed visiting Moody Bible Institute in Chicago when my daughter Emily was a student there. Because Moody is located near the center of one of the largest cities in America, the security on campus is tight, especially in the areas where students live and hang out. Students carry a pass card that allows them access to all the restricted areas. I was an outsider there, but as long as I was with Emily I could enjoy free access to all the college offered: I could visit the dorms, go to chapel,

attend classes, eat in the cafeteria, and have coffee at Joe's Coffee Shop. Nothing was kept from me as long as I was with Emily. Without her, I would be on the outside separated from the rich experience Moody offers. I could claim no right to these blessings. But as long as I was with her, all the blessings that were hers were mine, too.

Abundant blessing and privilege exists in the spiritual realm, but in ourselves, we have no right to it. Without Christ, we are on the outside and without hope. In the Second Reading Paul tells the church in Ephesus that God's plan from the foundation of the world was to include them (and us) in these great blessings.

As you read the Second Reading, notice the richness of these spiritual blessings which can be ours in abundance. Note the words *every, all, riches, lavished, fullness.* Observe the words that indicate how intentional God was to bless us—*He chose us, He predestined us, He purposed, according to the kind intention of His will.* And notice how many times the words *in Christ* are used for it is only through Christ that we have access to His abundant blessings.

Second Reading:

Ephesians 1:3-14 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. 13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Can you fathom the blessings that are ours in Christ?

v. 5 adoption as sons – When we trust in Christ and His death on the cross for us, we become members of God's family with all the rights and privileges of adult sons.

v. 7 *redemption through His blood* – Redemption has the idea of buying someone from the slave market and setting them free. We were slaves to sin, but God paid the price for us by sending

Jesus to die in our place. He has purchased us with His blood and set us free to serve Him.

v. 7 *the forgiveness of our trespasses* – We don't deserve forgiveness, but this is evidence of His abundant grace which He lavishes upon us.

v. 11 *an inheritance* – This is ours because in Christ we have been made a child of God. This inheritance, St. Peter explains in 1 Peter 1:4, "is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you."

v. 13 *sealed with the Holy Spirit* –We are sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit who comes to live in every believer. Our position in Christ is secure.

St. Paul explains the *pass card* that gives us access to God's abundant blessings:

"…after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14)

We hear the message of salvation, we believe it, and are saved and sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Christ's standing before God is our standing, His inheritance is our inheritance, and His riches are our riches. God lavished them on us, because we are in Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Jesus sent out the 12 disciples two by two as His representatives and under His authority. Their mission was a spiritual one. They would be taking the good news of Jesus to the lost. Naturally Satan and his demons would be opposing them at every turn, but Jesus gave his disciples power over these dark spiritual forces.

The disciples were to take nothing for their journey—no food, money, or extra clothing. Commentators have posed three reasons for what seems to us a strange command. First, extra possessions are an encumbrance. We have probably all experienced times when, instead of owning our possessions, they owned us. Our possessions require care and maintenance, consuming time and money and distracting us from more important matters of life. Are my possessions being used to serve God or are they distracting me from ministry? The disciples were to take nothing extra that could encumber them.

Second, the disciples were to go out in complete dependence on God's power and provision. One of the hallmarks of Jesus' life on earth was that He lived in complete dependence upon the Father (John 5:19, 5:30, 7:16). The disciples were to do likewise, depending on God for their daily provisions.

And third, Jesus established the principle that the minister of God is to be supported by the people to whom he ministers. It was appropriate for the disciples to enjoy the hospitality and provision of the ones who were receiving the blessings of their ministry.

If a city or household rejected the disciples and their message, the disciples were to shake the dust off the soles of their feet as they left. *Jews sometimes shook the dust off their clothing when returning from Gentile lands as a sign of contempt.** When the disciples did it, it was a sign of judgment. The disciples' message of salvation was often accompanied by miracles. Rejecting the message in the face of supernatural authentication indicated an intractable heart. Those who rejected the disciples were ultimately rejecting the One who sent them. And when people reject Jesus, they are rejecting the only provision for their sin. By shaking the dust off their feet, the disciples were communicating a warning: *We offered you what you needed for salvation, but you turned it down. The responsibility for your sins remains on your shoulders. Judgment is coming. We have nothing more to offer you.*

It is a moment none of us would want to face. And we don't have to if we repent and believe.

