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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 133: 09/20/2026



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

For He has glorified you." As you read, keep in mind this universal offer of salvation that God made to the world some seven hundred years before Jesus was born.

First Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is a parable from the Gospel of Saint Matthew. The context is that Jesus was talking to the crowds that were following him in the region of Perea, known as "Galilee beyond the Jordan" (Matthew 19:1). Some Pharisees also came to "test" Jesus by asking him a question about

the legality of divorce (v. 3). Next, Jesus had a conversation with a rich, young ruler during which Jesus made the statement, "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 24). The text says His disciples were "astonished" and asked Jesus, "Then who can be saved?" (v. 25). Jesus' answer helps to shed some light into the mystery on how anyone comes to believe in God. He said, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). With this introduction in mind, let's read the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

God's ways are not our ways

To live is Christ

The last shall be first, and the first last

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 135: 09/21/2025



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

We cannot know God apart from His revelation. One form of this revelation is the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. The reading for today is from Amos, who is known as a "minor prophet." This is not because he was inferior to the others, but because his book is shorter than other prophetic

books like Isaiah, who is referred to as a "major prophet." Read the opening verse of Amos to get an orientation to the text: *The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa– what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel (Amos 1:1).*

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

First Reading:

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

A frequent theme in the Book of Amos was the exploitation of the poor. This was a time of relative prosperity in Israel and Judah. The poor were evidently being taken advantage of by the rich. What was being pointed out here was that even during a holiday, which was meant by "when the new moon is over," and on the Sabbath day, the rich were plotting their future sleazy business deals. At a time when God called them to take time away from work to reflect upon Him, they were plotting how to cheat the poor by "diminishing the ephah." The ephah was the unit with which they measured grain. They were also plotting other ways, such as cheating on the scales and adding to the value of their money. These people were the ultimate among unjust stewards. Even though everything that they ultimately came from God, including the holidays, the Sabbath day, and all that they owned, they even used their worship time to plot how they might defraud the poor. Their minds were not on God during their worship, but were instead focused on planning how they would gain

more wealth, even at the cost of exploiting those less powerful than them. Even if their hearts were with God during their worship, they would still have been guilty of defrauding the poor. These people were poor stewards of not only their physical resources but also their immaterial resources. This includes things like their intellect, influence, and power.

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First Timothy. This is the first of the Pastoral Epistles, consisting of this Book, Second Timothy, and Titus. In the Letter, Paul is ministering to his spiritual son Timothy by advising him on spiritual matters in the church plagued with false teaching. This is evidenced by the opening of the letter in which Paul warns against false teaching in verse 3 of the first chapter. Paul said, "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines" (1 Timothy 1:3). Today's reading in the second chapter addresses the subject of prayer, but also reveals some timeless spiritual truths.

Second Reading:

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

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

Paul begins this section by saying how God wishes all people to be saved (v. 4). Next, he affirms that God is the only mediator between Himself and man, something that contradicts the teachings of the false teachers who placed mediators as intermediaries between themselves and God. This was because the Gnostics, among others, who held to these false beliefs, taught that matter was bad and spirit was good. Therefore, there had to be another mediator other than Jesus because Jesus was a man in the flesh. Alternatively, they taught that Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh because,

since the Spirit of God is good and the flesh is evil, then Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh. This necessitated various mediators, including angels or ministers who intervened between God and man. This is a key point that Paul addressed with Timothy because another of the heresies being confronted was the Galatian heresy. This false teaching was that Christians were bound to uphold the Jewish Law and the continuance of a form of Levitical priesthood that mediated between God and man. The emergence of this priesthood directly contradicted God's clear teaching on the priesthood of all believers, as evidenced in 1 Peter 2:5-9. Paul closes this section by affirming his status as a church leader, especially to the Gentile believers (v. 7). Finally, he again calls upon the church to pray together in peace (v. 8).

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

> he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 7 "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8 "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. 9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings. 10 "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. 11 "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? 12 "And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Many have found this parable puzzling, but the interpretation is really quite simple. Had we read the next two verses, we would have found that the Pharisees to whom this was addressed understood the parable quite well: *The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. (Luke 16:14-15)*

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

I remember an occasion while teaching in the prison where I caught a student cheating on an exam. He had completed the exam using a pencil. When I returned the paper the following week, showing the errors, he came to me after class and said I had made a mistake. He said that I had marked several answers wrong when he had entered the correct choice on the multiple-choice questions. I could see that he had neatly erased his answer and circled the correct one. He showed great ingenuity in his cheating. I didn't think anyone would try this again, but just to be sure, I ran copies of their exams the next time I gave an exam. Sure enough, the same student approached me with the same complaint. Imagine his surprise when I pulled out the copy of his original exam and

compared it to the one he had just returned to me! Some people are creative for worldly, sinful purposes. In contrast, imagine God's joy when we use the talents that He gave us for the greatness of His Kingdom.

