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 from Paul in dealing with Christians holding beliefs that differ from our own. Then we learn much about forgiveness in the Gospel lesson through the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

SIR 27:30—28:7
Wrath and anger are hateful things,
yet the sinner hugs them tight.
The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,
for he remembers their sins in detail.
Forgive your neighbor's injustice;
then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.
Could anyone nourish anger against another
and expect healing from the LORD?
Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,
can he seek pardon for his own sins?
If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,
who will forgive his sins?
Remember your last days, set enmity aside;
remember death and decay, and cease from sin!
Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;
remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

The reading points out how sinners love their sin. However, it is easy for us to view ourselves as somehow outside of sin. Saint Paul reminds us that "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). The reading goes on to remind us about God's clear call for us to forgive others (Ephesians 4:32), because as Paul said, "*God in Christ forgave us*." The reading closes with a reminder on how God (through Christ), forgives us. We have forgiveness only through our faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. "*Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them*" (Hebrews 7:25).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from Romans 14 follows a section in which Paul teaches about the godly calling to show grace to others with differing beliefs related to Christian practices such as the honoring of a holy day or a person's choice to abstain from meat. Paul said, "He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:6).

Second Reading:

> *Romans 14:7-9 NAS95 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.*

Paul continued his explanation by providing the reason why we as Christians should show grace to others with differing practices driven by their beliefs in such debatable matters as what we eat or when we worship. As fellow believers holding diverging views on the negotiable topics we are to remember that our souls and wholly given over to the Lord. When we place our trust in the Lord he came into us and regenerated our previously dead souls. Jesus spoke about this reality in the Gospel of John when He emphasized the reality of the spiritual birth with Nicodemus. Jesus said that "you must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). As believers in the Lord Jesus, ones who testify with our voices that God has raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9), our hearts are spiritually born again. As such, God has placed a seal upon us dedicating us to Himself. That is the whole reason that God has called us to Himself (Acts 2:39). The reading closes with, "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (v. 9). Jesus' rulership is over both the living and the dead, in the sense that He is Lord over everyone including believers who are alive, believers who have died, and unbelievers both living (but spiritually dead) and dead (as those who suffer the second death).

Paul's message serves as a reminder to us about recognizing in serving God as our ultimate goal instead of debating about relatively frivolous issues. Does one choose to go to church on a Saturday night instead of Sunday morning? Does one choose not to eat meat on Friday? Let us not disparage others because of their beliefs but let us instead remember through these debates that our reason for existing is to serve the Lord. It is hard to argue with someone about such issues while serving the Lord with our whole heart. People are dying every day without the knowledge of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus who gave Himself for their sins. Let's get on with fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) making disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Holy Trinity, and teaching them to obey all that the Scriptures teach.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Matthew continues from last week in the section of Jesus' final, detailed teachings to His disciples before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem before He gave His life for the payment of our sin debt. Last week's reading covered Jesus' teaching on church discipline including the general procedure one Christian "brother" is to use in confronting another. Here the term "brother" means a fellow believer. This week's reading continues Jesus' teaching about the godly behaviors of a Christian in forgiving others.

Gospel Reading:

> *Matthew 18:21-35 NAS95 21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his*

wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' 27 And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' 29 So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Peter asked Jesus a question about how often he should forgive another believer (brother, v. 21). Should I, Peter asked, forgive him even "up to seven times?" (v. 21c). Jesus answered him with a call to radical forgiveness, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (v. 23). Jesus then provided a parable in order to illustrate this high standard of forgiveness. We know that it is a parable because He introduces it by saying "For this reason the kingdom of heaven **may be compared to**" (v. 23, emphasis added).

The parable of the unforgiving servant begins with a certain servant who owed the king a sum that was impossible to repay, "ten thousand talents" (v. 24b). In biblical times, a talent amounted to about 20 years of wages for an average worker, bringing the debt to some 200,000 years of work. In our day we would say that the servant owed the king something like a zillion dollars, a sum which would clearly be impossible for anyone to repay not the least of which a lowly servant. Next, through an act of unbelievable grace, and clearly foreshadowing God the Father's forgiveness of us through faith in Jesus, the servant humbly fell upon his knees and begged for mercy (v. 26). Upon seeing the servant's heart, the king felt compassion and completely forgave his servant of the debt that he could never repay. The king provided a means for forgiveness knowing that the repayment of the debt was impossible by the man's works. As the story continues, we should expect the servant to leave the judgment hall with a sense of great peace and generosity, but that is not what happened.

