

Sunday, February 23, 2020

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

2nd Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Responsorial: Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13-34

Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48

Using Our Free Will to Choose Jesus and Follow Him as Lord and Savior

Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

How could Jesus say such a thing? He knows we're human; he knows that we can never be perfect in the sense of never committing a sin. So how can we live out this commandment?

Fortunately, God has given us some models to follow: the saints. Because they were human, they were sinners, just like us. But they were "perfect" in God's eyes nonetheless. Their perfection rested not in their sinlessness but in their commitment to love God and their neighbor with all their hearts (Matthew 22:37-39). It was their own experience of God's love that allowed them to follow the Lord wherever he led and to love other people with the love that came from God. And so they made it their aim to be as merciful and generous as possible (5:39-40). They strove to love their enemies just as faithfully as they loved their friends and to pray for those who persecuted them (5:44-46).

Think, for instance, how Blessed Charles de Foucauld turned from a life of indulgence and selfishness and moved to the Algerian desert to live among the Tuareg people as a witness to Christ's love. Or how St. Alphonsus Liguori left a thriving law practice to become a priest so he could proclaim God's message of mercy. Or how St. Monica was so patient with her short-tempered, unbelieving husband that he eventually became a Christian.

The point is, "perfection" isn't out of our reach. It is about loving God in a way that causes us to change our lives and do whatever he asks of us. It's about loving our neighbors—and even our enemies—with the love that God has for us.

So don't get discouraged when you read this Scripture verse. God is merciful; he knows that you're a sinner. But he also knows that you can become "perfect"—with his love and grace.

"Saints in heaven, intercede for me so that I can love God and my neighbor as you did."

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission.)

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. The first reading from Leviticus 19, opens with these words of the Lord: *Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.* He then provides some commands on how to be holy: *You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your enemy as yourself.*
 - What do you think it means to *Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy*?
 - What do you think is the key message conveyed by the Lord's commands that follow his opening words?
 - How are you doing in living up to these commands? What steps can you take to do better?
2. The responsorial psalm begins with these words: *Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.* It then describes the Lord's forgiveness and mercy with these words: *He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills. He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion. Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.*
 - What are the *benefits* the psalmist gives for him to *Bless the LORD, O my soul*?
 - In what ways have you experienced these *benefits*?
 - What are the ways you thank the Lord for his great forgiveness and mercy?
3. The second reading opens with this question by St. Paul: *Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?* He goes on to challenge us with these words: *Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool, so as to become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God.*
 - How would you answer St. Paul's opening question?
 - Knowing that *the Holy Spirit is the love of God poured into our hearts* (Romans 5:5), what role does the fact that *the Spirit of God dwells in you* play in how you live your life?
 - What message is St. Paul trying to convey with his challenging words at the end of the reading about what it means *to become wise* and why *the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God*?
4. In the Gospel reading, Jesus elevates two Jewish laws to much higher standards: *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* and *You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.* In doing so, he presents us with several daunting commands, including: *When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well and love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*
 - Do you believe is it necessary to personally know and experience the Lord's love and forgiveness, in order to love, forgive, and pray for those who have wronged you, as described in the Gospel reading? Why or why not?
 - How has your personal knowledge and experience of the Lord's love and forgiveness impacted your own ability to forgive others as the Lord has forgiven you, even when they haven't asked for your forgiveness?
5. The meditation is a reflection on the Gospel reading and these words: *Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Matthew 5:48). It begins with the following words: "How could Jesus say such a thing? He knows we're human; he knows that we can never be perfect in the sense of never committing a sin. So how can we live out this commandment? Fortunately, God has given us some models to follow: the saints." The meditation ends with these words: "The point is, 'perfection' isn't out of our reach. It is about loving God in a way that causes us to change our lives and do whatever he asks of us. It's about loving our neighbors—and even our enemies—with the love that God has for us. So don't get discouraged when you read this Scripture verse. God is merciful; he knows that you're a sinner. But he also knows that you can become 'perfect'—with his love and grace."
 - In the Gospel reading, why do you think Jesus' command to be perfect appears right after he explains how to treat others?
 - Why do you think how we treat and forgive others, including our enemies, can help us move toward that challenging goal of perfection? Why does it require God's "love and grace"?

Take some time now to pray that you would experience more deeply your heavenly Father's transforming love. Also, pray to the saints in heaven for the grace to love and forgive others as God has done the same for you. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as the starting point.

"Saints in heaven, intercede for me so that I can love God and my neighbor as you did."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National Fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]