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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-12-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **6-12-2016**. This week we will read about the confrontation and consequences that King David experienced after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, killing Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, and then taking Bathsheba as his own wife. The second reading is from the letter to the Galatians, which reminds us that faith in Christ is what saves us, not works. The Gospel reading illustrates this truth by recounting the story of the unrighteous woman who showed great love for Jesus, for she had been forgiven much. All three readings weave together the redemptive story line of the gravity of sin, the inability of humans to fix themselves, and the beauty of the Gospel, which is embodied in Christ's righteousness that has been given for our salvation.

Introduction to the First Reading:

King David, the second king of Israel, is famous for a few things. One of his most shining moments was his miraculous defeat of the giant, Goliath (1 Samuel 17). One of his darkest moments was his adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (2 Samuel 11). To cover up her pregnancy, David brought Uriah home from battle, so that her pregnancy would look legitimate. However, because Uriah was an honorable man, he would not sleep with his wife while his men were still on the battlefield making sacrifices for the nation of Israel. Instead of confessing his sin, David dug himself in deeper, and instructed the army leader to put Uriah in the fiercest part of the battle and to pull back on him, so that Uriah would be killed in battle. The once shepherd boy, turned King, had hit one of the

lowest points of his life. Instead of coming clean, turning to God, and confessing, King David continued to try to deal with his sin on his own terms. This all came to a climax when the prophet Nathan came to tell the king a story as a way to help David come to terms with his sin (2 Samuel 12:1-6). The story was about a man who was extremely wealthy, who had livestock in abundance. One day a traveler came to him, and instead of killing one of his many animals for the meal, the wealthy man took the one and only ewe lamb of his neighbor to make this man's meal. David's response to this story was one of complete outrage and disgust for the insensitivity and injustice of the wealthy man. In fact, David said "this man" should be put to death. Little did he know that "this man" was him!

First Reading:

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

2 Samuel 12:7-13 NAS95 7 Nathan then said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. 8 'I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these! 9 'Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. 10 'Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' 11 "Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. 12 'Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun.'" 13 Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.

It can be difficult for us to read passages like this, which recount God's just consequences for sin. But it is necessary to be exposed to the gravity and weight of sin or else we will try to brush it off, marginalizing its destructive effects. Our key character, David, tried to do this, but it didn't work. We have Psalm 32 that recounts David's internal suffering over his sin which had a crushing effect on him. He states, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away . . . for Your hand was heavy upon me" (Psalm 32:3-4).

In addition to the internal weight of sin, Nathan told of the external consequences that would be experienced as a result of his sin. Nathan's predictions came to fruition in a variety of ways. David not only had conflict with Israel's enemies, but conflict plagued his own household. For example, Amnon, one of his sons, raped David's daughter, Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Then, Absalom, David's son killed Amnon. This severe conflict culminated in an overthrow of David's rulership, where Absalom pitched a tent in the sight of all Israel and had sexual relations with David's concubines, thus fulfilling Nathan's prediction that David's companion would lie with his wives in broad daylight (2 Samuel 16:21-22). The gravity of sin and its destructive consequences are seen in an unfolding and

snowballing way in David's life. There was no way for David to fix the problem of sin in his own life. His only hope was to cry out to the Lord for help.

After Nathan's confrontation with David, we have insight from Psalm 51 into what it looks like to be a man after God's own heart, which is the New Testament's description of King David (Acts 13:22). Here are some key thoughts from Psalm 51, David's response to the Lord after Nathan confronted him that can guide our understanding of sin, confession, and forgiveness:

- He confessed his sin and grieved over the way he had betrayed God.
- He recognized that sacrifices and burnt offerings would never "make up" for his sin and that God was not looking for him to do heroic deeds to off-set the guilt.
- The sacrifice that David brought was a broken spirit. He knew that a broken and contrite heart would not be despised by the Lord.
- He turned to the Lord for forgiveness and trusted in God to take away his guilt. He rested in God's character, not his own righteousness.
- He asked God to "create in me a clean heart" so that his righteousness would come from the innermost being and would reflect the character of God. He basically told the Lord to do whatever it takes to make him clean from the inside out.

David's life is an example to us about the gravity and destructive force of sin. We learn from him that sin is a part of even the most promising and stellar people. Even if we have not committed adultery and tried to cover it up by having someone killed, Jesus said that lust and anger in our heart are equivalent to adultery and murder (Matthew 6:21-48). We all have sinned and fall short of God's glorious standards for the life He has given to us (Romans 3:23). Like David, we cannot fix ourselves with our own moral deeds. It is only God's mercy that provides a way of escape from the destructive force of sin in our lives. The next reading elaborates on this point and provides the clear antidote to our sin problem.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul clarified that a sinner's right standing before God is only achieved through faith in Christ. This passage is one of many in the New Testament that point those who are guilty of sin to the only One who can assuage guilt, namely Christ Jesus. We pick up the passage right in the middle of Paul's defense of his practice not to make the Gentile Christians fulfill the Mosaic Law. The fact that this was a controversial question that needed to be answered in writing allows us, as current day Christians, to have insight into the dimensions of our standing in Christ.

Second Reading:

Note: This includes verses 17-18 that were omitted from the reading.

Galatians 2:16-21 NAS95 16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the

Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. 17 "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! 18 "For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 "For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. 20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. 21 "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

This passage starts out by saying that man is not justified by following the Law, but through faith in Christ Jesus. In the early days of Christianity, there was some confusion over whether Gentiles who became Christians needed to follow the Jewish laws or whether faith in Christ alone was sufficient for salvation. Paul alludes to this controversy in the opening of this chapter and throughout these verses in the reading. At the Jerusalem council, which is recorded in Acts 15, the question about whether Gentiles have to live like Jews was definitively answered with a resounding "no."

This controversy allowed the key doctrine of justification by faith to be introduced into the record books of the Bible. The word "justified" is a term used in a court of law that is pronounced over one who is declared not guilty. As we saw in the previous reading and explanation of David's life, all have been pronounced guilty, for sin is part of the human condition. Paul shared that having right standing before God is not achieved by working really hard to please God ("works of the Law"—16), but by surrendering to Christ by faith ("I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me"—20).

In verse 16, Paul pointed out that even he, a Jew, was justified by faith in Christ, not in fulfilling the requirements of the Mosaic Law. In verses 17-18, Paul counteracted the implied argument that if Gentiles are not required to fulfill the Mosaic Law, then they will persist in sin and nullify the work of Christ and not achieve the righteous life that God desires for them. In response to this line of thought, Paul stated that the only thing that the Law does is to point out one's sin; it cannot save the law breaker. If he were to go back and build his faith on fulfilling the Mosaic Law, this would only result in being declared "guilty." He explained that he had to die to the Law so that he might live to God, which meant that the Law no longer hounded him to compliance. His compliance to God's standards was now generated from a new place in his heart—a place of surrender, devotion, and union with Christ. Because of Christ's love, he was now free to love God back and be in right relationship with Him. This freedom from the Mosaic Law did not negate God's grace, it actually celebrated it and relied upon it. For if one can fulfill the Mosaic Law from the heart, Christ's atoning death would be meaningless.

Paul realized the gravity and weight of his own sin and encouraged others to do likewise. He found forgiveness and grace by confessing His need for the Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul's new outlook can be ours as well, as we die to the old way of life that is structured according to handling sin on our own; and instead, live out of the new life that God has placed in every believer in Christ, the life of

relational dependence on our wonderful Savior.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading paints a vivid picture of what it looks like when one encounters the forgiveness of Jesus in a very personal way. The story of the sinful woman who wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes his feet with her hair, and pours perfume on his feet provides a display of tender-hearted devotion that should characterize all believers.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 7:36 – 8:3 NAS95 36 Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, 38 and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." 41 "A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." 44 Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45"You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. 46 You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. 47 For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." 49 Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" 50 And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." 1 Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, 2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.

Right before this encounter in Luke, Jesus' authority had been questioned by the Pharisees. The common people were being convinced that Jesus was a prophet from God, but the religious leaders "rejected God's purposes for themselves" (Luke 7:20). Therefore, this story of the sinful woman and Simon, the Pharisee serve Luke's purpose in illustrating a sharp contrast between a receptive heart and a hard heart toward God.

Luke sets up the sharp contrast right at the opening of the story. A Pharisee, who had means, invited

Jesus to a pleasant evening of eating and reclining at a table of equals. In this culture, the table would be set down low to the ground and diners would lay on their side, propped up on one elbow at the table and their feet behind them, away from the table. Hospitality was a high value and varying degrees of fanfare would have been shown in accordance with the status of the guest of honor. It would have been customary to have a bowl of water at the front entrance, where a servant would wash the guest's feet after walking dusty roads to arrive at the home. Obviously, this did not happen. Simon's passive display of honor is contrasted with the sinful woman's active pursuit of Jesus.

The woman who had a bad reputation came in (uninvited and unwelcomed by Simon) and wept at Jesus' feet. Why would someone weep in Jesus' presence? Why would this woman actively seek Jesus out and come unwelcomed into a powerful and judgmental person's home, breaking all social norms and lavishing a display of devotion that was unprecedented? The clue is in Luke's descriptive term for her. She was a sinner. In Jewish society back then, there were different categories of people. The highest castes were reserved for people of good moral repute and coming from honorable families. The people in the lowest caste of society were those who were ethnically not Jewish and those who had dishonored themselves as Jews by sinning in a public way. This woman was a Jew, but had been relegated to the lowest cast of "sinner" by dismantling her reputation in the eyes of respectable people. The shame she would have endured is probably something that would be hard for us as Westerners to comprehend. Her sinful reputation made her part of an untouchable caste, as if her uncleanness would make anyone she touched unclean by association. Somehow, she had enough understanding and possibly even an earlier encounter with Jesus where she had felt loved and forgiven by him, despite her sinner status.

Put in this context, her boldness in approaching Jesus and touching him shows a level of devotion that is beyond being a fair-weathered "fan" of Jesus. This woman overcame a lot of social obstacles to display this level of gratitude to Jesus. Her heart was on trial before the respectable people, for Simon's revealed thoughts show the judgement and scorn that she endured. In some sense, then, Jesus' heart was on trial too, for Simon's expectation is that a prophet would not let an unclean and sinful woman touch him. Respectable people distance themselves from unrespectable people.

But Jesus did not follow this cultural norm. He broke the social rule and praised this woman for her display of love. He defended her tenderness with a clever story that allowed Simon to see that his sense of respectability caused him to be a self-righteous man, blocking him from having a realistic evaluation of his own sinfulness. The short story that Jesus told had 3 characters and a question. Two men owed the same man money. One man owed a little (about 50 days of work) and the other owed a lot (about 500 days of work). Neither of them could pay the moneylender back. Both of them had their debt cancelled. Which one of them loved the moneylender more? The point was made. Jesus had corrected Simon's misevaluation of his own sinfulness and this woman's sinfulness. Both debts of sin were beyond human fixing. Simon sheepishly responded to the question with the right answer, softening the blow of conviction by saying "I suppose." The moral of the story is summed up by Jesus' words: "*For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little*" (Luke 7:47).