As the servant left the encounter with the king-judge, he went out and found a fellow slaved who owed him a substantial sum, equivalent to about one hundred days wages (one denarii was about one day's wage). In contrast to the "zillion dollars" the first servant had owed to the king this was a relatively insignificant amount. Additionally, since this first servant's debts would have most likely included the sum total of all that was owed to him by all of the other servants who had made borrowed from him, in all probability all of the debts had been erased. Though we have to be careful not to make a parable walk on all fours and instead to seek the central principle our Lord is getting at, all the members of this "loan pyramid" we will call it were forgiven, including the first servant and all of the servants who owed money to him. Therefore, the act of the first servant in asking for repayment of the 100 denarii debt was pure greed. This calls into question the honesty of the servants "impassioned plea" before the king in the first place. As a result of his greed and unrepentant heart, the king ordered the debts of the servant reinstated, something which was impossible for him to ever repay.

Jesus parable closes with the central point of Jesus teaching, something which is worthy of repeating here and every day that we live. “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (v. 35). Lord, help us, without you we are powerless.

Jesus’ teaching in the parable gets at some very important truths. First, unbelievers are separated from God the Father by a debt that they can never repay, even in 200,000 years or working to earn their salvation. The Scripture make it clear that nobody can earn their way into heaven, regardless of how “good” they are and how hard they work. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). God’s standard of righteousness in order to enter heaven is perfection. Perfection cannot be granted by our doing of good works but rather by faith in Jesus’ finished work on the cross. The scripture says, “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).

Second, as believers we are called to forgive other believers, seventy times seven times, that is a whole lot! However, this principle of forgiveness also extends beyond believers, as is clear from the whole canon of Scripture. We as believers are to forgive others regardless of their spiritual condition. God has placed upon believers the unique ability to exercise forgiveness, something which the lost world has a hard time understanding. We have to exercise a degree of common sense here as repeated, unrepentant attacks against us may warrant the separation of ourselves from these circumstances. In other cases, such as the treatment of believers by nonbelievers in certain parts of the world (and even in increasing frequency in the western world) we should expect continuing mistreatment.

Finally, the principle that we learned about showing grace to others holding differing spiritual beliefs brings with it a need to forgive, in an ongoing manner, those who hold these views. Unless God changes their hearts, we must recognize that their beliefs will likely never change. No matter how much this offends us we must turn our hearts to the Higher Judge, the King before whom we will stand to receive rewards for the things that we did with the gifts that He gave us during our lifetimes.

When we talk to others we can find many stories of forgiveness, or the lack thereof. I think of someone I know whose daughter was abused by a man. She told me that she would never forgive that man. I think that in her mind the act of not forgiving him provided her with a certain sense of power and control over the abuser of her daughter. This brings me to a much deeper story about personal forgiveness, one that I have chronicled at length in my personal journey to finding true faith in God and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It was my struggle to understand and later to forgive someone who greatly harmed me during my childhood years that led me to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ.

The bottom line is this. Because God has forgiven us from the payment of an impossibly huge debt brought about by our sin, we should likewise forgive others.

If you have a testimony about forgiveness please share it with us on the place provided for that purpose on the web site.

Reflection Questions

1. Think long and hard about this question, and pray about it before you answer. Who is someone for which you have heretofore refused to forgive? In what ways has your unforgiveness given you a sense of

power over them? In light of what you learned today, will you grant forgiveness to the person that harmed you?

2. When was a time when you encountered another Christian who held different beliefs than your own. How do you classify this difference in belief according to a major or minor difference? If the difference was one that upon further reflection you could classify as something rather minor, how does today's second reading help you to place this in perspective? What if the difference was more major, say concerning whether Jesus really did rise from the dead. Is there any principle that arises from the reading that could help you to relate with a person holding this belief? How does that principle relate to your calling to fulfill the Great Commission?

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