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

Examine some insights that I put together and insights shared by my business students when we discussed this particular parable.

- The manager was willing to go to great, creative, and insightful lengths to secure his position in a future job or living situation. As spiritual people, are we willing to go to these great lengths to grow the kingdom of God?

- As believers in Christ, we must be aware of the struggle between God and money. We can't worship two gods, only the True God. Money can become our god and compromise our way of life.

- As Americans we may struggle with compartmentalized thinking. We may practice the things of God on Sunday but not give them much thought the rest of the week. How many of us read some devotional materials this morning? We put the things in God in several compartments, but they don't "flavor" or run over into the others like work, school, driving to work, working out, relating to our family members, and how we spend our free time and money.

- Sometimes, we may find a church website of grade-school quality, but unbeknownst to us, we

have half a dozen web developers who attend our church and would never let something like this get posted on the web while at their workplace.

- We should not be surprised to find out that our boss was a Christian; this should already be evident to us. If we ran into him at a church event, we should not be surprised. The same should be true in reverse about us. Do others know that we are Christians?

- We should be willing to go to great lengths to grow the kingdom of God using whatever worldly resources are available.

- We should evaluate how compartmentalized our lives are. Where do we fall on a scale of worshiping God vs. money? The worship of money is very subtle, so asking this directly is not helpful because we defend ourselves and say, "Of course, we don't do that."

- These changes come about through God. We must pray and ask Him to deliver us from our false thinking. We are new creations in Christ, and old things have passed away. Any empowerment that we have toward true change will only come from God.

- Jesus gave us two metaphors – salt and light- that teach us that Christianity is designed not just to be a minor part of society, but the defining part. Salt permeates! It flavors! It arrests corruption! Similarly, Christianity should influence everything it touches and arrest the decay of a society tending toward corruption.

Let me tell a story about a special person in my life. After I moved to Indiana, I met a man who worked in the cafeteria at the local college. He was a gentle and unassuming kind of man, and he had a specific, unusual look about him. I struck up a conversation with him one day and built a relationship with him over a period of years. Dean (his real name) had a learning disorder, but continued to be a diligent employee at the college and is one of the longest-serving members of the school. As I got to know Dean, I realized many valuable lessons. Dean was a man who, although he wasn't given many talents or treasures, used everything he had to serve God. He worked hard in the cafeteria and was a friend to many students. He volunteered to film every basketball game and served the team in other ways. He worked in the children's ministry at his church on Wednesday

night and Sunday morning. Dean began volunteering for the local jail ministry and used his excellent singing voice to praise God to the men in the county jail. This requires his attendance at an early morning meeting on Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday, he goes to the local retirement community to sing at their afternoon church service. Dean also offers his house for a very nominal rent for students to stay. These are just the things I am aware of; the list goes on.

Well, one day we were at an evening church service, and a lady gave a moving testimony about some difficulties in her life. We all sat there listening with what we thought was deep compassion, but Dean got up and walked out. Everyone wondered why he would interrupt the focus at that critical time by leaving. He came back a minute later and walked up to the woman and handed her a couple of tissues with which to dry her tears. That says it all about Dean. Dean uses his time, talent, and treasure in serving God. If anyone in the community tried even half as hard as Dean they could change the world. I tell my wife, "It doesn't matter because when we get to heaven, we will all be working for Dean anyway."

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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Talents: What talents has God given you?

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-22-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Recently I watched the movie *War Room* that featured a man who was engaged in a struggle between the wisdom of God and the "wisdom" of his carnal fleshly desires. We will read about what James said about this struggle in the second reading. Later, I will provide some additional insights I gleaned from the movie. Then we will learn about servant leadership in the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark where we see the disciples arguing about whom among them was the greatest.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus during which no prophets spoke. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

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> *Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 The wicked say:*
> *Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us;*
> *he sets himself against our doings,*
> *reproaches us for transgressions of the law*
> *and charges us with violations of our training.*
> *Let us see whether his words be true;*
> *let us find out what will happen to him.*
> *For if the just one be the son of God, God will defend him*
> *and deliver him from the hand of his foes.*
> *With revilement and torture let us put the just one to the test*
> *that we may have proof of his gentleness*
> *and try his patience.*
> *Let us condemn him to a shameful death;*
> *for according to his own words, God will take care of him.*