Have you ever wept in a "holy" moment? Have you ever lovingly "wiped Jesus feet with your hair," so to speak? Have you ever poured out something valuable to show your love to Christ? Maybe you were gripped with the gravity of your own sin and rebellious heart, convicted that you were not able to fix yourself. Maybe you were overwhelmed with the truth of God's love for you, deeply impressed with His desire to risk His reputation to restore you to Himself. Maybe you were struck with the fact that you are just a small dot on the face of the earth and you are amazed that God cares about you. If you have responded to these prompts of conviction by the Holy Spirit, then you are like the sinful woman, who received Jesus' love and actively pursued him to show him her love. If you tend to brush these promptings away, reminding yourself what a good person you are and priding yourself that you are not as bad of a sinner as most people, then you are hardening your heart and you are in a dangerous place, like Simon the Pharisee. This story can be a turning point for all of us as we allow God to show us places in our hearts that are tender or hard towards him.

The last part of this reading recounts the lives of others who had been touched by Jesus and were devoted to him in various ways. It's almost as if the camera pans out from the focused tender moment of the sinful woman's devotion and flashes a wide-angled lens to plethora of ways others responded to Jesus' lavish love for them. For example, The Twelve (disciples) and the women who traveled with Jesus were giving their lives on a daily basis to share the good news of the kingdom of God. Some of these followers had dramatic experiences of rescue from demons and others were considered more respectable by society. But each of them was denying their old way of life, counting the cost and following Jesus. This is the way of true discipleship.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Jesus said that when we serve people in need, it's as if we are doing it to him. You may have never physically poured perfume on Jesus' feet, but if you have served those around you by listening, caring, meeting needs, sacrificing your own reputation and time, etc., then you have shown your love for Jesus in these tangible ways. How does linking your service to others with your devotion to Christ affect your attitude and motives for service? How can this picture of the woman pouring perfume on Jesus' feet provide you with a renewed focus for the moments of obedience that you are being called to in your pursuit of Jesus?

2. All three readings reinforce key truths to which our lives need to respond if we are to be wise. Review the readings and write out what you learned about each of the following themes and how this impacts your life:

- The gravity of sin
- The inability of humans to fix their sin problem
- Various responses to conviction of sin
- The gift of God's grace, which offers forgiveness for sin
- Various responses to God's grace and forgiveness

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Readings for the Week

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/061216.cfm

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time Lectionary: 93

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, 2-28-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **2-28-2016**. Why do bad things happen to "good" people? In the Gospel reading today Jesus addressed a related question posed to Him by the crowd except with a twist. Their question was whether when bad things happened to people were they

worse sinners than the ones who avoided the same fate? We will see how Jesus cut to the heart of the matter, the people's universal need for repentance and faith for the forgiveness of sin. This week we also look at a story of Moses in the Book of Exodus and a passage from 1 Corinthians which relates another story from Exodus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Exodus. The context of the reading is Moses' calling by God to lead the Hebrews out of their captivity under the Pharaoh. In chapter 1, after the Israelites had settled in Egypt under Joseph's guardianship (in the seven-year famine), "there arose a new king in Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). After Moses saw the injustices being done against his people, he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrews (Exodus 2:12). After he fled from the Pharaoh who found out about it, he helped Jethro's daughters water their flock (Exodus 2:17). Afterwards, Jethro, "the priest of Midian," gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses as his wife (v. 21). Thereafter he had his first son Gershom there in the land of Midian during this time of his first "exodus" because of his flight from the Pharaoh. All of this is leading up to today's reading in chapter three which begins the period of time known as "The Exodus" during which Moses under the direction of God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt. In today's reading we see Moses' first recorded experience with a divine revelation from God which happened during his stewardship of his father-in-law's flock.

First Reading:

Note: Verses 8b – 12 that were omitted from the reading have been included below.

Exodus 3:1-15 NAS95 1 Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. 3 So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. 7 The LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. 8 So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. 9 Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10 Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." 11 But

Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" 12 And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." 13 Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.

In the reading, we see Moses receiving direct revelation from God, first in the form of a sign (a bush burning but not consumed) and then in the form of the voice of God calling him by name (v. 4). This was the formal calling of the prophet Moses for the specific purpose of delivering the people from their oppression in Egypt (v. 10). Moses questioned God as to how he, as a humble man, could ever accomplish such a great task (v. 11). In contrast to the proud characteristics often exhibited in leaders such as the Pharaoh, we see in Numbers 12:3 how Moses was called the most humble man on the earth. God answered Moses by giving him a sign, saying that once he led the people out of Egypt that he would worship Him again at this same mountain (v. 12). Again, Moses questioned God asking what he should tell his people about the Person from whom he received his commission to deliver them from their oppression. God answered, ""I AM WHO I AM" (v. 14) and to tell them that "I AM has sent me to you" (v. 14). Finally, God connected His "I AM" name, the self-existent One, to the lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v. 15). In addition to the introduction of the "I AM" designation for God, in verse 2 we also see the use of the word "LORD." This word when used in all capitals denotes the Hebrew word (without vowels) "YHWH," the "tetragrammaton," often translated Yahweh. The first occurrence of this word is found back in Geneses 2:4 and then in 15:6 in which it says about Abraham, "And he believed the LORD and it was counted to him for righteousness." "YHWH" is a reflection of God's divine being, His self-existent nature, something made clear in His words to Moses. This bounding of the reading by opening and closing it with the word "LORD" (v. 2, 15) and the introduction of the heretofore unknown name for God of "I Am" indicates a very strong expression of the sovereignty of God in directing the affairs of Moses to accomplish God's purposes. Moses was to be God's chosen agent to affect the freeing of the Hebrew Nation, the one through whom God would pour pronouncements of blessings to those who obey and curses for those who didn't.

There is plenty that we can we learn from the reading that we can apply to our lives. God works through the lives of frail, imperfect people, like Moses. Although Moses sinned in the killing of the Egyptian (Exodus 2:12) God used him in spite of his sin. If God can use a humble man like Moses to accomplish His purposes, we should assume that God would use ordinary people like ourselves in working out His plan. Second, when God places a specific calling upon our life He expects our obedience, but it's okay to seek answers to our questions. In our day and age, we can seek guidance from a variety of sources when we sense that God has placed a specific calling upon our lives. These

include direct statements from Scripture, principles from Scripture, counsel from godly people (especially those with whom we collaborate in praying), and sensing the circumstances that God has placed in our lives. In the reading, we saw how God used Moses' circumstances to lead him to the exact spot to which he needed to be.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In this reading, Paul sheds light on these allusions from Israel's past for those of us who are reading this as Gentiles, without the history of the Jewish people as our backdrop. He gave an explanation about the water, manna, and the people's unbelief using a quote from the Old Testament Book of Exodus from which we read in the first reading. Paul's readers would have been familiar with the Old Testament events surrounding the Exodus. Keep in mind the context of chapter 10 in that it follows Paul's explanation of the legitimacy of his apostleship, having just confronted the Corinthians over a very serious matter of sin in their church (see 1 Corinthians 5:1).

Some background on the manna is helpful to understand the big picture and the application to Jesus Christ. The word "manna" in Hebrew means "what is it." As you can imagine, this was an extraordinary way for God to provide for His people. God seems to work in very unexpected ways. In the desert, the Hebrews collected the manna for the first five days of the week that then went bad overnight. However, on the sixth day God provided a double amount of a special type that was preserved for a two-day period in order to provide for a Sabbath rest day. In the spiritual sense Jesus is our special manna, the one who provides our eternal Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4). Yet, like us, the people God led out from among slavery during the Exodus sinned. Yet, this wasn't an isolated instance of grumbling. It says in Exodus, "The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness" (Exodus 16:2). In spite of their hard hearts, God heard the people and answered by telling Moses that He would "rain bread from heaven for you" even in the case when they did not obey Him (Exodus 16:4), which He knew they wouldn't. Moses explained to them that their complaints weren't against him but against God (Exodus 16:8). God made a special provision to provide for the Sabbath by making the manna quantitatively different (a double portion) on the day before as well as qualitatively different – it would not spoil during the Sabbath rest day. God then announced the miracle to Moses through the appearance of the Shekinah glory, which the people saw (Exodus 16:10, c.f.). In the meantime, in the evening before the raining of the manna from the sky began, God sent quail to the people (Exodus 16:13). The text concluded with the people seeing the manna and not recognizing what it was until Moses explained it to them (Exodus 16:15).

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 7 – 9 that were omitted from the reading are included below.

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 NAS95 1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they

were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. 6 Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. 7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY." 8 Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. 9 Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. 10 Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

Paul wanted New Testament believers to understand the spiritual heritage and to learn from the mistakes that led to disbelief and rejection of God's provision for their lives. Had the people not been so hard hearted they could have better understood God's provision through the spiritual "manna" that was Christ (v. 4). Yet the Hebrew people in the desert continued to sin, and the sin had dire consequences for them. The heart of the matter was this. "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (vv. 11-12).

There are many spiritual parallels in this reading between the provision of God through the manna and the person and work of Jesus Christ who, called Himself "the bread of life" (John 6:35). In spite of the fact that the people grumbled against God He still provided food for them. The parallel in the New Testament is that in spite of the fact that most of the people didn't accept Jesus as their Messiah, God still provided salvation through Him. The manna was a very unique provision that was done only by God and could not come about by any natural means. In the same way, Jesus was God's supernatural provision and also did not come about by natural means but was instead born through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Another point in the reading concerns Paul's use of the term "spiritual rock" (v. 4). When Paul said "they were drinking from the spiritual rock" and "the rock was Christ" (v. 4) both times he used the word "petra." Jesus was the foundation stone, the One Who provided sustenance to the Hebrews escaping from the Pharaoh during the Exodus. Jesus Himself explained the necessity of a sure foundation in Luke Chapter 6. " Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great" (Luke 6:47-49).

Finally, Paul stated, "*these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall*" (vv. 11 – 12). The meaning of this is self-evident. We should take great pains to 1. Become familiar with Scripture so that we even have the principles to apply, and 2.

Actually, apply them to our lives by learning from those that went before us. Why do we continue to sin when we know so much? Perhaps a better question is, why does God continue to use sinners like us? We know that He does, but this doesn't lessen the call of holiness that God has placed upon our lives.

As we transition to the Gospel lesson, we will learn about the ultimate consequence of the unforgivable sin, the forsaking of repentance of sin and belief in the forgiveness offered only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is chapter 13 of Saint Luke. The context is after Jesus' long discourse on the truths of the good news of the Gospel in contrast to the heresies and legalism taught by His antagonists the Pharisees. Jesus told them to "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1b). The Pharisees thought that they had contrived the secret code for living a faith-filled life, which at its root was hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). In contrast to the Pharisees' law code derived in secret, Jesus taught publicly. Jesus said, "But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known" (Luke 12:2). He told them not to fear those that could kill their bodies (i.e. the Pharisees), but to fear the One that could after they were killed cast them into hell (i.e. God). They were not to fear the Pharisees and their hypocritical legal code, a portion of which we will see in today's reading.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 13:1-9 NAS95 1 Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 And Jesus said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? 3 "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? 5 "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." 6 And He began telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. 7 "And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' 8 "And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; 9 and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

Jesus confronted the people's false doctrine that bad things happened to bad people because of their sin. He did this by giving them the truth of the Gospel. The big idea in the reading is that the people whom the tower fell weren't worse sinners, but that **everyone** was in need of repentance and finding faith in Jesus Christ as the only means of forgiveness for their sin. Jesus told them, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish," (v. 3), meaning spiritual not physical death. Scripture tells us, "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Jesus was clear

that He was the only way to God, and He said this using the same language about Himself that we saw in the first reading, meaning Jesus is God. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Jesus closed the reading by revealing God's patience in waiting for His people to bear fruit, meaning to repent of their sin and come to the knowledge of eternal life (vv. 6 – 8). Scripture tells us that "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Although there may be points of light in all religions, the only way to God is through faith in Jesus Christ – exclusively by becoming a Christian. This may not jive with the politically correct culture in which we find ourselves today, but the fact remains that this is the truth of God.

