

THE LAST JUDGMENT CAUSING THE WEAK TO STUMBLE

**March 2, 2008
Meat Fare Sunday
Revision E**

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:31-46
EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2

In the West, today's Gospel lesson is used in late October or late November. Most of today's Epistle is used on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany in the West (mid February) or about this same time of year.

BACKGROUND FOR GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 23, 24, 25

The theme of the Gospel lesson is the Last Judgment and the Epistle lesson gives some insight into the details of the Gospel lesson. But the Gospel lesson is part of a series of teachings Jesus gave during the middle of Holy Week; that is between Palm Sunday and His Crucifixion. Matthew 23 is a long discourse addressed to the Scribes and Pharisees where Jesus referred to them as whitewashed tombs, a brood of vipers, extortioners and murderers to name a few.

In Matthew 24, Jesus prophesied about the end times when He will return to judge the living and the dead. And this sets the tone for our Gospel lesson. He went into some detail on how bad things will get. As with many prophecies about the end times in Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Revelation, etc., the prophecies have both a near term meaning and a far term meaning. For example, in 24:15, the abomination of desolation occurred when the Roman General Titus entered the Holy of Holies just before burning the temple to the ground in c. 70 AD. Yet the Second Coming is spoken of in the same context (24:27) where the presence of Jesus will appear as lightning flashing from East to West. This clearly speaks of something still future.

Following these prophecies, Jesus gave some teaching regarding what He will do when He returns. He went into what He will be looking for and what basis He will use for judgment. There are four distinct lessons regarding judgment recorded by Matthew, of which the Gospel lesson for today is the fourth:

1. The servant who was made ruler of his master's household	Matthew 24:45-51
2. Parable of the 10 virgins	Matthew 25:1-13
3. Parable of the talents	Matthew 25:14-30
4. The judgment of works	Matthew 25:31-46

Each of the first three is related to today's Gospel lesson. The lesson of the first two is watchfulness; the lesson of the last two is judgment based on works.

The lesson of servant-made-ruler (compare: shepherds in the Church) is watchfulness. “Blessed is that servant whom his master, upon his return, will find giving his household food in due season” (Matthew 24:45-46). However, if the servant thinks his master is delayed and beats his fellow servants and parties with the drunkards, his master will return at a time he doesn’t expect. His master will be especially harsh with that servant (cut him in half) and there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The lesson of the ten virgins is also watchfulness. The imagery is taken from wedding celebrations of First Century Israel. It was customary for the groom and his family and attendants to go to the bride’s house for the ceremony. Afterward, the bride and groom would be led in a procession to the groom’s house by singers and musicians. Along the way, they would pick up some people like the friends of the bride who didn’t go to the ceremony. Arriving at the groom’s house, they would begin a week long celebration. It was this week long celebration that was the setting for Jesus’ first miracle when the wine ran out (John 2:1-11).

To be included in the wedding feast, one had to be present in the right place at the right time. If the ceremony wasn’t perfectly punctual, one may have had to wait a while. For a week long celebration, there wasn’t the hurry we have today where the bride and groom are anxious to leave. Also, it was customary to leave an oil burning lamp lit all night long in one’s bed chamber but with the wick turned down to generate a dim light. While the virgins waited, they turned the wicks down. When they heard the procession coming, they all trimmed their lamps up bright. It was then that the five foolish virgins realized they didn’t have enough oil to make it to the groom’s house -- and had to go buy more. Having no oil or coming late, either way they became indistinguishable from party crashers, and were left out. The lesson here is that if you don’t have it when the Bridegroom comes, it’s too late to get it.

After giving two examples on watchfulness, the Lord gave two examples of judgment based on a person’s deeds. The Parable of Talents is the subject of the Gospel lesson for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost (q.v.). As a quick overview, different servants were given different amounts of their master’s wealth according to their abilities: five talents, two talents, one talent. A talent was originally defined as the maximum weight a man could carry and was later standardized at 75 pounds. In the parable of the talents, the master gave his servants talents of silver. In the First Century, a denarius was one day’s wage for a laborer and 84 denarii were minted from one Troy ounce of silver. Thus one talent of silver is the equivalent of 74,600 days’ wages.

The servants were judged by their master on what they did with their master’s wealth. And the reward was proportioned to their achievement. In a similar parable in Luke 19:11-27 using minas instead of talents (1 talent=60 minas), the servants were made rulers over a number of cities proportioned to their earnings. Again, their master was especially harsh to the servant who did nothing with his wealth. Again there was the wailing and gnashing of teeth.

GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 25:31-46

In today’s Gospel lesson, the Lord gave a second example of a judgment based on deeds. In the three previous examples, the relationships were:

master	servants
bridegroom	virgins
master	servants

In the Gospel lesson, the Lord does not mince words; He tells it like it will be without parables or hidden meanings. He will come with all the angels and sit on the Throne of His Glory. The hymns of the Church paint an awesome picture of this event, where thousands of angels attend Him while a river of fire flows by (Dan. 7:10). And from this vantage point all the nations will be gathered before Him and He will separate the nations as one separates sheep from goats (v.32).

In ancient cultures, sheep and goats were raised together (and still are today in some parts of the world) since both need grazing and they eat more or less the same thing. Yet sheep and goats are quite different. Goats were generally dark in color and sheep generally white. Goats are able to cope with mountains and rocks, but sheep prefer the flatter valleys. Goats will eat the leaves off trees, whereas sheep prefer grass. Goats graze all day while sheep lie down in the shade during the heat of the day. Goats were less popular than sheep because goats are destructive, grazing closer to the ground and destroying pasture. Goats also have a more stubborn, less pleasant disposition. It was the “scapegoat” that took the sins of the people to the wilderness on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:22). On the other hand, a sheep was preferred in many sacrificial offerings over a goat.

Both sheep and goats produced benefits for their owners. Sheep produced wool for clothing, milk for food and reproduced rapidly. Goats also produced milk (3 quarts per day) plus hair for a sack cloth tent covering and skin for leather. Goat meat was not as tasty as lamb, however. For a shepherd who has raised both sheep and goats separating them is easy.

After the nations are separated, all will be judged regarding how they treated the Lord Himself when they:

- fed Him when He was hungry
- gave Him drink when He was thirsty
- welcomed Him as a stranger
- clothed Him when He was naked
- visited Him when He was sick or in prison

The Lord described this as if He took it all very personally. The righteous had done this but didn’t know they had. The cursed hadn’t done it at all. The righteous are told they will inherit the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundations of the world (v.34). The cursed are told to depart into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Again, the tone is especially harsh toward those cursed. John Chrysostom pointed out that the fire was not prepared for the unrighteous but for the devil and his angels. The unrighteous cast themselves in there by their refusal to have anything to do with their Lord. They had cut themselves off from any connection to His Body (Homily LXXIX on Matthew 25).

To the righteous, He said not “take”, but “inherit”. The righteous are referred to as “blessed of My Father” (v.34) by the Lord. For what are they blessed? John Chrysostom addressed this as follows: “And in return for what do they receive such things? For the covering

of a roof, for a garment, for bread, for cold water, for visiting, for going to prison. For indeed in every case it is what is needed, and sometimes not even that. For surely, the sick and one who is in bonds do not seek only for this, but the one to be freed, the other to be delivered from his infirmity. But He, being gracious, requires only what is within our power...leaving to us to exert our generosity in doing more... For even if they had done ten thousand things, the munificence would be of grace, since in return for services so small and cheap, such a heaven, and a kingdom and such great honor should be given them” (Ibid.).

In the last week’s Epistle lesson (1 Corinthians 6:12-20), we read about how our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit, how we are joined (or glued) to the Lord in one Spirit and how our bodies are limbs (or members) of Christ. In today’s Gospel lesson, the effects of this are apparent. As the righteous and the cursed did or did not feed, welcome, clothe or visit the least of the limbs (or members) of Christ, they are so judged. In our relations with other members of the body of Christ, we are not dealing with just a delegation from Christ; we are dealing with Christ Himself (since each member is a temple of the Holy Spirit).

Why did the unrighteous refuse to do such small things for members of the body of Christ? Chrysostom summed it up by saying that “covetousness once for all blinded them that were seized by it; and this though so great a threat was set against it” (Ibid). They were caught up in the things of this world to the exclusion of the next world.

Chrysostom also pointed out that our judges will be our contemporaries (in terms of pointing out that we had no excuse). “The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:41-42).