So much of what is written in the Apocryphal writings accord with the Book of James in the New Testament (from where the second reading today is drawn). In this reading we see a contrast between the wicked person and the righteous one, the intended reader of the Book. The wicked person's thoughts are (perhaps unknowingly) focused upon wicked words, here personified as a sort of literary foil. A literary foil often comes into the scene saying things in order to provide important contextual information, such as, "How did you find yourself on this boat on this sunny Tuesday afternoon in August during the middle of the second world war." In this reading, the foil expresses the secret thoughts, context, and other insights from the perspective of the wicked mind who is set against the things of God. The wicked say things like, "*For if the just one be the son of God, God will defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes*." This sounds much Satan's accusation of Jesus recorded in Matthew 4:6, *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone*." Jesus' response was, "You shall not put the LORD God to the test," (Deut 6:16).

As Christians, we understand that we will suffer trials in spite of the fact that God is for us. Even though those opposed to the Gospel, even unknowingly oppose God and falsely accuse us, in the end

we will prevail. There will be a separation of the wheat from the chaff. For, "*His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire"* (Mt 3:12).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James but picking up in Chapter 3. The context is just after James' treatise on the power and danger of the tongue. He calls the tongue a fire (James 3:6), a "restless evil full of deadly poison" (James 3:8). He says, "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so" (James 3:10). The main theme of today's reading is the contrast between human wisdom and godly wisdom. As you read, take particular notes of the words and phrases that constitute each side of this spiritual battle. Especially take note of repeated words and phrases.

Note: Although the reading omitted verses 14 – 15, we included them below. This was because although verse 14 forms a conclusion to his teaching on the dangers of our speech it also provides a natural linkage to his subsequent teaching below.

Second Reading:

> *James 3:14 – 4:3 NAS95 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. 18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. 1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

In the reading, James contrasts the "wisdom from above" (v. 17a) with that which arises from within the human heart and results in the ungodly speech about which he just finished speaking (James 3:1-12). James calls this outpouring of sinful thought patterns of the heart "bitter jealousy and selfish

ambition" and repeats it twice (vv. 14a, 16a). These sinful patterns of the heart result in "arrogance and [lying] against the truth "v. 14b-ff). They are not from God (v. 15a), but are instead of non-divine "earthly, natural, demonic" sources (v. 15b-ff). They result in "disorder and every evil thing" (v. 16). In contrast, wisdom originating from God as described verse 17 is 1. Pure, 2. Peaceable, 3. Gentle, 4. Reasonable, 5. "Full of mercy" and results in good works, 6. "Unwavering," and 7. "Without hypocrisy." It's like there are two freight trains pulling against one another in our hearts. The first is that of sinful patterns originating from within the fallen condition of our hearts with input from Satan our enemy feeding the coal into the steam heading pulling away from God. Opposing that train is another engine that is God's "wisdom from above" Who opposes all of these sinful seeds implanted into our lives. The planting of God's seed in our hearts, meaning the Word of God from the Bible, results in the fruits of righteousness and peace "v. 18).

As James continued his teaching in chapter 4 with the source of the troubles already clearly in our minds, he asked the hypothetical question, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you" (v. 1a). He answers his own question with a summary statement of the things that came before. The source of the "quarrels and conflicts among [us]" is our "pleasures that wage war in [our] members" (v. 1b). These "pleasures that wage war against our body parts" form Satan's tools to lead us to "commit murder" (v. 2b) because of following the lust in our heart (v. 2a). The war between our spirit and bodies continue and when we are "envious and cannot obtain," meaning we covet the things from others which we cannot have; we "fight and quarrel." James says that even when we pray because we want something we don't have, we "ask with wrong motives, so that [we] may spend it on [our] pleasures" (v. 3). Hidden within James teaching upon the contrasts between our fallen human condition and godly wisdom is a principle to ask God in prayer for the things that we desire (v. 3a). We will speak more about this later.

How many of us can identify with the ongoing struggle between our flesh and the devil's ways that rage in our hearts? In this section, James closely links our speech with the revelation of the secret battles that rage within us. Our ungodly speech provides an insight into the ways in which we are walking in opposition to the plan that God has for our lives. God said, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). I remember once I was talking to a friend of mine and as men have a habit of doing the subject moved to women. He made a statement about engaging in a certain specific form of carnal behavior with a woman. In my heart, I knew immediately that because of his current life situation he had been engaging in viewing pornography. Pornography is one of Satan's key ways in which he pours ungodly wisdom into the lives of people, be they unbelievers like my friend, or believers who know better. Engaging in the viewing of pornography is a channel through which flows the "wisdom" of our enemy. God stands ready to deliver us from our temptations, and as James said, all we have to do is to ask Him (v. 3a).

