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 open with a comprehensive introduction to Ezekiel from the first reading. Then move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans and conclude with Matthew 18 where we discuss the procedure given to us from God regarding the resolution of disputes between believers. We would like to think that we would never need this but conflict is one inevitable consequence of the fall of mankind (Genesis 3).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. He was an animated prophet who sometimes acted out the message that God gave him in very peculiar ways. For example one time he dug a hole in the side of his house (Ezekiel 12), cooked his food using human waste for fuel (Ez 4:9), and laid on his right side for 390 days and then 40 days more only on his left! Ezekiel was among about ten thousand in the second group of Jews that were carried off to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar's invading forces in 597 BC. He ministered after the tragic death of godly King Josiah in 609 who had enacted broad reforms in Judah. However, the people were so entrenched in their idolatry that they quickly returned to their tragic way of living after the king's death at the hands of the Egyptian army. Ezekiel's message, like many, if not most of the prophets, is easier to understand after it has been fulfilled versus interpreting it in the predictive sense. For example, chapter 38 of his book contains a frightful prophecy about something that will come upon Israel at some future date. We know from the description of the events in that section that nothing like this has ever come upon them up until now, but interpreting Ezekiel's message is extremely difficult without the benefit of hindsight. Such was the case even for Jesus's own disciples in interpreting relatively straightforward messages from Isaiah regarding the Lord Jesus himself. Interestingly enough, the meaning of today's reading is very clear.

The context of today's reading is clearly illustrated in the first six verses that precede it:

> *1 And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 "Son of man, speak to the sons of your people and say to them, 'If I bring a sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman, 3 and he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows on the trumpet and warns the people, 4 then he who hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, and a sword comes and takes him away, his blood will be on his own head. 5 He heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning; his blood will be on himself. But had he taken warning, he would have delivered his life. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand.'" (Ezekiel 33:1-6)*

Ezekiel provided an illustration of the responsibility for the people to warn each other regarding their sin by relating it to the necessity of a person appointed in a military position to warn his superiors of an approaching army. It is common sense that a person appointed as a military guard would quickly report an approaching army, yet the people didn't warn each other about the sin that was approaching and even inside of their own souls.

With this context in mind let's continue reading the text of the first reading.

First Reading:

> *7 Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. 9 But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your life.(Ezekiel 33:7-9)*

Part of Ezekiel's role as a prophet was to vindicate the theocratic kingdom rule that God had ordained through the Law. This message was very specifically directed towards Ezekiel. Notice that the word "you" (and your) appeared no less than seven times in reference to Ezekiel. Verse one provided a good summary of the big idea of the reading. "Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me." This message was not, as some have said, in the context of evangelism. This admonition was made specifically to the Prophet Ezekiel in the context of warning his fellow Israelites about God's strong admonition for them to live according to the terms of their covenant. Ezekiel's role was to call them back to their covenant relationship with God. Not only was Ezekiel a watchman for the house of Israel, but all of the prophets, including the New Testament prophet John the Baptist acted in that role.

We can draw a theological principle from the text. Sometimes love is tough, we don't always want to hear what the authorities are saying when we are stepping out of line with God's plan for our lives. God in His kindness warns us when we are moving into destructive ways, but we are responsible to heed the warning. God warns us not only through His Word in the Bible but also through other people who embrace and then speak the truth of His Word. He also warns us through allowing certain difficult circumstances to intervene. Sometimes our first instinct is to attack the person that brought us the information about which we felt convicted. Later when we study the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus provided a procedure for dealing with conflicts between believers.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is just after Paul finished explaining his compelling desire for all of Israel to come to faith in the Lord Jesus including those before his time (Romans 9), those during his time (Romans 10), and those that will come after him (Romans 11). Next in Chapter 12, he explained how Christians were called to live transformed lives and present their bodies as living sacrifices. This is in contrast to what the author of Hebrews said about the Jewish Law, "Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Hebrews 10:11) since Jesus offered his body not as a victim but willingly on the cross once for all (Hebrews 10:10).

The reading today is from Chapter 13 which opens with an admonition for believers in the Lord Jesus to submit to their government authorities. Paul said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). He continued:

Second Reading:

Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (Romans 13:2-7)

It's important to remember that God commands us to obey our government authorities. As we will see in the reading he puts this admonition on the same level as our need to obey the Commandments. With this context in mind let's proceed with the second reading.

8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Paul quoted from the Old Testament and provided the seventh, sixth, eighth, and ninth commandments (Exodus 20:13-17). Paul also included Jesus' statement from Mark 12:31 that summed up the last five commandments. Christians are called to be careful stewards of their resources and to obey the commandments given by Him and which God has already placed on their hearts (Romans 2:15). As you can see, the heart of what God wants for us is to love one another. We fulfill this "law" by treating others with dignity and respect, the way we ourselves would want to be treated. Instead of trying to take advantage of people for our own gain, we should "owe" them nothing except love. What an amazing contrast Christians would be if we lived according to this passage.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The context was just after the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:2) when Jesus began to teach the disciples about God's kingdom values. The disciples asked who was the greatest in the kingdom. They evidently were alluding to the argument recording in Luke regarding who of **them** was the greatest (Luke 22:24). Jesus settled the matter by setting a child before Himself and saying, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). Jesus continued to teach them that the kingdom of heaven lies in sharp contrast to the kingdom of this world.