We shouldn't dismiss the fact that God judges sin, whether it's in the life of a believer or a non-believer. In our day, God operates according to the New Covenant in which he prunes believers during their earthly lives (John 15:2) while storing up His judgement for unbelievers largely until the end of their lives (John 15:6, "cast in the fire and burned"). Even during the Old Testament times, God revealed His grace for the unbelieving world by lavishing His material blessings upon them, although their eternal destination was hell. This is very clear from both Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. God calls us to remember those who went before us, such as the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:1-11), or Paul's teaching about some being sick and some have died because of their unholy behavior in the love feast and communion meal (1 Corinthians 11:30). A key point that we need to see is that there are consequences for sin, but not in perhaps the ways we can imagine or according to the ways the people (including the Pharisees addressed in the adjacent verses) contrived.

As Christians just because we do everything right doesn't mean that we will be blessed in the earthly sense in which we might expect, including material blessings and protection from sudden death. Instead, God allows challenges in our lives to lead us to a fuller relationship with Him including the death of loved ones (our ourselves) in order to accomplish His purposes. Our Christian lives are not like baking a cake. We can't just put together the exact right ingredients using a measured formula and follow the recipe exactly and have the cake turn out perfectly well each and every time. Sometimes God throws a monkey wrench into our plans in order to achieve His purposes. What's more, we may not even know or understand these purposes during out natural lifetimes. Unlike the Pharisees who taught salvation by works and outward obedience to their own set of laws, God calls us to walk in faith alone while behaving in ways as directed by the Holy Spirit. This does include closely understanding the biblical principles taught in the New Testament and the Ten Commandments of the Old. However, we should not live our lives formulaically, doing things for God and expecting Him to "bless" us on our terms. He will surely bless us, but His definition of blessing is a lot broader than our limited perspective. May we learn to walk by faith and not our feelings or our sight.

Many of us have had nice young men dressed in white shirts wearing nametags and backpacks knock on our door. The Mormons, although very well intentioned, teach a doctrine similar to that confronted by Jesus in the Gospel reading today. Would you recognize false doctrine when it

knocked on your door? As we ponder what Jesus said about those that perish, we have to remember that we are not just talking about the false doctrine of Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses and Muslims, but anyone who holds the doctrine that good works cause salvation rather than flow from it (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus taught us not that we shouldn't judge but rather than when we do judge we are to use a righteous standard (John 7:24, Matthew 7:2). Jesus was clear that belief in Him is the only way to God, and that many would not travel this road. Less we think that those in our community are immune, we can say that many who claim Christianity truly live as practical atheists except they go to church on Sunday while negating Christian principles and practices during the week including prayer, fellowship with other Christians, study Scripture, following God's calling for them (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus told this group, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. We saw in the Gospel reading how Jesus upended the people's beliefs about sin and salvation. How can you be part of bringing a message of hope and light to people who are approaching God with an expectation of God being a genie on demand (and often being disillusioned with God's unexpected ways of interacting with them)? Are there areas of your own life that you need to work through disillusionment with the Lord's unexpected ways so that you can be freed up to minister to others authentically in their own struggles with surrendering to God?

2. The "bigger" idea in the Gospel reading is evangelism, reaching out to those trapped in false belief systems with the truth of the Gospel. What are two practical ways in which you can begin to reach out to those holding false beliefs? If you pray for God to change a person's heart (an important first step), will you be confident in how you speak to them about Jesus? What verses will you have them read in order to begin to show them the truth of the Gospel?

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/022816-third-sunday-lent.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-4-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **10-4-2015**. This week we open this week with a reading from Genesis, the first and foundation Book of the Bible. This is one of the Books that I read once a year, along with the two other Books that I consider foundational for any student of the Bible. The other two that I read (and sometimes the entire Book in one sitting) are the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts. When I speak with new believers, I frequently tell them to proceed in the following order. Begin with Genesis, then with John, and finally conclude with Acts. In this way, the reader picks up many very important names and biblical constructs in a very short time. In addition, when reading in this order a person will quickly recognize the connections between the Old and New Testaments. This week as we begin with a reading from Genesis, we will see how Jesus connected this first Book of the Bible to His contemporary teaching on divorce as well as the Mosaic Law which His nemesis the Pharisees were trying to twist for their own advantage. We will also study in the second reading how the Old Testament proves that Jesus is the Christ as we look at the Book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews was a star student of the Old Testament and understood extremely well the themes and theology of the Old Testament and how it connected with the New as revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Moses Chapter 2. This reading is from Moses' retelling of the creation story that added additional details to the summary account he provided in Chapter 1. Beginning in verse 4

of this chapter, Moses adds additional details to his account. Although God had already created man (Genesis 1:26, 2:7) he was placed in the garden to work it alone (2:18). God knew that Adam needed a mate who was like himself, and provide a means to fulfil the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). In today's reading, we will find out the remedy to Adam's loneliness.

First Reading:

Genesis 2:18-24 NAS95 18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." 19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." 24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

After God created the animals, He brought them to Adam who completed the task of giving names to each one (2:20). Adam's naming process may have taken a long time, and the absence of any helper in the process reinforced his need for a spouse. Early in the reading we see the phrase it was "not good" in reference to Adam being alone. This contrasted with the closing of chapter one at the conclusion of the creation account in which God said it was "very good" after everything, and everybody including Adam and Eve, had been created (Genesis 1:31). During Adam's naming process the text says that "there was not found a suitable helper for him" (v. 20d) among the animal kingdom. Although Adam had close fellowship with the animals, as any pet owner can attest, these very special bonds still didn't satisfy his need for **human** companionship. Remember that during this time before the Fall the Lord God walked with Adam in fellowship with him (Genesis 3:8), however even this relationship left Adam desiring a mate because God had designed him for it. God then remedied Adam's need by creating the woman we know as Eve (Genesis 3:20) from out of Adam. In the Hebrew the word transliterated "woman" is "ish-shah" which sounds much like the word for man which is "aw-saw." In the original the word for rib also means side, so the woman was literally from Adam's side and named a word with the same root sound. In the English the idea of her name is similar, with "man" being the root and "wo-man" being the person taken from the man's side. In verse 18, the text says that a suitable "helper" was not found for Adam. The word there in the original is "ezer" pronounced "ay zer" which means aid. This word brings with it an association with another word found later in the Bible, "Ebenezer," which by interpretation is the "stone of help" and is used of God in the Old Testament. Ebenezer reminded the Jewish people of God's presence, and Eve created by God as a helper should do the same for us. Adam was created as a relational being, and God is a relational being consisting of three Persons in the Godhead. After the Fall we know that Adam and Eve's relationship was shattered, in contrast that which exists among the Persons of the Godhead is eternally in perfect relationship. Although Eve is literally the helper person drawn from

Adam's side, the inevitable conflicts would begin between Adam and Eve after her creation, not matter how lonely he was before. These two had a mission, as the woman joined Adam in the work that God had given to him as the leader of the effort to maintain the garden that had been entrusted to him (Genesis 2:8, 15). Second, they were to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28).

Later in the Gospel reading, we see how Jesus used the last verse of this reading to show how it was God's original plan that man and woman be united in the relationship of marriage during their lifetimes. Verse 24 explains that "for this reason" the man and woman shall leave their parents and become one in marriage, both in the spiritual sense and through the sexual union. The phrase "for this reason" points back to the previous verse where God explained that woman was formed from the man, and since this is so, the two are now one in marriage. Jesus will explain this essential truth to the Pharisees who were trying to twist the Law to hold their followers in the same bondage that they placed upon themselves.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Hebrews, a Book about the superiority of Jesus Christ over angels and everyone else. This Book teaches us how Jesus was in the line of the Melchizedekian priesthood, which is eternal, rather than the Levitical priesthood which is tied to the human lifespan of the high priests. We know that one of the heresies that plagued the early church was the worship of angels, and the author of Hebrews attacked this headlong in showing Jesus' superiority over them. Saint Paul talked about this in the Book of Colossians when he said, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the **worship of the angels**, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind" (Colossians 2:18). In the first chapter of the Book the author explained how angels are "ministering spirits sent to those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). Angels are God's agents who do His business for Him. They are never to be worshiped in any manner, since there is only one mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). The author's teaching on Jesus' position relative to the angels continues into chapter 2, which is the reading for today.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 2:9-11 NAS95 9 But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. 10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. 11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren,

In today's reading, the author explains how Jesus submitted to God the Father's plan for Him by allowing Himself to be born as a man in order to serve the world. The theological term for the process by which Jesus emptied Himself of His independent use of His divine attributes during the ministry of His First Advent is "kenosis." This concept is explained most clearly by Saint Paul in the

Book of Philippians in the reading below. We are including this because of the great importance of this subject and for the fact that the author of Hebrews assumes the reader's familiarity with this concept. Saint Paul explains this in the verses below.

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" (Philippians 2:5-10).

With Paul's teaching in mind, the meaning of the reading from Hebrews becomes clear. Jesus voluntarily became human during His earthly lifetime, making Himself "for a little while lower than the angels" (v. 2a). Jesus died for everyone according to God's rich grace by humbling Himself on the cross not as a victim, but as a victor. Nowhere in Scripture is Jesus ever called a victim, rather Jesus gave His life willingly for us in order to suffer the penalty for the sins of the entire world. The purpose of Jesus' work is explained in verses 10 – 11. Jesus is "bringing many sons to glory," and sanctifies (meaning makes perfect" those whom He calls brethren. At the first moment we believe we are given a new Spirit, the old one is gone and replaced with something new who knows God (Ezekiel 36:26, 2 Peter 1:3). In this new relationship, we are united in fellowship with the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and the Father. The author stated in the reading, "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father" (v. 11a). This relationship is never something from which we can become divorced, as it was given to us by God. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35). As we transition to the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus taught about the relationship of marriage as created by God for the purpose of a lifetime of fellowship between two followers of Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is a continuation of the study from Saint Mark. Before we continue let's take a step back and look at the big picture of this Gospel. Mark's writing was one of the earliest of the four Gospels. In this important Book of the Bible, the author emphasizes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John Mark is held by tradition to be the author and there is strong evidence to regarding this. He was very likely influenced by ministry of Saint Peter, whom the Lord Jesus called the Rock of the church. Remember that this Rock of the church wrote about how as believers we become the heirs of God's great gifts through an eternal relationship with Him, something which the Pharisees did not understand. Peter said that as believers we are born again to a living hope "to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3). Throughout Mark there are three primary groups of people, and in the reading this week each them appear. The first is Jesus' primary nemesis, the religious leaders including the Pharisees. The second is the crowds who follow Jesus and continually misunderstand Him. The third

group is Jesus' disciples who also suffer from no small amount of misunderstanding even up until Jesus had risen from the dead when He had to explain everything to them regarding Himself from the Old Testament (Luke 24:13-32).