Additionally, just recently a friend of mine going all the way back to kindergarten was arrested for possession of child pornography. He evidently searched the web and then downloaded some sort of child pornographic materials. What worse is that this friend is a professing Christian.

I mentioned in the introduction that I had just returned from watching the movie *War Room*. This Christian movie provided a powerful illustration of the power of and necessity of prayer for couples as they engage in the unseen spiritual battle surrounding their lives. The movie told the story of a young mother met an older woman who mentored her about the power of prayer. Once this young woman began honestly seeking God by honoring Him in prayer huge things began to her in her life as well as that of her husband. James said in verse 3 of the reading, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." We need to ask the question; do we even ask? Regardless of our motives, we need to regularly assess whether we are honestly praying for the important things in our lives, such as our mate, children, and the lost people whom God has brought into our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson continues from Saint Mark but moves ahead from 8:35 where we ended last week and picks up with Chapter 9 just after the story of Jesus' transfiguration with His chosen subset of disciples consisting of Peter, James, and John. In between, Jesus had healed a demon possessed boy (Mark 9:16-27). This miracle was unique because someone in the crowd had presented the boy to Jesus after the disciples could not heal him (Mark 9:18). Afterwards, when the disciples had asked Jesus about why they could not heal him, Jesus told them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 8:29). Interestingly, this followed the father of the boy's request to Jesus when he said, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 8:24). It was as if Mark expressed a teaching moment with the disciples that the boy's father had the courage to ask Jesus to help his unbelief, yet the disciples were unable to heal the boy "by anything but prayer." As we saw in James, God calls us to ask Him in prayer for the things we desire (James 4:2e), yet at this stage the disciples did not yet understand the power of prayer in freeing the boy from his enslavement to a demon. Obviously, this was because Jesus was still with them, and they would understand later the powerful ministry of prayer.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 9:30-37 NAS95 30 From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. 31 For He was teaching His disciples and telling them,*

> *"The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." 32 But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him. 33 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. 35 Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." 36 Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me."*

Jesus and disciples left "from there" (v. 30), meaning the event of the last healing. This would have been at the base of the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured before His disciples. The two traditional sites of this event are Mt. Tabor and Mt. Hermon. After they left "there," Jesus wanted to be alone with His disciples as we see in verse 30b, "He did not want anyone to know about it." Along the way on their journey to Galilee, after they got to Capernaum Jesus asked the disciples what they had been arguing about (v. 33c), but they refused to answer Him (v. 34). Mark tells us that they had been debating which among them was the greatest disciple (v. 34b). It's not coincidental that this argument arose after the chosen three (Peter, James, and John) experienced seeing Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is also possible that these three were still radiating some of God's glory after coming down from the mountain as happened with Moses. (Exodus 34:29). Perhaps this created in these disciples' minds a sense of superiority, and the others perhaps wondered why they weren't chosen for the trip up the mountain. Jesus quickly corrected their misunderstanding concerning the pecking order by telling them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (v. 35c). Next, Jesus proceeded to provide them with an object lesson by placing a child in front of them to illustrate this principle (v. 36). Jesus used this illustration of the child to show them greatness does not consist of one's position. Even the lowest "child of the kingdom" can act as an ambassador for Jesus, and an ambassador for Jesus is also for God the Father. Therefore, the disciples shouldn't be arguing about their relative positions of greatness but should pursue the kingdom with a childlike faith and humility as servants of Jesus in pointing people to God the Father.

In summary, Jesus illustrated in the story today the principle of servant leadership. Even though He told the disciples that He was going to be "delivered into the hands of men" and killed (v. 31), they persisted in arguing about whom among them was the greatest. The presence of children provided Jesus with a means of using these young people as an example of how the disciples should view themselves.

What does this mean for our lives? Regardless of our social position in society, God calls us to view ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus. This Lord of the Universe is the same One Who washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:12-17). Saint Paul emulated these principles of servant leadership in his

ministry. He said, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). God empowers us through His Holy Spirit to carry out the work that He has started within us (Philippians 1:6). As we go about the week, let's keep these principles in mind when we are tempted to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Romans 12:3).

