Study Notes for the Sunday Mass

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

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom.

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The Book of Philemon is a story about a servant named Onesimus who having stolen from his master Philemon met up with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. Upon meeting with Paul, Onesimus' heart was changed by God and he repented of his former sins. The Book opens with Paul's address to Onesimus who was obviously a fellow believer and church leader and whom he called "our beloved brother and fellow worker" (Philemon 1). Today's reading is a portion of Paul's appeal to Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus back.

Second Reading:

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

> *Philemon 1:9-17 NAS95 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you --since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- 10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, 11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. 15 For*

perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

In the next section of Jesus' teaching he brings up the concept of carrying our own cross. The Scripture is clear in Matthew 11:30 that "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus said outright that the burden of being a disciple wasn't a heavy one, so is he contradicting Himself? Clearly not. What Jesus is saying is explained in the subsequent section where He tells of the wisdom of a builder to make a plan before he builds a tower and a king planning a battle. Jesus disciples didn't understand that he would be crucified on a cross, even if He had already told them about this prophesy. When we read this section and hear the word "cross" our mind jumps to Jesus on dying on the cross. But in context Jesus was referring to what the disciples would have understood about the cross. They would have understood that the cross beam was something which was carried on the way to a person's own execution. The cost of the cross for that person was their own death, and Jesus was foreshadowing the fact that for many of His disciples the cost of their cross would be their lives. This remains true in many parts of the world, and especially in the Middle East. In light of the recent unrest in Syria and Egypt

many Christians are proving Jesus' prophesy to be true. It's likely that for most of us we won't have to give our lives for our faith in Jesus. Carrying the cross for Jesus in our lives is a bit more complicated as to what God calls us to do for Him through our daily thoughts and actions.

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

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

As Christians, there will undoubtedly be times during which God will require us to count the cost. Sometimes it may be obvious to us, like if confronted by an Islamic terrorist asking us to deny the Lord Jesus. At other times it may be less obvious, like paying the repair costs to a car you hit because the wind caught your door even though it wasn't explicitly your fault. Perhaps you will run into an ethical situation at work. To use an illustration from one of our readers (we are praying for you sir), maybe you would receive inside information about the price of your competitors bid before you making your own. Or, using an illustration from my world of pay per click advertising, using a competitors trademarked name in your online ad in order to draw them away from that competitive product to your own.

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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Keywords: Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary 129