In today's reading, Jesus responds to a question from the religious leaders who came at Him not to learn but rather to test Him (Mark 10:2). Jesus responded with a question, something that He often did when questioned. Do we know anyone who when we ask them a question responds with a question, and afterwards we learn something from them? Jesus used this inductive approach when He was addressing the crowds, as contrasted with a deductive method in which He would have plainly given them the answer to their question. He uses those two different approaches consistently when He was addressing those two different groups of people. With the inductive method, He spoke mostly with questions and parables, but then later explained His public address privately to His disciples. In this case, the religious leaders didn't really desire to learn from Jesus by understanding the true answer to their question, instead they were trying to test or trap Jesus by asking Him a question about some obscure or difficult subject dealing with Jewish Law. In the reading, we see Jesus following a familiar pattern. Someone from one of the first two groups asks Him a question, and Jesus responds with a question, which if answered properly could have led them to the answer themselves. Then once He is away from them, He plainly explains to His disciples the answer to both questions. As you read, ask yourself how you would answer the question from the Pharisees, and then the question posed by Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 10:2-16 NAS95 2 Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. 3 And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of creation, God MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. 7 FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, 8 AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." 10 In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. 11 And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; 12 and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery." 13 And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all." 16 And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them.

The context of the reading is following Jesus' teaching on the seriousness and spiritually harmful nature of sin. Jesus had taught them, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast

into the sea" (Mark 9:42). Afterwards, He left Capernaum and came to the region of "Judea beyond the Jordan," meaning the largely Gentile land to the east of this important watery landmark (Mark 10:1). Here the crowds met up with Him again and were joined by the Pharisees who led with a question to test Him (v. 2).

The Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful (according to Jewish Law) for a man to divorce his wife (v. 2). They didn't of course mean whether it was lawful according to Roman Law, but rather according to their strict, literal and often wrong interpretation of the Mosaic Law. Jesus responded with a question, asking them to locate the answer from what Moses had written in the Law (v. 3). Jesus explained to them following a method that would have been very familiar to the Pharisees from the Old Testament. In the Book of Nehemiah, the people after they had been held in captivity in Babylon for seventy years had lost track of the Scriptures. Once Ezra had located a copy, he gathered the people around him to teach them, and Ezra and the priests read the lost biblical text. We see there that is said that "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8). This is what Jesus did by reading from the text and at the same time providing the interpretation of it. Moses didn't write in Deuteronomy Chapter 24 saying that God in any way favored divorce, but rather that God **authorized** divorce. Jesus explained this very crucial difference. Moses said that it was an abomination before the LORD for a man to remarry a woman whom he had previously divorced and had remarried, and taught the people through the Law not to do this because it would bring "sin upon the land" by doing so (Deuteronomy 24:4). Jesus continued the biblical teaching on the matter of divorce by drawing the people back to the Scriptures, a behavior which all of us would do well to follow. In responding to the question from the Pharisees, who didn't really care to hear the true answer, Jesus simply pointed them back to God's original teaching on the matter.

The closing of the reading was the second instance where the crowds were bringing children to Jesus (v. 13). Once again, Jesus rebuked His disciples for not allowing or even encouraging this. "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these," He said (v. 14). As true followers of Jesus, all of us must approach him humbly, and He was teaching His disciples this very important lesson.

This week we saw how Jesus turned to the Scriptures to answer a question by the Pharisees. Even though this group of religious legalists didn't desire to listen to His answer, Jesus still explained to them the sanctity of marriage and how this flowed from the relationship of the first man and woman God created during Creation about which we read in the first reading. In the closing of verses of the Gospel, reading Jesus had to remind His disciples to be humble and receive Him just like the children. In the second reading, we learned how Jesus humbled Himself in order to accomplish the will of His Father. As followers of Jesus He calls us to humble ourselves and receive Him as little children.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the first reading we read how God created the first woman out of Adam as a helper and

companion for him to accomplish the purposes that He had previously assigned to him. Later in the Gospel reading, we saw how Jesus used these same verses to explain the lifetime relationship of marriage as arising from God through this same creation account. Read the following verses and then discuss in what ways a husband and wife model the more perfect relationship that exists between the Persons of the Godhead.

John 14:16-20 NAS95 16 "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. 18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 "After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also. 20 "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

2. How does knowing that God exists eternally in a perfect relationship help you in your own relationship, regardless if you are single or married?

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/100415.cfm

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **9-27-2015**. Over the years, I began to keep in my computer a folder in which I filed obituaries and death notices. As I am getting a bit "long in the tooth" myself, this folder has been growing larger and larger. From time to time, I look through this folder and contemplate the lives of all the people who have passed away that I have known. To be truthful the ones I really think about are the people who I am not sure trusted in the Lord Jesus as their savior. Some of the people listed in this folder are ones who I prayed for over the course of a decade or more. As I think about these people I remember all that Jesus said about hell, and how anyone that does not trust in Him will spend eternity in that awful place. I am very glad for those precious few people listed in my folder whom I knew had trusted in the Lord Jesus. This week we will learn some things that Jesus said about hell. We will see how even Jesus' own disciples got distracted through their own spiritual pride which kept them from proclaiming the message that Jesus gave them, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).

This week we start with some history and context about the first reading from the Book of Numbers. Then we continue with the study from James and conclude with the Gospel lesson in which Jesus addresses spiritual pride and the danger of sin.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Numbers is that Moses' father in-law Jethro had earlier approached Moses about setting up judges to help with the administration of disputes just after the Hebrews had fled from Egypt (Exodus 18:22). Next, Moses received the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai and the Hebrews left Mt. Sinai to begin their first (and unsuccessful) approach into the Promised Land. They complained to Moses about their food as they became very tired of eating manna day after day (Numbers 10:12-13, 11:1). Moses was so overwhelmed that he cried out to God

for help (Numbers 11:10-15). The LORD's solution was twofold. First, He promised to send them meat, and second He told Moses to appoint seventy elders who would help him carry his responsibilities (Numbers 11:16-18). Our reading today picks up with the consecration ceremony of the elders. Be careful to note the use of capitalization of the pronouns in verse 25 as referring either to God or to Moses.

First Reading:

Numbers 11:25-29 NAS95 25 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again. 26 But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. 27 So a young man ran and told Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them." 29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!"

This passage tells the story of the empowerment by the Holy Spirit of the elders to speak the Words of God (prophecy). Even though two of them (Eldad and Medad) were not at the Tent of Meeting during the commissioning ceremony, they still received the Spirit which enabled them to prophecy in the camp among the Hebrew people. Instead of restraining them after it was discovered that they were prophesying although they had not been at the formal ceremony, Moses taught them a valuable lesson. Moses said in essence, "I wish everyone was so filled with the Spirit that each person would prophecy like this" (v. 29b).

There are two lessons from this passage for us today. First, we learned from Moses what humility and leadership look like. Instead of hoarding God's power, Moses celebrated the distribution of God's power to others. Second, in spite of the disobedience of the two elders, God still used them to minister to the people. Note that the text never mentioned the works of the sixty-eight faithful elders. God's first choice is to use His faithful people to accomplish His works, but he will use others as well. God can use sinful people to accomplish His greater purposes, and this reveals His grace.

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus taught His disciples a very similar lesson as to what Moses told Joshua. In the meantime, we will move to the second reading from James in which he discusses the reality of judgment and hell for nonbelievers. This is also something that Jesus will also discuss in the Gospel reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James but skips ahead to chapter 5 from where we left off last week at James 4:3. The intervening verses covered a variety of subjects but were primarily about pride. This week's reading is a brief departure from the instructions to

believers and is instead a warning to the unbelieving rich. In biblical times, there was no such thing as a middle class. A possible exception to this was the few shopkeepers the existed in the cities and even they owned very little property making them subservient to the rich property owners. Wealth in those days was distributed mostly to the super rich and the rest of the people struggled for survival. It wasn't until the 19'th century that these wage gaps began to slowly disappear. James would have written just two decades before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans who saw to it that the possessions of the rich were stolen, the rest reduced to rubble, and all the Jews were evicted from the city. James, as the leader of the Jerusalem church, would have known the Lord's prediction about the coming destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (Matthew 24:2). Perhaps the tenor of the people's relationship to the Roman government was moving in that direction. It is evident from the reading that James also had a telescopic view in mind like how Isaiah writes with near and far term fulfillments stacked on top of one another. Although the near term fulfillment of James' warning to the rich would have happened with the destruction of Jerusalem, the ultimate fulfillment was as in Jesus story of Lazarus and the rich man, when the wealthy man died and stood before the Lord in judgment. As you read, keep in mind both of these upcoming judgments.

Second Reading:

James 5:1-6 NAS95 1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! 4 Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. 5 You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.

James' focus in the reading is upon the eternal judgment coming from God after the unbelieving rich person dies. He says that the rust of their golden and silver treasures bear witness against them. Also crying out against them during this terrible day of judgment is the laborers whom they exploited during their lifetimes and whom they "condemned and put to death" (v. 6a). Even those in what we may consider the middle class, people like the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick makers were being taken advantage of by the rich in this polar society with two social classes – the very rich and everyone else. Yet we know that around two decades later there was also an earthly judgment that happened to everyone in Jerusalem, not just the rich. This was a judgment in the sense that it was against the Jews for rebelling against Roman authority, and God says that no authority exists unless He ordains it (Romans 13:1).

The unbelieving rich people to whom James addressed this writing would have done well to listen to his warning. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus described in grim detail the conditions in Jerusalem during the Roman siege in the days leading up to the destruction of the temple and city in AD 70. During the three-year blockade, the distinctions between the social classes were obliterated and all of the people were reduced to plundering and stealing to find food. Josephus wrote that

cannibalism was commonplace, and "Tufts of withered grass were devoured, and sold in little bundles for four drachmas" (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews Book II*). Yet although we could say that James' prophecy about the "miseries which [were] coming upon [them]" (v. 1) was fulfilled in the physical sense in AD 70, the ultimate terror was yet to come when the non-believing people died and stood in judgment before the Lord when they died.

We can be profoundly happy that although we will stand to account before the Lord for what we did with what He gave us, we will not suffer with any miseries that will come upon us when we die (v. 1). This doesn't mean that since we are relatively rich compared to people in the early church that we don't have to be good stewards of the things that God has entrusted to us. We must recognize the great responsibility that God has entrusted us since we are comparatively rich compared to the early readers of James' Letter. In contrast to the rich person who will have nothing when they die, we have now and will possess even greater riches from God after we die. Saint John said, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life" 1 John 5:13, emphasis added. It is not a sin to know that we have eternal life with our Lord Jesus. Saint Paul said, "but just as it is written, 'THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM'" (1 Corinthians 2:9). So even if we are poor, we can trust that we are rich in spirit.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is a continuation of the study from Saint Mark. The context is just after the disciples were arguing about whom among them was the greatest (Mark 9:34). Afterwards Jesus taught them that the way to be great was to become a servant (Mark 9:35), and provided an object lesson to them by setting a child before them and saying, "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me" (Mark 9:37). This illustration revealed someone (the child) who needed to be served, but was unable to serve in return. In the same way, Jesus calls us to serve even if we are unable to pay him or her back. As you read, keep this context in mind of Jesus' call to achieve greatness by being a servant.

Gospel Reading:

Note: Verses 44 and 46 which were omitted from the reading have been included below.