God continues to teach me about my sinful pride and how I have often viewed myself as superior to others. This week I was mowing my lawn using my large zero turn lawn mower while my neighbor was mowing his using an older riding type mower with a missing hood and various Band-Aids holding it together. The background of this particular neighbor is that he is some two decades younger than his wife who moved in a few years ago with her first husband and two kids. However, something happened between them, and she later married the much younger "boy" who was now out mowing her lawn. As I was contemplating the matter and zoomed past him on my tiger-striped racing machine I admit that I felt superior to him as he mowed with the broken-down junk machine. In an attempt to get a handle on my pride, I actually found myself saying, "When I was his age (i.e. riding a bike with training wheels), I would have been glad to have had a mower as nice as that." How's that for getting a handle on my pride! In reality, God calls me to be the servant even of my boyish neighbor who also needs to hear the message of the Gospel. In retrospect, what I can do in the future is to pray for him as I see him mowing his lawn, and even pray for an opportunity to build a bridge to him in order to be able to share the hope that I have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. All of us have heard the expression, "put your foot in your mouth." Jesus said in Luke's Gospel, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart" (Luke 6:45). From what you learned from the second reading today, reflect upon the last time which you put your foot in your mouth. What was the underlying condition that brought about this action? Through God's wisdom in the Bible, what are one or two ways that you can avoid this in the future?

2. The super disciples, including Peter, James, and John had every right to view themselves as being in a privileged position since they were the only ones invited to the travel up the mountain with Jesus and subsequently experienced His transfiguration. In what ways are you tempted to view yourself as being in an exalted position either in society or in the church? Using what you learned from the Gospel lesson, how does what you know about Jesus' view of leadership change your view?

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In summary, Jesus illustrated in the story today the principle of servant leadership. Even though He told the disciples that He was going to be "delivered into the hands of men" and killed (v. 31), they persisted in arguing about whom among them was the greatest. The presence of children provided Jesus with a means of using these young people as an example of how the disciples should view themselves.

What does this mean for our lives? Regardless of our social position in society, God calls us to view ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus. This Lord of the Universe is the same One Who washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:12-17). Saint Paul emulated these principles of servant leadership in his ministry. He said, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). God empowers us through His Holy Spirit to carry out the work that He has started within us (Philippians 1:6). As we go about the week, let's keep these principles in mind when we are tempted to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Romans 12:3).

God continues to teach me about my sinful pride and how I have often viewed myself as superior to others. This week I was mowing my lawn using my large zero turn lawn mower while my neighbor was mowing his using an older riding type mower with a missing hood and various Band-Aids holding it together. The background of this particular neighbor is that he is some two decades younger than his wife who moved in a few years ago with her first husband and two kids. However, something happened between them and she later married the much younger "boy" who was not out mowing her lawn. As I was contemplating the matter as I zoomed past him on my tiger-striped racing machine I admit that I felt superior to him as he mowed with the broken down junk that was

handed down to him from the neighbor's former husband. In an attempt to get a handle on my pride I actually found myself saying, "When I was his age (i.e. riding a bike with training wheels), I would have been glad to have had a mower as nice as that." How's that for getting a handle on my pride! In reality, God calls me to be the servant even of my boyish neighbor who also needs to hear the message of the Gospel. In retrospect, what I can do in the future is to pray for him as I see him mowing his lawn, and even pray for an opportunity to build a bridge to him in order to be able to share the hope that I have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. All of us have heard the expression, "put your foot in your mouth." Jesus said in Luke's Gospel, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart" (Luke 6:45). From what you learned from the second reading today, reflect upon the last time which you put your foot in your mouth. What was the underlying condition that brought about this action? Through God's wisdom in the Bible, what are one or two ways that you can avoid this in the future?

2. The super disciples including Peter, James, and John had every right to view themselves as being in a privileged position since they were the only ones invited to the travel up the mountain with Jesus and subsequently experienced His transfiguration. In what ways are you tempted to view yourself as being in an exalted position either in society or in the church? Using what you learned from the Gospel lesson how does what you know about Jesus' view of leadership change your view?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-20-2020

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will

remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. 27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . . (Philippians 1:20-27)

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). With this introduction in mind let's read the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

minister and spread the Good News even when our circumstances aren't perfect. Let us worship our wonderful, generous, persistent God with our whole lives.