One might ask how we reconcile today’s Gospel lesson which represents judgment based on deeds to last week’s Gospel lesson (The Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32) which might be called salvation by grace? Nothing is said of the Prodigal Son feeding, welcoming, clothing or visiting the limbs or members of Christ. From the comments last week by Isaac of Nineveh, we may presume he will start doing that if his repentance is genuine. A great deal of grace was shown by the father toward his younger son in (1) giving him gifts, (2) waiting for him to return and (3) taking him back into his household. Similarly, our Heavenly Father shows a lot of Grace toward us all of our lives (Ephesians 4:7, 2 Corinthians 8:1, 9:14). With an abundance of grace, we are able to have an abundance of every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Looking at the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the perspective of the Parable of the Talents, each servant in the Parable of the Talents was given different portions of their Master’s wealth. We often think of that wealth in terms of spiritual gifts, but perhaps there is also a time factor related to opportunity to use them. Similarly the Prodigal Son was given some of his father’s wealth. No matter whether we are given many gifts or few, our Master still calls us “good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21, 23) if we use what we have. And He also says that if we use what we have, more will be given (Matthew 25:29). Applying this to the Prodigal Son imagery, the Prodigal was given an opportunity to recover the wealth he squandered if he was faithful about it.

One big factor not addressed in the two (Matthew 25) illustrations of Judgment of works is dead works. Dead works are addressed specifically on the 5th Sunday of Lent (q.v.). However, the issue boils down to whether the works are done in faith from a loving heart or whether they are done out of legalism.

CAUSING THE WEAK TO STUMBLE

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EPISTLE LESSON: 1 Corinthians 8:8-9:12

On the surface, the Epistle lesson refers to eating food offered to idols -- which was a common practice in those days. Meat left over from pagan ceremonies for the local idols was often sold in public meat markets. For those who are strong in the faith and realize the idols -- and the demons behind them (1 Corinthians 10:19-21) -- are nothing (8:4), Paul said there was nothing wrong with eating that meat. The problem was in setting an example that someone who was weak might follow and by following, the weak brother might be led astray to join in the idolatrous festivities and eventually perish.

The real focus here is not so much on eating versus not eating, but in the relationship and awareness of the body of Christ. If the things I do cause others (who may be weak) to stumble, then I am not feeding, welcoming, clothing or visiting the limbs or members of Christ as we read in the Gospel lesson. And, in fact, I may be cutting off the limbs of Christ if my bad example causes them to perish. Paul refers to this as sinning against Christ in verse 12.

Another aspect of the situation in Corinth was the Gnostic influence. The Gnostics taught that due to their knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*), certain foods and ascetical practices were required in order to be saved. Paul alluded to this in the Epistle lesson: "For if anyone sees you who have knowledge (*gnosis*) eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge (*gnosis*) shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died?" (1 Corinthians 8:10-11).

John Chrysostom comments on this as follows: "A man is on the point of withdrawing himself entirely from all idols; but when he sees you fond of loitering about them, he takes the circumstance for a recommendation and abides there himself also. So that not only his weakness, but also your ill-timed behavior, helps to further the plot against him. For it is you who make him weaker."

"Four things deprive us of excuse in this mischief: (1) that he is weak; (2) that he is our brother. (3) Christ did not refuse to die for him, yet we can't even abstain from a polluted table for his sake. (4) A brother is destroyed just so we might obtain a piece of meat."

"For what can be more savage than a man who wounds the sick? And yet no wound is so grievous as making a man to stumble. Often, in fact, is this also the cause of death" (Homily XX on 1 Corinthians 8).

Dorotheos of Gaza (6th Century) makes a similar comment regarding idle talk or gossip: "If one of you sees something unedifying and so much as goes on to pass it on and put it into the heart of another brother, in doing so you not only harm yourself but you harm your brother by

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putting one more little bit of knavery into his heart. Even if that brother has his mind set on prayer or some other noble activity, and the first arrives and furnishes him with something to prate about, he not only impedes what he ought to be doing, but brings a temptation to him” (Discourses: On the Fear of God).

Paul goes on to give a similar example in 1 Corinthians 9 regarding how he and Barnabas conducted their missionary campaigns. Rather than expect the (very poor) churches they started to support them while they were preaching the Gospel, healing the sick, casting out demons, etc., Paul and Barnabas also held part-time jobs to support themselves. (Paul was a tent maker from Acts 18:1-3). Paul pointed out that he and Barnabas had a right to be supported (9:6-9). They did not use this right but endured all things so as not to hinder the Gospel of Christ.

In Romans 14:13-23 is a parallel passage to the Epistle lesson on the same subject written by Paul a few months after he wrote 1 Corinthians. In the Romans passage, Paul added that the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (v.17). We live by faith; anything that is not of faith is sin (v.23) and this includes dead works. And if we cause a brother to stumble due to our eating and drinking (intentionally or not), we show a lack of love for the weak brother (v.15). This is another reason we need to say “Lord, have mercy” a great deal and ask that we might have a good defense before the Judgment Seat of Christ.