Mark 9:38-48 NAS95 38 John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. 40 For he who is not against us is for us. 41 For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward. 42 Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. 43 If your hand

causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, 44 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. 45 If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, 46 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. 47 If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, 48 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.

In the opening of the reading Jesus answered the objection of His disciples about someone they saw casing out demons in His name. From the context, it is clear that Jesus was continuing His teaching on the matter of spiritual pride as He had just finished teaching them about this through His illustration with the child. Jesus told His disciples that they should humble themselves and in essence be glad that others were serving Him and accomplishing good works in His name. Next, Jesus taught His disciples about how great a sin it was to cause another person to sin as well as the reality of hell. There are degrees of punishment in hell and Jesus is warning them that any nonbeliever who leads others deeper into their nonbelieving, sinful state will suffer the worst eternal punishment in hell. Jesus used a hyperbole of the hand, foot and eye to illustrate the danger of sin in the life of a believer. The hand refers to the things we do (v. 43a). The foot refers to the places we go (v. 45a). The eye refers to the things we see (v. 47a). Jesus is using exaggeration to say that believers should take radical actions to deal with the sin in their lives. Some people have taken literal actions against themselves, including the church Father Origen of Alexandria who emasculated himself in order to deal with his problem of lust. He doesn't mean that we should physically cut off the body part which brought the sin about, but rather take drastic actions to see that we don't continue in the sinful pattern.

What are some practical applications we can take away from the lesson today? First, one of the primary ministries that we have as believers is to tell the world about the danger of sin and the need to turn from their sin and place their faith in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness of their sin. God calls us to remember that the first message that Jesus brought when He began His ministry was the call to repent. Jesus picked up where John the Baptist left off who said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This could mean coming alongside someone who you know is leading others into sin as there is a multiplying effect that their sinful actions are bringing upon the world. The greatest sinners in the world tend to become the greatest evangelists after they come to faith in Christ. Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Sin when left unchecked in the life of a nonbeliever will eventually lead them to an eternity in hell, and they need to be told about this fact.

Second, all of us need to keep an eye on our spiritual pride. Jesus went to great lengths to caution people about the danger of sin in the life of a believer, the foremost of which is pride. Just after the disciples finished arguing about who was the greatest among them, Jesus had to calm their objections about someone who was doing good works in His name. Pride is hard to see in ourselves, but oftentimes easy to see in others.

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We can develop many practical ways to safeguard ourselves from runaway sin. One way that I have found it helpful is to develop a relationship with a believer of the same gender to share prayer requests and to hold each other accountable for the things going on in their lives. A realistic schedule could be to agree to meet for one hour a month to meet face-to-face, talk to each other at least once a week by phone or email, and pray for each other each day. In this way, it is harder for sinful patterns to develop unchecked without any feedback from another believer.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In biblical times, the rich were the primary nemesis of the working poor. James comforted the believers by reminding them of the judgment that was to come upon the rich and that their abusers were actually **spiritually** poor. In our day, we are relatively rich compared to the first century Christians and have to refine how we view the "rich" as discussed by James. Who are the "rich" people who oppress you? How does knowing that you are spiritually rich help you to mentally overcome these oppressors in your life?

2. Ask yourself the following question. Have you ever developed a relationship with another believer in which you have been able to share personal and spiritual matters? If your answer is no, or if you are no longer meeting with this person, pray that God would place someone in your life with whom you could meet and know that someone was praying for you each day.

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/092715.cfm

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 8-30-2015

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **8-30-2015**. This week we open with a study of a reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses pours out his heart to the Israelites just before they were to begin their final conquest and enter the Promised Land. Moses cautions the people not to add to or take from the Law but to just simply follow it. Second, we look at a reading from the Book of James, said to be "the Proverbs" of the New Testament. Then we close with the Gospel reading from Saint Mark in which Jesus scolds the scribes and Pharisees for doing exactly what Moses told the people not to do by creating religious traditions, which they held above the Mosaic Law. In application, we will address the tendency toward formulaic religion and how God uses hardship to accomplish His purposes.

Do you believe that if you obey the government, pretty much keep the Ten Commandments and go to church every week that God will reward you with a life filled with some level of prosperity and good health? What if you sensed and were obedient to a call from God to uproot your life in order to engage in missions? Would you then be upset if things didn't turn out perfectly for you in your new life? I know a man named Dave that studied hard to become a missionary and moved to France with his wife to reach people for Jesus in this spiritually dark but civilized nation. He worked there for many years, had a good degree of success in his ministry and followed biblical teaching in all that he did. However, after being in France several decades, his health began to decline. As the months went by, his condition continued to worsen and at some point he was told that he would need a liver transplant or he would die. You may ask, how could God allow this life threatening condition in his life which threatened to end his ministry? How could God allow this situation in his life when he had sacrificed so much to move there, was faithful in his following the Bible, and was obedient in every way to the laws of his adopted nation? Later in this lesson you will hear what happened to Dave.

According to Scripture God allows challenges in the lives of believers which goes against what is

known in our times as "health and wealth" or the prosperity gospel. This week we are going to see in the Gospel reading how Jesus confronted the false teachings occurring during His ministry from a Jewish religious group called the Pharisees. These were a sect that taught, in effect, salvation by works and held some of the same false beliefs as the modern prosperity gospel preachers of today.

It would be easy to misread the first reading if we have this formulaic or prosperity gospel in mind. The formula goes like this: I am obedient to God's commands, then He has to give me the circumstances in life that I think I deserve. The problem behind this formula is that is lacks the relational underpinning that God desires for us. We obey Him out of our own effort and then feel justified in our sense of entitlement. We will need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of relationship with God now made possible through grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, a word which means literally "second law." The Book begins with a chronicle of the events of the Hebrew people in the period just after the wilderness wanderings. Because of the people's disobedience they were forbidden from entering the Promised Land and spent thirty eight years wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses. During this time God revealed the Law to Moses and began the Levitical Priesthood with his brother Aaron as the first high priest. At the end of these thirty eight years God prompted Moses to lead military campaigns against the two regional leaders on the "other side" (meaning the east) of the Jordan River. The Hebrew army soundly defeated both King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. According to this Scripture, the Hebrews "captured all [their] cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women, and children. We left no survivors. Only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves with the plunder of the cities we captured" (Deuteronomy 2:34-35). These events occurred over the final two years which closed out the full forty years of wandering in the desert outside of God's Promised Land (to the west of the Jordan).

Even more so than in previous readings in order to glean the proper meaning from the passages that follow, it is necessary to clearly understand the context. Reflect upon each of the following points that will help to lead you to the proper contextual understanding for today's lesson.

- God does not change (Malachi 3:6, James 1:17), but He does change the terms through which He deals with His people according to His covenants. There are five covenants in the Old Testament Bible.

  I. First was the Noahic (pronounced "no ay ick") Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7).

  II. The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis Chapter 12. In this God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v.1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v.3). These

unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future.

III. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through which God introduced the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19), and the context of the first reading today. The promises of this Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The Law was clear and exact, unlike the religious traditions that were derived from it over the centuries (as we will read about in the Gospel lesson). Moses spent forty years teaching the people the Law, and they spent forty years breaking it! Point of Fact: Had I lived during that time I wouldn't have done any better than they did.

IV. The forth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant was and will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah.

IV. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34b), and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v.34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17). This Covenant is the terms through which God deals with us as believers today.

- God's plan of salvation for people has never changed, whether in the Old or New Testaments, although God has revealed His plan more clearly through the revelation of Jesus Christ (see Colossians 1:26 and Hebrews 1:1). Everyone is saved by faith in God's Savior whether it was Jews in the Old Testament, Jews in the New Testament, or Gentiles during either of the Testaments. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God is clear that there is only one unforgivable sin, which is rejection of His only provision for the forgiveness of sin.

Finally, this is the key point which we need to remember as we study the first reading showing the sinful behavior of the Jews and how Jesus confronted the false teachings of the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson:

- God assesses different short-term penalties for sin according to each era and covenant. For example, before the Noahic Covenant when Cain killed Abel, God dealt immediately with this sin by putting a mark on Cain, exiling him to a foreign land, and causing him to tirelessly till unfruitful soil (Genesis 4:12-15). As a second example, in the first reading today we will see Moses' mention of an instance in which God acted quickly and harshly to judge sin among the Jewish exiles. Later during the time of the Exodus which is the context of the first reading, God ruled His people as a "theocratic kingdom." During this time Moses, his successor Joshua (and later the prophets and King David) received direct guidance from God. During the "theocratic

> kingdom" God levied heavy consequences upon those who broke the Law. In John's Gospel Jesus used the metaphor of God's pruning in the life of a believer in order to bring about more fruit (John 15:2). God's pruning in the context of the theocratic kingdom may have meant sudden death for the disobedient Jew, whether it came from God or as a result of capital punishment levied by the Israelite priests (and later Kings).

In our era God operates according to the New Covenant in which he prunes believers during their earthly lives (john 15:2) while storing up His judgement for unbelievers largely until the end of their lives (John 15:6, "cast in the fire and burned"). Even during the Old Testament times God revealed His grace for the unbelieving world by lavishing His material blessings upon them, although their eternal destination was hell. This is very clear from both Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. Lest we think that God doesn't immediately judge sin in some cases, we must remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:1-11), as well as Saint Paul's teaching about some being sick and some have died because of their unholy behavior in the love feast and communion meal (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Now, with this context in mind let's move to today's reading which is an address by Moses to the people as he prepares to appoint Joshua his successor (3:28) who would soon lead the people into the new land. Although Moses himself was forbidden by God to enter (Deuteronomy 3:23-26), God did allow him to travel to the top of Mount Pisgah to see a divine vision of the land just before his death (3:27).

First Reading:

Deuteronomy 4:1-8 NAS95 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. 3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you. 4 But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. 5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"

Moses urged the people to follow the Levitical Law without adding to it or taking from it (v. 2) so that they may "live and go in and take possession of the land" being given by God to them (v. 1). We will see later in the Gospel reading that the people didn't heed God's warning not to add to the law. Interestingly, God repeated this admonition in the very last Book of the New Testament not to add to or take from the Scriptures (Revelation 22:18). God's marching orders were for the people to just do

what He has clearly told them through the Law delivered to Moses. Twice in this reading Moses tells the people to keep the commandments of the Law (v. 1, v. 2). Keeping the Law in the context of the reading does bring with it the promise of material blessing because God had promised the people entrance to the Promised Land. The recipients of the blessing were the minority of those in the Exodus, those who were still alive and the ones whom had "held fast to the LORD" (v. 4). If God killed a person because of their sin, then obviously, they didn't receive the blessings of the Promised Land. As we noted in the introduction, the consequences of disobedience during the theocratic kingdom could be severe and immediate. Beginning in verse 3 Moses recounted what God did to the disobedient people as recorded in the Book of Numbers. The people had become immersed in the worship of the god "Baal of Peor" (Numbers 25:5). In that Numbers it says, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel'" (Numbers 25:4). A plague followed in which 24,000 people died (Numbers 25:9). This was God's way of purging the evil in order to protect the integrity of those who were seeking to follow God with a pure heart.