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-22-2019



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

The text says that Amos was a shepherd prophet, and that he spoke about "what he saw concerning Israel" and this was "when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of

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

First Reading:

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

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

I am a high energy person and have frequently had some difficulty in focusing upon one certain thing at a time. My behavior doesn't end when the work week finishes and I head off to church on Sunday. No, I am guilty of frequently bringing all of my worldly cares and concerns into church on Sunday. I have learned that I need to begin to prepare my heart for worshiping God many hours before I actually arrive at church. For me this means limiting my consumption of coffee that morning along with consciously focusing upon God to the exclusion of outside thoughts. I have also

discovered that praying before church tends to improve my concentration level for spiritual things before I come to church. God knows what is going on in our hearts when we go to church. Part of being a good steward of our time, talents, and treasures involves the stewardship of our mind.

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First Timothy. This is the first of what is called the Pastoral Epistles consisting of this Book along with Second Timothy and Titus. In the Letter, Paul is ministering to his spiritual son Timothy by advising him on spiritual matters in the church that was plagued with false teaching. This is evidenced by the opening of the letter in which Paul warns against false teaching in verse 3 of the first chapter. Paul said, "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines" (1 Timothy 1:3). Today's reading in the second chapter address the subject of prayer but also reveals some timeless spiritual truths.

Second Reading:

> *1 Timothy 2:1-8 NAS95 1 First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. 7 For this*

> *I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. 8 Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.*

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

Paul begins this section with saying how God wishes all people to be saved (v. 4). Next, he affirms that God is the only mediator between Himself and man, something that contradicted the teachings of the false teachers who placed mediators as intermediaries between themselves and God. This was because the Gnostics, among others who held to these false beliefs, taught that matter was bad and spirit was good. Therefore, there had to be another mediator other than Jesus because Jesus was a man in the flesh. Alternatively, they taught that Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh because since the Spirit of God is good and the flesh is evil then Jesus couldn't have been God in the flesh. This necessitated various mediators including angels or ministers that intervened between God and man. This is a key point that Paul addressed with Timothy because another of the heresies being confronted was the Galatian heresy which held Christians bound not only to uphold the Jewish Law but also the continuance of a form of Levitical priesthood that interviewed between God and man. The emergence of this priesthood directly contradicted God's clear teaching on the priesthood of all believers as evidenced in 1 Peter 2:5-9. Paul closes this section by affirming his status as a leader of the church and especially to the Gentile believers (v. 7). Finally, he again calls upon the church to pray together in peace (v. 8).

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 16:1-13 NAS95 1 Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 2 And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' 3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 4 I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes. 5 "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 7 "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8 "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. 9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings. 10 "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. 11 "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? 12 "And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

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

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.

He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. (Luke 16:14-15)

The rich man in the story is God who is the provider of all things, both to believers and also non-believers. The unjust steward is a lazy but creative, non-believer who used his God-given creativity

to achieve his worldly self-satisfying purposes. The children of light represent all believers. The big idea is quite simple. God calls believers to use everything that he has given us to build up His kingdom. If non-believers are creative for worldly purposes then believers are called to a higher standard of stewardship for the kingdom of heaven. The parable also address the trap which the Pharisees fell into, for they were lovers of money (see Luke 16:14). As believers we are to use our money to worship God and not worship money and use God. This was where the Pharisees went wrong, the used God and worshipped money. Again, we are to use money to worship God, not worship money and use God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw how in the reading from Amos some teaching on honest stewardship. This dovetailed nicely with the Gospel lesson on the parable of the unjust manager. What are some ways in which people cheat in our modern society? How does knowing understanding God's high regard for "honest scales" and proper treatment of the poor enable you to counter these modern ways of cheating?
2. God has provided our time, talents, and treasures. With your answer to the first question in mind, pray that Jesus would show you what He would have you do for His Kingdom as a steward of those three areas. After you pray record your thoughts in your journal. What are some things towards which God may be calling you to action? Here are some thought starters:

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

Talents: What talents has God given you?

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 09-23-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Recently I watched the movie *War Room* that featured a man who was engaged in a struggle between the wisdom of God and the "wisdom" of his carnal fleshly desires. We will read about what James said about this struggle in the second reading. Later I will provide some additional insights I gleaned from the movie. Then we will learn about servant leadership in the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark where we see the disciples arguing about whom among them was the greatest.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James but picking up in Chapter 3. The context is just after James' treatise on the power of and danger of the tongue. He calls the tongue a fire (James 3:6), a "restless evil full of deadly poison" (James 3:8). He says, "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so" (James 3:10). The main theme of today's reading is the contrast between human wisdom and godly wisdom. As you read, take particular notes of the words and phrases that constitute each side of this spiritual battle. Especially take note of repeated words and phrases.

Note: Although the reading omitted verses 14 – 15, we included them below. This was because although verse 14 forms a conclusion to his teaching on the dangers of our speech it also provides a

natural linkage to his subsequent teaching below.