*https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/reformation-study-bible/Matt.10.14-Matt.10.15

Gospel Reading:

Mark 6:7-13 NAS95 7 And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; 8 and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff–no bread, no bag, no money in their belt– 9 but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." 10 And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. 11 Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." 12 They went out and preached that men should repent. 13 And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Which of the blessings listed in Ephesians 1 are you most thankful for and why?

2. If God were to send you out to minister, which of your possessions would be most difficult to leave behind? What could you do this week to decrease your attachment to things and increase your dependence upon God?

Readings for the Week

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

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/071215.cfm

First Reading AM 7:12-15

Second Reading EPH 1:3-14

Gospel Reading MK 6:7-13

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 9-21-2014



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

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The context is the section where God was telling of His

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

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

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

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

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

> *standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . . (Philippians 1:20-27)*

Paul spoke about the inner conflict that he was having on whether it was more important for him to stay in the world to minister there or to join God in heaven, although the choice would of course be up to God. Paul said that regardless of what happened to him, he realized his life found meaning only when it was connected to the purpose of exalting God, "for to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21). Paul undoubtedly suffered greatly in prison. Perhaps during the time he wrote these passages he was experiencing something very difficult. In spite of his hardship, Paul said that his choice was to remain doing his work (v.25). Next, he went on to state his overarching theme of the Book of Philippians, the call to become more Christ like. He said, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (v. 27a). Throughout this Epistle Paul urged the believers to become more and more like Christ in their behaviors and attitudes. Paul closed this section with a call for unity among the believers in the Philippian church (v. 26). He told the Philippian believers to "[stand] firm in **one** spirit, with **one** mind striving **togethe**r for the faith of the gospel (v. 27b-c, emphasis added). This too was a call for Christlikeness as Jesus also prayed for unity in the church (John 17:21).

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

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

> *1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the*

> *laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first." 9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." 13 But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last. (Matthew 20:1-16)*

Many people who live in large cities such as Los Angeles know how to hire workers by going to their local building supply store in the morning and selecting from among the men that gather there to find work each day. This was a common practice in Jesus' day. The workers would gather in the marketplace with hopes of being hired for the rate or one denarius, which was a typical day's wage with the day lasting from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.

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

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

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

Let's highlight some of the key insights this parable implies about the nature of God. First, God is persistent in calling people to Himself. The landowner went out no less than five different times to

call workers including early in the morning (v. 1), about the third hour (v. 2), about the sixth hour and ninth hours (v. 5), and finally about the eleventh hour (v. 6). Second, God is very generous. The landowner gave the exact same wage to those that had started working much later in the day. Man, who was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), has a strong sense of judgment that was violated when all of the workers received the same wage regardless of how many hours they worked that day. The wages that the landholder paid to the workers that worked less than a full day is what we call "grace," which means unmerited favor. Third, God is sovereign (v. 15). The landowner said, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?" (v. 15a). Finally, God calls the workers His friend (v. 13), though we see that this is conditional upon believing. Jesus said in John's Gospel, "You are My friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

In summary, God is persistent in calling people to Him, is generous, is sovereign, and calls believers His friend. Although His ways are above understanding, He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. It is there that we discover that He is full of grace and patient in calling sinners to repent and believe in Him. Saint Paul said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The parable of the workers in the vineyard clearly illustrates the grace that God provides in calling each person in the world to trust in the finished work of His Son Jesus Christ. As we saw in the first reading, God calls everyone to believe in Him. And we saw in the second reading that God calls us to minister and spread the Good News even when our circumstances aren't perfect. Let us worship our wonderful, generous, persistent God with our whole lives.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

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

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

Readings for the Week

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Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/092114.cfm

First Reading IS 55:6-9

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

Gospel Reading MT 20:1-16A

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Keywords:

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

Reflecting Upon God's Grace



When we think about God's grace, we must approach it with the splendor and complexity inherent in how God manifests and expresses Himself. God's grace is theologically defined as God's unmerited favor. I like to define grace in these terms: "Getting something good when I don't deserve it." But is

there more to grace than this?