Another point from the reading was that God had established the Nation of Israel as a light to everyone in the world. God's "chosen people" were not chosen just for their own sake, but for the salvation of all people groups through their testimony of God's greatness (see also John 4:22). Moses addressed the people just before they were to begin the final conquest(s) to claim the land, saying "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the **sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes** and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (v. 6, emphasis added). The Jews whose hearts were pointed towards the worship of the true God expressed their beliefs through the observance of the Law. The Jews' unique lifestyle served as God's showplace to the Gentile nations surrounding them. Their unique civil, moral, and ceremonial Laws were designed by God as a herald to the idolatrous people of the world. This was especially true when the Jews were dispersed around the world during the various captivities that God allowed throughout history, a pattern which continues to this very day. As Christians we are called by God in a way similar to be like the Jew, living in a peculiar way, heralding the good news of God's grace and shining biblical light to our sin darkened world (Matthew 5:14, Ephesians 5:8). This ministry isn't just reserved for vocational works like my missionary friend Dave in France.

As we transition to the second reading we will see some practical ways in which we are believers in Jesus Christ can live our lives as a beacon shining on the pathway for people to find God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of James, a letter often called the "Proverbs of the New Testament." James is a Book filled with practical wisdom and the application of godly principles drawn from throughout Scripture. The message woven into the entire book of James is the principle stated by Jesus, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). In a letter such as written by James, the literary context (knowing the verses before and after the reading, and the flow of the author's thought) is very important for understanding the original author's intent. In the reading today the verse immediately prior to the reading was omitted (verse

16). Once that is included there is a nice connection created between the first reading we just studied and the Gospel lesson we will look at below.

Second Reading:

James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

James 1:17-27 NAS95 17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. 19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James cautioned the people to "not be deceived" (v. 16), but about what? His caution was to not be deceived about the source of good things. The enemy subtly tries to convince us that God's gifts are not good or that good can come from any other source besides God. The source of every authentic blessing is God (v. 17). He encourages them by pointing out that they are the first fruits of the future believers (v. 18). This is much like the Jews we saw in the first reading who were uniquely commissioned by God as a light to the nations.

You'll notice that James called the people "my beloved brethren" twice in the first four verses to give a loving context for his more confrontational statements in this passage. He gets to the heart of the matter by hitting his readers square between the eyes with teaching on the danger of the tongue (v. 19, v. 26, also repeated in chapter 3), and the falseness of believers who profess one thing, but live another way. In God's economy, there is no such thing as not "living up" to our beliefs. Instead, our lifestyle and choices are merely reflecting our true beliefs. Basic religion, James says, is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (v. 27). While not everyone has a direct ministry to orphans and widows, James is highlighting the need for us to express our religion in practical acts of service to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). The orphans and widows of his day would have been those who are marginalized by society, vulnerable to exploitation and overlooked because of their inability to reward those who serve them. Serving those who cannot give you any "kick back" helps to ensure that our motives are pure.

In the closing verse James said to "keep oneself unstained by the world." This is an important admonition that, if heeded daily, could help all of us live a more abundant life in the Lord. This is akin to "being in the world, but not of it" (Matthew 17:14-16), which allows us to be a witness to those who do not know the Lord as we live with a different mindset. The Book of James provides many such godly proverbs which can help us to live fully surrendered lives for Jesus. In the first reading we saw where Moses called the people to obey the Law of God. James calls people to obey not only the teachings of Jesus but also the spirit of the New Covenant. He also provides additional instruction in practical ways to implement this new relationship with God. We don't have to be motivated by guilt or shame as we consider serving God. When we truly listen to the Holy Spirit, Who is the life giving force empowering us to perform things including (and exceeding) "basic religion," He teaches us how to follow through with our particular race to run (Hebrews 12:1). In this way we look to fulfill not just the letter of the law, but we truly start to see how to be God's hands and feet in the world, thus fulfilling the spirit of His ways. This contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law connects us to the Gospel lesson, where we will see Jesus' teaching against the falsehoods taught by the Pharisees who embraced the letter of the Law but disregarded the spirit of the Law altogether.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is, pardon the pun, sandwiched between Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-34) and His feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10). Just prior to the events in the reading today Jesus had walked on the water (Mark 6:48) and healed many sick people in the lakeside community of Gennesaret (Mark 6:53-56).

Gospel Reading:

Mark 7:1-23 NAS95 1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 7 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' 8 "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." 9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; 11 but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' 12 you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and

you do many things such as that." 14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. 16 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. 18 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) 20 And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

The scribes and Pharisees formed their own flavor of "Deuteronomy," or second law, not heeding Moses' call we read about in the first reading. As James warned, they were deceived about even doing the works of the Law regarding basic religion including the honoring of the parents, a clear commandment of God (Exodus 20:12). The behaviors associated with basic religion were the things that the Pharisees were consciously choosing not to do! Because the scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, it was vitally important for Jesus to point out the hypocrisy of their ways and to warn people against their bad influence.

There were a few things in this passage that the religious leaders did that were opposing true heart religion. The first was their insistence on having pure hands, but neglecting to have a pure heart. The second was that they had contrived a religious practice that provided a means to neglect financial assistance to their parents by saying those resources were instead given to God ("Corban," v. 11). The scribes' and Pharisees' "traditions" did in fact trump the first Law of God, that given by Moses and taught throughout the first five Books of the Bible. Jesus explained that what defiles a person is not what goes into their body, but it is what comes out of their heart. The uncleanness is already apart of us, it just takes the right variables to have it come out and show itself. The sin-sickness of the human heart is the issue that Jesus wanted them to see, so that they might see turn to Him for healing as the soul physician (Luke 5:31).

The big idea in the reading is the difference between following human traditions and dead religion versus possessing a life giving relationship with the lover of a believer's soul through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were teaching a false message of salvation by works. Their non-gospel would accord well with the "health and wealth" teachers of today or the tendency to reduce God down to a formula. Either way, these false messages set us up to expect God to act in certain ways based on our good behavior and subtly demand that He hold up His end of the "bargain." Unfortunately, this is a misguided understanding of how to relate to God.

In the opening I mentioned the story of a missionary who walked with God in every way but still experienced tremendous difficulties. As a result of some excellent medical care he was able to receive the liver transplant that he needed to sustain his life. He has recovered and is continuing to

serve overseas even in light of the fact that he will remain on rejection drugs and suffer from their side effects for the rest of his life.

I met with Dave recently to discuss what he has learned so far through his experiences. He told me that one of the things that really sustained him was when he called together a group of leaders from his church who prayed over him and anointed him with oil in obedience to what James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Dave said that this really helped him to turn the matter over to God. Second, the church came around him and offered excellent prayer support during his most difficult time. He told me that many people reached out to him and told them that they were praying for him. These things gave him confidence that regardless of what happened it would all be for the glory of God. Interestingly, some of the French people told him everything would turn out okay because, "he was a Christian." These sentiments provided Dave with many teaching moments in which he was able to explain to the people that God allows hardships in the lives of Christians and perhaps even more so than those who don't believe. He knew that everything ultimately would turn out okay, but that believing in God did not guarantee a good and long-lived life.

As Christians just because we do everything right doesn't mean that we will be blessed in the earthly sense in which we might expect, including material blessings and good health. Instead, God allows challenges in our lives to lead us to a fuller relationship with Him. Our Christian lives are not like baking a cake. We can't just put together the exact right ingredients using a measured formula and follow the recipe exactly and have the cake turn out perfectly well each and every time. Sometimes God throws a monkey wrench into our plans in order to achieve His purposes. What's more, we may not even know or understand these purposes during out natural lifetimes. Unlike the Pharisees who taught salvation by works and outward obedience to their own set of laws, God calls us to walk in faith alone while behaving in ways as directed by the Holy Spirit. This does include closely understanding the biblical principles taught in the New Testament and the Ten Commandments of the Old. But we should not live our lives formulaically, doing things for God and expecting Him to "bless" us on our terms. He will surely bless us, but His definition of blessing is a lot broader than our limited perspective. May we learn to walk by faith and not our feelings or our sight.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the second reading James said, *27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27)*. This admonition can weigh heavy on the minds of some Christians because they don't often find themselves busy visiting orphans and widows in distress.

A. In what ways do you obey the spirit of James' calling through the activities that you do engage in for God.

B. In what ways can you create connections in your life between the first part of verse 27 (Pure and

undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress) and the last part (keep oneself unstained by the world)? List at least two ways in which you do.

2. Do you catch yourself being a Pharisee, overlooking the motives of the heart and instead, focusing upon minor, outward faults in yourself and others?

A. How does knowing that God looks on the heart change how you evaluate what's important in your own life and in relationship with others?

B. Ask God to reveal to you in what areas you are glossing over God's goodness in a certain person and missing His heart for them.

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/083015.cfm

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 4-26-2015

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **4-26-2015**. This week we open with the first reading from Acts 4 in which we see Jesus as the Chief Cornerstone, the One whom the builders rejected. Then we cover the second reading from First John on which we learn more about the nature of a believer whose heart has been changed by God. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from John 10 where we see an illustration that Jesus gave of Himself as our Good Shepherd.

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is just after Peter's sermon given to the people gathered at the portico of Solomon (Acts 3:11-26) and following the miraculous healing of the man lame from birth (Acts 3:2-11). These events greatly disturbed "the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees" (Acts 4:1) "because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (4:2). At this point, Peter and some of the disciples were taken into custody, most likely protective custody (4:3). The church continued to grow as a result of the preaching and reached a total size of four thousand people (4:4). The next morning Peter and the disciples were presented to a group including the high priest and two others of priestly descent (4:4-6) at which point they asked them, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" (4:7). This led to Peter's response which is covered in the first reading.

First Reading

Acts 4:8-12 NAS95 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead–by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11 He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. 12 And there is salvation in no one

else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Peter explained to the Jewish rulers that the lame man was healed by the miraculous power of Jesus Christ whom they crucified (v. 9). He went on to explain that this Jesus is the Messiah, then quoted from the Bible evidence showing that their rejection of Him was prophesied to occur. Peter quoted from Psalm 118:22 which said, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone." In the context of the audience, the builders who rejected the cornerstone can be seen as the unbelieving Jewish leaders. Finally, Peter combined the teaching from Isaiah 28:16 that said something similar about the cornerstone but added the element of belief in Jesus for salvation. Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God said, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who **believes in it** will not be disturbed" (Isaiah 28:16b, emphasis added). Peter's teaching wasn't new to the disciples because Jesus had Himself taught that the belief in Him was the only way to get to heaven. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Jesus used the expression "I am" in this passage as a strong statement of His divinity. We will see Jesus' use of this term again in the Gospel lesson.

Peter's bold speech contains some crucially important truths. Faith in Jesus as the Messiah, which fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy of the Chief Cornerstone, is the only way to get to heaven. There is no other Person through whom we can gain forgiveness of our sin; this can come through faith in Jesus Christ alone. These truths are just as applicable to the "rulers and elders of the people" (v. 8) as they are to "all the people of Israel" (v. 10) and by application to everyone in the universe.

The free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9) comes about, as we will see in the second reading, as a result of God's great love for us. The context of this reading from First John is the apostle's teaching on the evidences and nature of true salvation of a believer. John opened Chapter 2 by saying, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). Keeping the commandments of God is evidence of a heart that has been changed by God. Today's reading opens in Chapter 3 by expanding this teaching to include the special relationship that exists between God and the believer.