Second Reading:

> *James 3:14 – 4:3 NAS95 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. 18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. 1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

In the reading, James contrasts the "wisdom from above" (v. 17a) with that which arise from within the human heart and results in the ungodly speech about which he just finished speaking (James 3:1-12). James calls this outpouring of sinful thought patterns of the heart "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" and repeats it twice (vv. 14a, 16a). These sinful patterns of the heart result in "arrogance and [lying] against the truth "v. 14b-ff). They are not from God (v. 15a), but are instead of non-divine "earthly, natural, demonic" sources (v. 15b-ff). They result in "disorder and every evil thing" (v. 16). In contrast, wisdom originating from God as described verse 17 is 1. Pure, 2. Peaceable, 3. Gentle, 4. Reasonable, 5. "Full of mercy" and results in good works, 6. "Unwavering," and 7. "Without hypocrisy." It's like there are two freight trains pulling against one another in our hearts. The first is that of sinful patterns originating from within the fallen condition of our hearts with input from Satan our enemy feeding the coal into the steam heading pulling away from God. Opposing that train is another engine that is God's "wisdom from above" Who opposes all of these sinful seeds implanted into our lives. The planting of God's seed in our hearts, meaning the Word of God from the Bible, results in the fruits of righteousness and peace "v. 18).

As James continues his teaching in chapter 4 with the source of the troubles already clearly in our minds, he asks the hypothetical question, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you" (v. 1a). He answers his own question with a summary statement of the things that came before. The source of the "quarrels and conflicts among [us]" is our "pleasures that wage war in [our] members" (v. 1b). These "pleasures that wage war against our body parts" form Satan's tools to lead us to "commit murder" (v. 2b) because of following the lust in our heart (v. 2a). The war between our spirit and bodies continue and when we are "envious and cannot obtain," meaning we covet the things from others which we cannot have; we "fight and quarrel." James says that even when we pray because we want something we don't have, we "ask with wrong motives, so that [we] may spend it on [our] pleasures" (v. 3). Hidden within James teaching upon the contrasts between our fallen human condition and godly wisdom is a principle to ask God in prayer for the things that we desire (v. 3a). We will speak more about this later.

How many of us can identify with the ongoing struggle between our flesh and the devil's ways that rage in our hearts? In this section, James closely links our speech with the revelation of the secret battles that rages within us. Our ungodly speech provides an insight into the ways in which we are walking in opposition to the plan that God has for our lives. God said, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). I remember once I was talking to a friend of mine and as men have a habit of doing the subject moved to women. He made a statement about engaging in a certain specific form of carnal behavior with a woman. In my heart, I knew immediately that because of his current life situation he had been engaging in viewing pornography. Pornography is one of Satan's key ways in which he pours ungodly wisdom into the lives of people, be they unbelievers like my friend, or believers who know better. Engaging in the viewing of pornography is a channel through which flows the "wisdom" of our enemy. God stands ready to deliver us from our temptations, and as James said, all we have to do is to ask Him (v. 3a).

I mentioned in the introduction that I had just returned from watching the movie *War Room*. This Christian movie providing a powerful illustration to the power of and necessity of prayer for couples as they engage in the unseen spiritual battle surrounding their lives. The movie told the story of a young mother met an older woman who mentored her about the power of prayer. Once this young woman began honestly seeking God by honoring Him in prayer huge things began to her in her life as well as that of her husband. James said in verse 3 of the reading, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." We need to ask the question, do we even ask? Regardless of our motives, we need to regularly assess whether we are honestly praying for the important things in our lives, such as our mate, children, and the lost people whom God has brought into our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson continues from Saint Mark but moves ahead from 8:35 where we ended last week and picks up with Chapter 9 just after the story of Jesus' transfiguration with His chosen subset of disciples consisting of Peter, James, and John. In between, Jesus had healed a demon possessed boy (Mark 9:16-27). This miracle was unique because someone in the crowd had presented the boy to Jesus after the disciples could not heal him (Mark 9:18). Afterwards, when the disciples had asked Jesus about why they could not heal him, Jesus told them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 8:29). Interestingly this followed the father of the boy's request to Jesus when he said, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 8:24). It was as if Mark expressed a teaching moment with the disciples that the boy's father had the courage to ask Jesus to help his unbelief, yet the disciples were unable to heal the boy "by anything but prayer." As we saw in James, God calls us to ask Him in prayer for the things we desire (James 4:2e), yet at this stage the disciples did not yet understand the power of prayer in freeing the boy from him enslavement to the demon. Obviously, this was because Jesus was still with them, and they would understand later the powerful ministry of prayer.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 9:30-37 NAS95 30 From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. 31 For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." 32 But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him. 33 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. 35 Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." 36 Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me."*

