

Sunday on September 4 - 10 (Proper 18)

Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 33: 7-9

Ezekiel, a member of the **priestly** class, was one of God's **prophets** to the citizens of **Judah**, beginning during the reign of King Zedekiah—the **last** king of the **Southern** Kingdom—and ending during the early part of the Babylonian Captivity, Ezekiel himself being one of the **captives**. His general message was one of God's **judgment** on an apostate nation as well as God's promise of **restoration** to a repentant people.

In today's reading, we see God giving, as it were, Ezekiel's marching orders. Thus, when God gave Ezekiel a **warning** to be delivered to God's people, the unrepentant people would die in their sins but their deaths would be the responsibility of Ezekiel if he **failed** to deliver that warning. On the other hand, if Ezekiel **did** deliver the warning, the deaths of the unrepentant would **not** be required of Ezekiel's hand.

Epistle Lesson: Romans 13: 1-10

Continuing from last week St. Paul's instructions for **how** Christians should **behave**, we find him making some statements that some people today would find incredible, yet if we think about it, they are statements that Jesus had made earlier. What are these statements? They are

- we should be **subject** to governing authorities (*i.e.*, the government),
- we should pay our **taxes** (see Jesus' words in **Matt. 22:15-22**), and
- we should give **respect and honor** to whom respect and honor are due (which of course includes governmental authorities, employers, and certain family members).

But then St. Paul adds some **unexpected** requirements: he states that we are **required** to **love** each other. Not just **like** them, but actually to **love** them **as we love ourselves**. Why? Because when we love our **neighbor** as ourselves, we are actually keeping the Ten Commandments, we are satisfying the requirements of the **Law!** Is this surprising? It shouldn't be, because Jesus himself declared that the two **greatest** commandments were to **love the Lord** our God with all our

heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to **love our neighbor** as ourselves. (Matt. 22:34-40). In other words, we could say that the **only** thing God wants of us is to **love**, i.e. to **genuinely care** about someone else to the extent that we show it in our actions and behavior).

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 18: 1-20

Today's lesson deals with the **greatest** issue that has ever faced a nation, a people, an organization, a football team, or even an individual: who is the **greatest**? Who is **number one**? When Jesus was asked to address this issue, his response caught everyone by surprise: the real issue is **not** who is **greatest**, but who is the most **humble**! And he uses a **child** as his example.

But then Jesus warns that children are to be greatly **respected**, especially when it comes to **tempting** them or leading them into **sin**. In fact, it would be better for someone to be **dead** than to cause a child to sin. Stern words indeed for **this** generation!

Then Jesus says that there is a remedy: if your foot or your eye is causing you to sin, get rid of it rather than spend eternity in hell. But what is Jesus implying? Your foot or your eye sins only because your heart tells it to. So the problem is really in one's **heart**, one's **attitude** toward God and man. God wants us to have **love and compassion**, especially for **children** so that none of them perish eternally.

Finally, Jesus deals with the problem of what to do when someone sins against **us**. Rather than get **even**, Jesus tells us instead to **talk** to the person who has sinned against you. If **that** doesn't bring about a positive response, then try again with a few **others** to help mediate. And finally, if that doesn't work, then the issue needs to be brought to the **church as a whole** to adjudicate the issue with the same authority as God. The need for **repentance** is that serious!

Sunday on September 18 - 24 (Proper 20)

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 55: 6-9

Continuing the theme of last Sunday's lessons, that of ***repenting*** of our sins and then having a ***loving, compassionate, and forgiving*** heart toward others, Isaiah continues the thought that he began seven weeks ago when he described for us the ***compassion*** of our God who offers to give us food and drink ***without price***. Having established how compassionate God is, Isaiah encourages the people of the ***Southern*** Kingdom (and ***us!***) to ***forsake*** our wicked thoughts, words and deeds, and instead to turn to ***God*** in repentance. After all, God knows what is ***best*** for us far better than our ***self-centered minds*** do.

Epistle Lesson: Philippians 1: 12-14 and 19-30

As St. Paul writes to the Philippians in today's lesson, we see a marked similarity of ***his*** circumstance to that of ***Joseph's***, the subject of ***last*** week's Old Testament Lesson. Here too, St. Paul confesses that all of the ***sufferings*** that he has experienced have been for the advancement of the Kingdom of ***God***, just as all of ***Joseph's tribulations*** were experienced so that God could show his ***compassion*** to millions of people. As in the case of Joseph, St. Paul ***also*** wishes to ***honor*** God in ***both*** his body and his life. St. Paul admits that he would rather ***die*** and be with Jesus than continue with the ***present*** life, but he also knows that his ***sufferings*** will bring eternal benefits to millions of people, ***many*** of whom are yet to be ***born***. So St. Paul encourages ***all*** saints to honor the Lord in both their ***bodies*** and their ***lives***, no matter their circumstances.

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 20: 1-16

What ***is*** the Kingdom of heaven like? Jesus addresses that question in today's reading, where he likens it to a ***viticulturist*** who hires people to work in his vineyard. The ***nature*** of the work is unspecified, but it is clear that there are never ***enough*** workers. So the owner keeps going out to find more workers, even hiring more workers just an hour before quitting time. But then to a lot of workers' ***surprise***, the owner pays everybody the same, no matter whether they worked ***12 hours*** or 1 hour. Seems ***unfair***, doesn't it?

But Jesus is not talking about an ***earthly*** kingdom. He is talking about a ***heavenly*** kingdom. And the workers are the ***believers*** whose job it is to do whatever God ***wants*** them to do to ***advance*** the Kingdom. Thus some workers may have been believers all of their lives, enduring plenty of ***hardship*** and ***tribulation***; while others may have been ***deathbed*** converts. Whatever. God still gives each ***believer*** the blessing of ***eternal life*** with him. But perhaps what the life-long believers do not know is that, throughout their lifetime, they were enjoying the ***blessings*** of being children of ***God***, all of which occurred ***behind*** the scenes, as it were, without their ***realizing*** it. In which case, they have a ***lot*** to be thankful for, but are totally ***unaware*** of all of their special gifts, blessings and protection.