Gospel Reading:

15 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19

Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20 For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18:15-20)

Today's Gospel lesson can be applied in two contexts, first for the resolution of an issue between two Christians (whether or not they attend the same church), and second, as a procedure set forth by God for handling issues related to church discipline. The process for resolving either type of dispute is similar. In the reading, Jesus provided a four-step process for resolving conflict. First, Jesus taught that the offended person should talk to the offender privately, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother (v. 15)." The Greek word translated "show him his fault" is elegchō, which in this context might better read, "to convince and turn them away from their sin." In Galatians, Paul directed that this must be done "in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Second, Jesus stated that if the private meeting did not result in repentance and satisfaction, the offender was to be approached by a small group, "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED" (Matt 18:16). The second meeting provided the offender with another opportunity to repent, albeit more forceful than a private meeting. Paul affirmed this doctrine as applicable to the church: "Reject a factious man after a first and second warning" (Titus 3:10).

The third step that Jesus outlined in Matthew was a "public corrective summons." In this announcement Jesus said, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (ekklesia in the original)" (Matt 18:17a). The word ekklēsia means, "a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation.

The fourth and final step that Jesus outlined regarding corrective discipline in the Jewish assembly was a "public corrective exclusion." Jesus continued his discourse in verse 17 and said, "and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17b).

Should this four-step process outlined by Jesus for correction within the Jewish assembly be utilized in the church at large? Yes. It would seem that Jesus intended this four-step process for all believers. In Matthew 18:17 this is the second and last occurrence of the word "church" in the gospels. It is used in a different sense here from that in Matthew 16:18. In the earlier occurrence it has reference to the body of Christ composed of those who are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Here it speaks of the local assembly, a body of believers gathered together as a fellowship. Both times the Lord uses the term He is anticipating in the future when the church age would begin after His resurrection from the dead. Second, Paul evidently believed that Jesus' teaching applied to the church since he provided similar advice. In 2 Thess 3:6 and 1 Corin 5:5, Paul said, "deliver such a one to Satan," which is very similar to Jesus' teaching in the fourth step in Matthew 18:17b. In 1 Tim 5:20, Paul's advice was very similar to Jesus' third step (Matt 18:17a), "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." Paul's advice in 2 Thess 3:15b to "admonish him as a brother" was very similar to Jesus' first step of restoration with a sinning brother in Matt 18:15. Paul in describing the process of discipline against an elder used very similar language to Jesus in 1 Tim 5:19-20. It is evident from the biblical evidence that Paul and the apostles relied upon Jesus' teaching on discipline within the Jewish assembly, and that this teaching was relevant to the yet to exist church.

What does this mean for our lives? First, the goal of church discipline is restoration as well as the secondary purpose of restraining sin in the church. Paul said, "(W)ith gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and

they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will." Church discipline was also for the purpose of restraining sin, as is evident in 1 Timothy, "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning" (5:20). The same theme is evident in the narrative of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 with the conclusion of the account by Luke, "And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things" (v. 11).

Second, Paul and Peter made it clear that a secondary purpose of church discipline was to preserve the Christ-like reputation of the church among the gentiles. Paul spoke to the Philippians, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world" (2:14-15). Peter made a similar statement in 1 Peter 2:12.

Finally, an additional insight from the Epistles is that Paul intended church discipline to keep false teachings from the church. In Galatians 5:7-9 Paul stated the principle that a little bit of sin in the church spoiled the whole assembly. In 2 Thessalonians Paul stated the principle explicitly, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (3:6). A final insight offered in the Epistles is the restorative goal of church discipline. In 2 Timothy, Paul stated, "with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will" (2:25-26). The insights from the Acts and Epistles help to clarify both the process and purposes of church discipline.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you handle conflict? What steps of this four-step process could you begin to practice this week?

2. When Christians live under God's kingdom values, our lives should look very different from those who are still ruled by worldly values. This week's Scripture focused on the following themes. Which of these do you already practice? Which do you want to see increased in your life? Use this to guide your prayer life with God this week:

A. Because God tells the truth and warns humans of impending danger connected to sin, we likewise are called to tell the truth and warns others. We saw this in the first reading from Ezekiel.

B. Because God loves us, we too ought to love others. Instead of exploiting people or moving toward them in selfish ways, we move toward them in love. We saw this in the second reading from Romans.

C. Because God's heart is one of restoration, we can become peacemakers in the midst of conflict and sin.

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