Since the time of the Reformation, theologians have defined grace in at least two categories: common grace and saving grace. The first category, God's common grace, refers to God's goodness that is enjoyed in everyday life by both the saved and the unsaved. Jesus hinted at this when He said "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 4:45 ESV). God is gracious even to the unsaved by providing order in the universe that allows one to carry out life without any need for saving faith. The crops of the righteous do not necessarily yield more than the unrighteous. God's common grace is experienced in common life by common human beings.

If you are a good Bible scholar, you may recognize that Jesus was using this illustration as concluding evidence for a primary point he was making in the Sermon on the Mount. His point was not to unpack the merits of common grace (this was assumed knowledge). His point was to bring out the amazing kindness of God which is to be seen in those who follow Him. The preceding verses read: "43You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." Jesus was ushering in an outrageous value system that would characterize those in the Kingdom of God, those who willingly bow their knee to the true King, Jesus the Messiah. [Note: This value system is expounded on in Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (San Francisco: Harper/Collins 1998).]

The gift of saving grace was the prerequisite for being able to show common grace, which in my opinion is anything but common. Loving one's enemy, praying for those who persecute you is unnatural and untenable without the love of God Himself infusing one to die to self and live for another cause. This was not a warm and cozy fireside chat; it was a battle cry for all who would take up their cross, deny self and come follow Jesus. The only way a human being could live out this outrageous new code of honor was due to the radical relationship God offered through His Son. God's saving grace is so transformational for us who believe because we would finally experience an unconditional love that the world system cannot give. God Himself loves His enemy—namely us! (Col 1:21). In acknowledging saving grace, we get something good (love from God) which we don't deserve. That is the basis of grace, which is the basis of God's character.

So what does all of this have to do with us who believe? We're saved. Period. But that's not the end of the story. God uses us to be evidence of His transformational love to those who have yet to bow the knee to King Jesus. God uses us to be His walking billboards of who He is. We are supposed to make the watching world jealous of us (in a good way), so that they will see the source of all delight is really God Himself. The saving grace God gives us allows us to move toward others with an unnatural and untenable love. Without some supernatural explanation, our lives should not make any sense to unbelievers.

The question is: do we live in such a way that really causes the watching world to scratch their head

and ponder what in the world motivates us to be such gracious people? Is that the reputation that God's people have among those who are in the world? Unfortunately, this does not tend to be the perception. So that means that we will have to be even more strategic about embracing opportunities God gives us to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us" in all its many forms. That means we will need to depend on God's grace to flow through us when our flesh is crying out to be satisfied by being judgmental, vindictive or angry.

One counterintuitive way to grow in becoming more gracious is to ask God to help us become more aware of our ungracious ways. We can be broken over our internal lack of grace to someone who invades our space at the grocery store or to a friend who talks solely about her problems without overt concern over our own issues. When we treat people like annoyances, threats and problems to fix the clear message of God's grace gets muffled. This should grieve our hearts and lead us to a place that confesses: "I can't (fill in the blank with your own struggle: love, treat people like You do, forgive . . .), but You can." Our dependence on God to love through us becomes a lifeline of His grace to us. And maybe as we participate in showing His common grace, He will use that to lead hearts to trust in His saving grace.

Dr. Christy Hill

Questions for Reflection:

· What does God's grace reveal about His character and why should grace define our new identity in Christ?

· Why is common grace an implied assumption about Kingdom life?

· What difference does it make if I know about common grace and saving grace as theological constructs?

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