Second Reading

1 John 3:1-2 NAS95 1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.

John said that believers in Jesus Christ are bestowed with a special relationship with God, that of "children of God" (v. 1). This was in contrast to those who don't know God, whom Jesus called children of their father the devil (John 8:44), something that he said to the very religious Pharisees.

Faith in Christ bestows a special relationship on the believer with God, that of sonship (John 1:12; Romans 8:14-17). The person whose heart has been changed by God stands in contrast to the values of the worldly people around us (v. 1d). This was John's point in the previous chapter and one of the main ideas that he continues to bring out in the entirety of this letter.

Besides our present status as children of God, John tells of an additional blessing from God in how as a believer in some future time we will become like Jesus because we will see Jesus with eyes opened and will be freed from our sinful flesh (v. 2). Perhaps we will have some of the same powers that Jesus had, Who was able to walk through walls (John 20:19). Whatever the case, we will possess supernatural powers and freedom in our glorified bodies (Romans 8:18). Paul describes our current bodies as perishable, dishonorable, and weak, all due to sin (1 Corinthians 15:42-53). However, our imperishable bodies will be perfect, like Jesus, and unhindered by sin. For this we have only God to thank. "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are" (v. 1).

John's teaching here brings out the reality of our redeemed standing in God. We do not have to perform to get Him to love us. Instead, because we belong to Him as a child of God, we learn how to walk in a way that is consistent with our new identity. The world will not know what to do with us, for we will exhibit the fruit of God's Spirit within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Opposition, persecution, and being looked down on for our faith is just an opportunity for God to display His nature in us. If these things do not fully characterize our daily lives, we can pray for God to continue His work in us as His children to help us to live in light of our true identity.

As we transition to the Gospel reading, we must remember the raucous caused by Peter as he healed the man lame from birth that we learned about in the first reading. In the Gospel, we see Jesus teaching just after He healed a blind man and afterwards confronted the Pharisees (John 9). The message today alludes to Ezekiel 34, where God condemned the shepherds of Israel, meaning the spiritual leaders (Ezekiel 34:1-10). Ezekiel announced God's strong judgment on the kings, priests, and prophets who ruled before the exile of the Jews to Babylon. God said, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them" (Ezekiel 34:10). It's not coincidental that Jesus' message came just after He told a group of Pharisees that they were spiritually blind (John 9:41).

This section of Scripture is profound in that throughout the Chapter Jesus uses a metaphor of Himself as the Shepherd and the Door, with us (the children of God) as the sheep. Other characters come into play in the lesson including a hired hand, owner, and wolf. As you read, think about the contemporary application of these characters as Jesus' illustration unfolds. In the world today, who are the hired hands and wolves to whom Jesus was pointing?

Gospel Reading

John 10:11-18 NAS95 11 "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, 15 even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. 18 No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

It's evident that Jesus' message was pointed squarely at the Pharisees, a group of selfishly motivated "lay ministers" (shepherds) of Israel identified as the wolves and hired hands in this story (v. 12). Clearly, the owner of the sheep is God the Father, and Jesus stated outright that He is the Good Shepherd. He even added extra emphasis by using the Greek term transliterated "ego eimi," translated "I Am" (v. 11), a term which Jesus had repeated multiple times about Himself beginning in John 6:35. This phrase was something that the First Century Jews would have recognized as a strong statement of divinity. In Jesus' earlier use of this phrase in this Gospel He said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and "I am the light of the world" (John 8:35). In today's reading Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" (v. 11a). Jesus is our protector, the one who provides us with spiritual sustenance, and protects us from our enemies. He is the Light of truth from God, the Light that leads us to the single door to obtain eternal life, the only way to God.

Jesus went on to explain, with the context of the Pharisees in mind, that the plan of salvation would be extended to the "other sheep" (v. 16), meaning the Gentiles, and they would join with the flock of the believing Jews. He foreshadowed His death by telling how the shepherd would lay down His life for the combined Jewish and Gentile flock. Finally, Jesus made a very important point that He was not a victim. He said that He was given the power by His Father to lay down His life for His sheep. Nowhere in the Bible is Jesus ever portrayed as a victim. On the night He was betrayed Jesus said, "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53). Jesus gave up His life in voluntary submission to the Father. This teaching has important implications for our daily walk as believers. As we contemplate Jesus' voluntary sacrifice for us, would we not want to voluntarily reciprocate and sacrifice our misguided desires for Him? The call of the Gospel is one of invitation, not coercion and manipulation. Jesus' voluntary death on the cross built a bridge of trust to us in our desperate situation. May we cross the bridge of trust and learn to walk with Him on a daily basis.

Finally, Jesus is our protector from the wolves. Though Jesus directed His message to the Pharisees, these ungodly forces are alive and well in the present day. All one has to do is click through the television dial on any given day to find spiritual charlatans peddling their wares all across the airwaves. False spiritual cults and belief systems abound, as do global religious movements that enthrone the false god of the moon and objects in temples. Peter said about the false teachers, "But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling

where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed" (2 Peter 2:12). Though we live in a fallen age where spiritual darkness is present across the world, we are called as the ones that God knows by name to continue to plead with the lost and dying generation to repent of their sins and be baptized, trusting only in the Lord Jesus for spiritual life.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Jesus is referred to as our Good Shepherd and the Guardian of our soul. In what areas are you struggling on your own and need to let Him into your life to shepherd you? How does this guardianship of your soul change how you view life and your decisions?

2. In all three passages, we see a variety of angles to identify the greatness of Jesus:

He is the Chief Cornerstone of the faith

He is the One who will appear and make us like Him when He returns for believers

He is the Good Shepherd

Write out your response to these descriptions of Jesus and what difference this should make in your life. Pray this back to the Lord and ask Him to help you to internalize these realities in your soul.

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/042615.cfm

First Reading ACTS 4:8-12

Second Reading 1 JN 3:1-2

Gospel Reading JN 10:11-18

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 10-26-2014



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

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

The verses leading up to today's reading provided important emphasis on points of the Law already

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

Foreigners were not the only downtrodden class of people to whom God afforded special protection in the Law. Before we move onto the reading, we need to discuss the standing of the underlings in the historical context of ancient Near East. In those days there were three classes of people that were as low in the socioeconomic strata as foreigners were. These were widows, orphans, and the poor, although the first two certainly shared the characteristic of being poor. These groups of people had almost no rights in the secular kingdoms that surrounded Israel. However, we find throughout the Law God's special protection provided for these groups of people. The fact that God provides protection for the lower classes of people through the Law is an insight into God's very nature. We see in the Book of Psalms God's care for the poor. God says that He is "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows" (Psalms 68:5). The Psalmist said, "I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted And justice for the poor" (Ps 140:12). "The LORD performs righteous deeds And judgments for all who are oppressed," the Psalmist said (Ps 103:6). God made special provisions for the protection of these classes of people throughout the Law. In Lev. 19:9–10 God provided special protection for strangers and the poor in providing for them through the gleanings in the corners of the fields. In Deut. 14:28–29 God provided special Laws for strangers, the fatherless, and widows. The Prophet Isaiah gave God's call to the Israelites to repent of their sin in the opening of his Book. God said, "Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). This admonition appears multiple times throughout the Old Testament, and is in fact what James in the New Testament called "basic religion." He said, "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

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

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

In the reading we see God's concern for widows (v. 22), orphans (v. 22), and the poor (v. 25). God

said that He would hear the cries of the widows and the orphans and answer with judgment by allowing the people to be killed by their enemies with the sword (v. 24). This is something that was repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament, especially in the era of the Judges. When times were good the people would begin to oppress the lower classes, then God would allow an alien nation to overtake the people. Then they would repent, God would raise up a deliver (for example a judge like Gideon in Judges 6), the people would again return to prosperity and the cycle would repeat. God's instruction about not oppressing the poor continued in verses 26-27 as neighbor took his neighbor's cloak as collateral for a loan. This person was so poor that the only thing that they had to pledge was their clothing. God knew that this was a dire situation and provided a clear principle that such essential items were not to be taken as collateral in loans among fellow Israelites. The principle is that when the poor neighbor is taken advantage of by being forced to pledge his essentials in order to survive that God will raise up a deliverer against the more prosperous man to bring judgment upon him for his unrighteous action. Instead, God said in Leviticus something that we shall study later in the Gospel lesson, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Loving your neighbor in the case of what God said about not taking your neighbor's cloak as a pledge instead meant sharing in your abundance and that of the community.

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

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

Paul told the Thessalonians how impressed he was with them because they didn't just do as he had told them to do ("word only," v. 5), but that they also carried out those things that he had directed them to do through the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but they became examples to others (v. 7). The Thessalonians turned from the worship of idols as was the custom of their culture to the worship of the One True God (v. 9). Finally, Paul commended them for holding hope in the

resurrection of the dead. When he said that Jesus "rescues us from the wrath to come" (v. 10) he was referring to the eternal punishment that was promised to the unbelievers in hell, not some sort of temporal deliverance or rapture (catching up) from their present circumstances. Later in the Book Paul did discuss how believers who were alive at the time when Jesus did return would be united with him in the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:17), which is the context of the books and movie entitled *Left Behind* (we will cover that in a future lesson). The key point that Paul was making to the Thessalonians was his commendation for them for living out their Christian lives in word **and** in action, something that the Sadducees and Pharisees in the Gospel narrative hadn't learned.

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

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

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

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

The short term silencing of the Sadducees provided the Pharisees with the opportunity to test Jesus for themselves. They asked Him, "which is the great commandment in the Law" (v. 36), again

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

Spiritual Resources in Christ:

- I have been washed (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been sanctified (set apart for special use) (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been justified (pronounced "not guilty") (1 Corinthians 6:11)
- I have been forgiven of my sins (1 John 1:9)
- When I sin I have an Advocate – Jesus Christ, who speaks to the Father in my defense (1 John

2:1)

- I am a new creation, the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- I have been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3)
- I belong, I have been adopted, I have a spiritual family (Ephesians 1:5)
- I have resurrection power (Ephesians 1:19-20)
- I have God's grace that teaches me to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live a self-controlled, upright and godly life (Titus 2:11-12, 1 Corinthians 10:13)

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

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/102614.cfm

First Reading EX 22:20-26

Second Reading 1 THES 1:5C-10

Gospel Reading MT 22:34-40

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 10-19-2014

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/101914.cfm

First Reading IS 45:1, 4-6

Second Reading 1 THES 1:1-5B

Gospel Reading MT 22:15-21

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 10-12-2014



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

contact with each week."

For Further Study:

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

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/101214.cfm

First Reading IS 25:6-10A

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

Gospel Reading MT 22:1-14

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 3-30-2014

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5



Welcome back to the Mass Notes for 3-30-2014. This week we begin with the Book of First Samuel where we will see how God used Samuel to select David as the King of Israel. Then we will move onto Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and finally close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 9 where Jesus miraculously heals a blind man. I also share a story about how God "unblinded" my eyes to be able to understand the Bible.

The first reading is from First Samuel 16 and records the story of how the Prophet Samuel followed God's instructions in order to select the second King of Israel to replace King Saul whom God had rejected. Immediately after Saul was ordained king he began disobeying very clear and direct orders from God provided to him by Samuel. In Chapter 15 Samuel gave Saul clear prophesy from the LORD which said "Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1Samuel 15:3). Saul gathered his troops together and followed God's command *except* for some rather large details. "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (v. 9). Oops. Because of this (and the other times Saul disobeyed) God took the kingdom away from him saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands" (v.11a). The text continued, "And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night" (v.11b). So Samuel began to make his search for the new king by following God's order to go to Jesse who was David's father. Let's read the text along with all of the other verses surrounding the reading (verses 1-13) in order to understand the entire context.