Jesus and disciples left "from there" (v. 30), meaning the event of the last healing. This would have been at the base of the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured before His disciples. The two traditional sites of this event are Mt. Tabor and Mt. Hermon. After they left "there," Jesus wanted to be alone with His disciples as we see in verse 30b, "He did not want anyone to know about it." Along the way on their journey to Galilee, after they got to Capernaum Jesus asked the disciples what they had been arguing about (v. 33c), but they refused to answer Him (v. 34). Mark tells us that they had been debating which among them was the greatest disciple (v. 34b). It's not coincidental that this argument arose after the chosen three (Peter, James, and John) experienced seeing Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is also possible that these three were still radiating some of God's glory after coming down from the mountain as happened with Moses. (Exodus 34:29). Perhaps this created in these disciples' minds a sense of superiority, and the others maybe wondered why they weren't chosen for the trip up the mountain. Jesus quickly corrected their misunderstanding concerning the pecking order by telling them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (v. 35c). Next, Jesus proceeded to provide them with an object lesson by placing a child in front of them to illustrate this principle (v. 36). Jesus used this illustration of the child to show them greatness does not consist of one's position. Even the lowest "child of the kingdom" can act as an ambassador for Jesus, and an ambassador for Jesus is one for God the Father. Therefore, the disciples shouldn't be arguing about their relative positions of greatness but should purse the kingdom with a childlike faith and humility as servants of Jesus in pointing people to God the Father.

In summary, Jesus illustrated in the story today the principle of servant leadership. Even though He told the disciples that He was going to be "delivered into the hands of men" and killed (v. 31), they persisted in arguing about whom among them was the greatest. The presence of children provided Jesus with a means of using these young people as an example of how the disciples should view themselves.

What does this mean for our lives? Regardless of our social position in society, God calls us to view ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus. This Lord of the Universe is the same One Who washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:12-17). Saint Paul emulated these principles of servant leadership in his ministry. He said, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal

interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). God empowers us through His Holy Spirit to carry out the work that He has started within us (Philippians 1:6). As we go about the week, let's keep these principles in mind when we are tempted to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Romans 12:3).

God continues to teach me about my sinful pride and how I have often viewed myself as superior to others. This week I was mowing my lawn using my large zero turn lawn mower while my neighbor was mowing his using an older riding type mower with a missing hood and various Band-Aids holding it together. The background of this particular neighbor is that he is some two decades younger than his wife who moved in a few years ago with her first husband and two kids. However, something happened between them and she later married the much younger "boy" who was not out mowing her lawn. As I was contemplating the matter as I zoomed past him on my tiger-striped racing machine I admit that I felt superior to him as he mowed with the broken down junk that was handed down to him from the neighbor's former husband. In an attempt to get a handle on my pride I actually found myself saying, "When I was his age (i.e. riding a bike with training wheels), I would have been glad to have had a mower as nice as that." How's that for getting a handle on my pride! In reality, God calls me to be the servant even of my boyish neighbor who also needs to hear the message of the Gospel. In retrospect, what I can do in the future is to pray for him as I see him mowing his lawn, and even pray for an opportunity to build a bridge to him in order to be able to share the hope that I have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. All of us have heard the expression, "put your foot in your mouth." Jesus said in Luke's Gospel, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart" (Luke 6:45). From what you learned from the second reading today, reflect upon the last time which you put your foot in your mouth. What was the underlying condition that brought about this action? Through God's wisdom in the Bible, what are one or two ways that you can avoid this in the future?

2. The super disciples including Peter, James, and John had every right to view themselves as being in a privileged position since they were the only ones invited to the travel up the mountain with Jesus and subsequently experienced His transfiguration. In what ways are you tempted to view yourself as being in an exalted position either in society or in the church? Using what you learned from the Gospel lesson how does what you know about Jesus' view of leadership change your view?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-24-2017



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

Paul spoke about the inner conflict that he was having on whether it was more important for him to stay in the world to minister there or to join God in heaven, although the choice would of course be

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first." 9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 When

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

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

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

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

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

Let's highlight some of the key insights this parable implies about the nature of God. First, God is persistent in calling people to Himself. The landowner went out no less than five different times to call workers including early in the morning (v. 1), about the third hour (v. 2), about the sixth hour and ninth hours (v. 5), and finally about the eleventh hour (v. 6). Second, God is very generous. The

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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

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