> *1 Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons." 2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you." 4 So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, "Do you come in peace?" 5 He said, "In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'The LORD has not chosen this one either." 10 Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all the children?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." 12 So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:1-13)*

It's interesting that Samuel was afraid of King Saul since even the elders of the city were afraid of him (v. 4). However, the text recorded not only the story and circumstantial details of the search for the future king but also Samuel's thoughts (v.2). We know of course that God knows all of the secret thoughts of our hearts (Psalm 44:21) and this became even clearer by what we saw in verse 7. "[F]or God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (v.7c-ff). God directed the Prophet not to rely upon the outward appearance of the Sons of Jesse; rather he was to wait for God's confirmation. Regardless of his feelings, Samuel followed God's directions exactly and went to David's hometown of Bethlehem.

First, Samuel surveyed the eldest son; the one whom one may think would be the logical choice from among the large clan of Jesse's sons. Eliab passed before him and Samuel didn't receive any confirmation from God. He proceeded on down the line, next with Abinadab, then with Shammah, and down the line with the brothers. Nevertheless, God did not confirm any of them, so Samuel asked Jesse if there were any more brothers. Jesse then sent for his youngest son David (v. 11). The writer of this Scripture then made an interesting observation. After being cautioned not to look on the sons' outward appearance the writer said immediately upon seeing David, "Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance (v. 12b)! Next, the LORD spoke to Samuel. How this was done we are not told. He directed Samuel to annoint David as king (v.12c-ff). So Samuel

followed God's command and anointed David as the new King of Israel (v.13a).

The New Testament Bible records that King David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). What does it mean to be a person after God's own heart? First, the reading said, "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (v. 13b). God empowers believers through His Holy Spirit Who indwells everyone that has been born from above (John 3:3). Second, we must submit ourselves to the Lord by being obedient to Him (James 4:7). One of the main stumbling stones that we may have in submission to God is pride. Saint Peter said, "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1 Peter 5:5). Finally, we must develop a love for the Word of God. King David said the following about this in the Book of Psalms. "I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate on Your statutes" (Psalms 119:47-48).

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, insert your name in place of the "you" in the second word of verse 8, and rephrase it like this. "For Jim, who was formerly in darkness . . . .

> *8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; 12 for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. 13 But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. 14 For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you." (Ephesians 5:8-14)*

Paul said that those who were blind are now able to see (v.8). Believers are "children of light" (v.8) as contrasted with children of darkness (or children of the devil) that we will read about in the Gospel lesson. God's children exhibit clear attributes and behaviors that reveal their "light relationship" with their Father God. This is in contrast to the children of darkness who express themselves, many times without even knowing it, as children of the devil. Children of the light express "goodness and righteousness and truth" (v.9), try "to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (v.10), "do not participate in unfruitful deeds of darkness" but instead work to "expose them" (v.11). God, who is the light, exposes everything, for nothing can be hidden from Him (v.13). When we come to a point where we believe and agree with what God says about sin then we have followed God's admonition to awaken from our spiritual darkness so that the light of the Word of God may enable God to launch us on a path of growing in love for and knowledge of Him (4.14).

What if we cannot read the Bible and understand what it means, or if we don't have a desire to even attempt to study it? This week I was contemplating the subject of understanding and coming to the point of loving God's Word. I remember that for the first 35 years of my life, I had an almost impossible time understanding the Bible, this included the New Testament – the Old Testament was a lost cause for me. In fact, when I decided almost 20 years ago to begin reading the Bible I became

angry while reading the Old Testament. I thought that since Jesus was eternal that it would be easy for me to locate Him there in the Old Testament. It just didn't make any sense to me, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate. Something had to happen in order to bring about a change or I felt like I was going to throw it away and just quit. What made the difference for me? It wasn't a magical, one-time event, but the change came as a series of impressions I got while I was praying over the course of about a month long period. I had always prayed to God but at some point while reading in the New Testament, I came to the point where I prayed something like this, again, over a period of several weeks. I told God that I believed that I was a sinner (Romans 3:23) and I deserved punishment for sin (Romans 6:23). I told Him that I believed that Jesus was the only way to heaven (John 14:6) and that I needed His Spirit (John 3:3) to help me to fix the mess that I had made of my life. After a long period of praying to God about this, as well as talking to a few other people about it, I had an eerie encounter with Jesus late one night in my bedroom. In those days, I was living in an upscale condominium in a large city surrounded by the nightlife only a few blocks up Main Street, but I had never felt more alone. I turned off all of the lights and closed the door to my bedroom to pray in silence while laying on my bed. I was frustrated with my inability to live up to my high standards, which included trying to go to church more and party less. After I began praying I felt a tangible presence of Jesus in my dark bedroom that night. In the quiet darkness and with my eyes closed more tightly than I thought possible, I extended my hand to Him over the side of the bed. Although I didn't expect for my hand to be physically grabbed, for I would have freaked out, I sensed the strong presence of Jesus in the room with me during that instant. From that night onwards, I felt a certain presence of God in my heart, something which is hard for me to put into words. However, some days later I noticed that I could read the Bible with understanding and without getting angry, as had happened in the past.

I still have difficulty in reading a variety of books but have come to the point that I find joy in reading the Bible. Last week I downloaded the free version of Saint Augustine's Confession onto my Kindle, thinking that by reading this I would gain some important spiritual insights and become a more godly man. I'm ashamed to say that I couldn't make it through one entire page. The Elizabethan English didn't help, but I'm just not a philosopher. Sometimes we need to understand and accept our limits.

What about you, do you desire to have a deeper understanding of the Bible? I encourage you to fall on your knees in prayer and ask God to grant both the understanding and the desire. Is there something standing between you and God? The Scripture says that if you confess your sins God is faithful and just to forgive your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Scripture also says that we don't have because we don't ask and sometimes when we do ask God doesn't give it to us because we ask with a false motive (James 4:2-3). Everyone, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, must be born from above (John 3:3) in a spiritual sense. If you don't feel that you have the spiritual discernment necessary to read God's Word, just ask Him for it, but ask with the proper motive. This is a motive of desiring to turn from your sin and to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

To summarize, in the first and second reading we discussed how God "unblinded" the minds of

people. First, Samuel was "unblinded" to the identity of the future King of Israel, King David. Second, Paul wrote about how believers are "unblinded" to the reality of sin and even work to expose it. As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will find a story about how Jesus healed a blind man, and this person also received spiritual eyesight through his belief in the Lord Jesus. Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath, something that set him further at odds with the hypocritical Pharisees.

A very interesting insight regarding the topic of blindness can be found by studying the context of the Gospel lesson immediately prior in Chapter 8. Here Jesus had a very difficult conversation with His nemesis the Pharisees, a conflict that continues into the lesson today in Chapter 9. Jesus pronounced the source of their logic after they began to accuse Him and He read their minds and told them that they wanted to kill Him. When the Pharisees said that Abraham was their father (John 8:39) Jesus said, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Next, they accused Jesus of having a demon. This led to Jesus making one of His famous "I Am" statements. "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am'" (v. 58). This powerful statement was an outright testimony by Jesus to his deity (see also John 10:30). Finally, in the very last verse of Chapter 8 John wrote, "Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus **hid Himself** and went out of the temple" (v. 59, emphasis added). Notice that Jesus "hid himself," which is another way of looking at it was that he blinded the Pharisees.

As you read the lesson today, notice that Jesus' first action was to "unblind" a blind man. Think of it like this: First, he blinded the *proud* Pharisees, then he "unblinded" a *humble* blind man.

> *1 As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." 6 When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. 8 Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" 9 Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." 10 So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is He?" He *said, "I do not know." 13 They *brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. 14 Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a*

> *sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they *said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." 18 The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, 19 and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" 20 His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." 25 He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" 28 They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. 31 "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. 32 "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 "If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." 38 And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. 39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains. (John 9:1-41)*

A variety of key points emerged from the text. First, the disciples believed that the physical condition of the blind man was as a result of the man or his parent's sin. Jesus corrected this false believe and said that God allowed this condition so that he could be healed during this particular event! God is sovereign over every single event in history, and He designed this whole affair to show the glory of God. Second, the healed, formerly blind man became a powerful testimony to the deity of Jesus and this further deepened the His opposition to the Pharisees. One has to like what the formerly blind man said to the Pharisees, it's almost like something we could hear from a smart talking teenager! "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v.25). After the Pharisees had put him out of the temple (most likely permanently, see his parents warning in v. 22), Jesus came and presented Himself to him, telling the man that he was the Messiah (v. 35, "Son of Man"). The blind man believed, and then worshiped Him (v.38).

Third, the Pharisees alluded to the fact that they held the same belief as the disciples about sin being the cause of physical infirmity (v. 24). Someone that was born blind clearly was a sinner, and sinners, according to the Pharisees, should have nothing to do with worship in the temple. They went on to say, "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him" (v. 32).

This powerful story concluded with some of the most intense teaching ever found in the New Testament. Read the conclusion again very carefully.

> *39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

One time I was reading a certain spiritual book called *The Complete Green Letters* by Miles J. Stanford (Zondervan 1984). This book contains many very powerful sections that I copiously underlined and highlighted, probably adding a half a pound to the book just for the weight of it all! I found one particular page to be so moving and important that I just wrote a note at the top of the page and highlighted the note in yellow that said, "Consider this entire page highlighted!" The last three verses of the Gospel lesson are like that – consider the whole section highlighted! Jesus' statement is the essence of the Gospel message. Jesus said that He came into the world to reveal the two groups of people, those on the narrow road to life and those on the broad road to eternal separation from God (Matthew 7:13). In a spiritual sense, there are two types of people, children of God the Father and the rest, by default, children of the devil. The children of the light have spiritual vision, but the children of the darkness are spiritually blind. Saint Paul said:

> *3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).*

Consider this whole quotation highlighted! There is no more crucial distinction between people than whether they have spiritual vision or are spiritually blind. Jesus, through His divine grace, came to show us the difference. He calls us to repent of our sins and to believe that He is the Messiah of the universe. As we approach Easter let's all us pray that we may be God's light to a lost and dying world that badly needs the spiritual vision that can come only through the good news of the Gospel and believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How have you been "unblinded" to the spiritual truths of the Bible? Consider submitting a brief testimony of to the Christians for Christ web site: http://www.christiansforchrist.org/personal-testimonies

2. Frequently when someone brings up King David our mind automatically jumps to the story about his indiscretion with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). In reality this is similar to what the Pharisees did to Jesus by accusing the formerly blind man of being a sinner, and glossing over the great miracle of his healing – though they said that this type of healing had never been seen before.

A. Do you catch yourself being a Pharisee overlooking the heart and focusing upon minor, outward faults in yourself and others?

B. How does knowing that God looks on the heart change how you evaluate what's important in your own life and in relationship with others.

C. Ask God to reveal to you in what areas you are glossing over God's goodness in a certain person and missing His heart for them.

3. How could you reach out to someone who hasn't experienced the miraculous gift of God's spiritual healing?