

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

October - 2018

The following series is **free, downloadable small-group materials** based on each week's Mass readings and taking into account the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group's discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minute format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.
2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, "What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?" or "What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?" As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.
3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.**
4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.
5. You can either read this week's Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, **so do not feel like you need to force a connection.** However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, "How do you see this passage tying into the theme of the readings?"
6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Gospel Reading, and the Second Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.
8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear the Scripture is read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the *Reflecting on Sunday's Readings*, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.**

Sincerely in Christ,

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Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—October 7, 2018

Introduction: Since the publication of Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* there has been a lot of theological discussion about a very important doctrinal issue; that of Catholic divorce and civil remarriage and how to relate these couples to the Church and to the Eucharist. I believe people holding various positions on these questions would agree on one thing, and that is the need to help reduce the number of divorces taking place as we move forward. Pre-marriage cohabitation, and post-marriage divorce is rampant today like never before, endorsed and promoted by a culture that is both anti-God, and anti-marriage.

We should not be surprised that marriage is under attack, for out of all of life Jesus chose marriage as the image that best illustrates his relationship with those he died to redeem. So in a very real sense Christian marriage is an icon of Jesus Christ. An icon is a visible representation of an eternal truth. Consequently, when a Christian couple's marriage is constant and true in spite of life's difficulties and storms, people will look at them and conclude that Jesus' love is also constant and true. Conversely, when two Christians give up on their partner either out of selfishness, or from despair, and dissolve their marriage, people will look at them and conclude that Jesus' love is also dissolvable. That is why we must stem the tide of failed marriages, even while we extend arms of grace and love to those who have experienced divorce.

Surprisingly, the place to stem the tide is not merely with marriage counseling, though that is vital and important for couples currently in the midst of problems. We must stem the tide by changing the cultural mores regarding marriage and divorce prior to dating, engagement, and marriage. Someone has said, "healthy people make healthy marriages." This simple statement strikes at the heart of the problem. Unless each individual in the marriage partnership, is independently committed to following Jesus Christ at all cost, and committed to life-long growth in Christ and practical application of his truths and character to their life, it is doubtful that a healthy Christian marriage will ensue. For marriage unites two imperfect individuals, who bring into their marriage not only their assets and gifts but also their faults, flaws, and woundedness. Only Christianity provides the values, principles, and the power to live as one ought to live in a godly relationship between two imperfect people.

Consequently, to stem the tide of divorce we must begin by being and developing life-long disciples through Christian formation. By being a life-long disciple we ourselves will be on a positive growth curve of spirituality, learning to live as we ought to with our mates, and with the people in our world. This by itself becomes a powerful teaching example to the coming generations. However, we need to go a step further by encouraging and inviting our children, family, and friends to join us in a life of discipleship and formation. Marriage is too important as a sacrament and sign of Jesus' love to allow its meaning to degenerate into a temporary, meaningless arrangement.

"This is where Christian marriage differs from non-Christian marriage. For Christians, marriage like all of life, is not simply concerned with what we personally can figure out, but should be concerned with re-configuring our beliefs and behavior to conform to what is *Christ's good and perfect will*, rather than our own opinion.

"The best preparation for being a godly husband or wife is to major on being the kind of person to whom God would gladly entrust in marriage the life of one of his choicest sons or daughters. Individuals who devote their life to following God and growing as his disciple and who cultivate a heart devoted to pleasing Christ in all things will be wonderfully prepared to take on the responsibilities of being a godly spouse."

* *Celebrating Life Together*, by Rich Cleveland, (page 18).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/100718.cfm>

First Reading — Genesis 2:18-24

1. How does the Genesis passage help to define loneliness?

2. What does “leaves” one’s parents and “cleaves” to one’s wife mean to you?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 128:1-6

Second Reading — Hebrews 2:9-11

3. What can we learn about dealing with our mate’s imperfections from Jesus’ example?

Gospel Reading — Mark 10:2-16

4. What did Jesus mean when saying that divorce was allowed by Moses because of their hardness of heart?

5. What are the positive reasons why people should avoid divorce?

6. Describe what you feel should be the Christian’s attitude toward divorce. Toward marriage.

7. How does the quality of our marriage either open the door for our children to come to Jesus, or hinder their coming to Him?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—October 14, 2018

Introduction: Someone has observed that if you put a penny close enough to your eye you can block out the sun. So it is with many good things in life including money and possessions. In and of themselves money and possessions are not bad or evil. In fact, God is the source of them as gifts to us; “for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all.” (1 Chronicles 29:11b,12a)

Man’s problem with possessions and riches comes from grasping them so close to our heart that they replace the Son as the center of our vision, the apple of our eye. I believe that the point of this week’s Gospel reading, is Jesus’ warning about “trusting in riches.” As long as we are in this world we still need to relate to possessions and money, but they should be a means of life, not an end. True peace and happiness is enhanced when we recognize that possessions and money are simply tools that enable us to live as God desires. They are a means not an end.

This leaves us with the question, “What should be the end or the goal of our existence?” Is it not the same issue with which Jesus confronts the rich young man? Namely, abandon anything in your life that is hindering your commitment, and come follow me. The rich young ruler did much for which he could be commended. Many would say he “had his heart in the right place.” Yet his response to Jesus’ challenge and invitation to sell all and come follow him, indicated a hesitancy to put the call of Christ ahead of his life of financial security.

Surprisingly it is often not just wealthy people who are beset by the problem of trusting in riches. Often, we who have little are equally preoccupied with concern about acquiring more money, and our preoccupation blocks out the reality of Jesus Christ and his call to righteous living. Actually, concern about acquiring more possessions and money is simply another way of saying we are trusting in them. Why are we concerned? Because deep in our heart we believe (trust) that they are the key to security, comfort, freedom, peace, and a host of other inner desires.

The Scriptures do not tell us how the rich young man ultimately responded, but only indicated the emotional turmoil the decision was obviously causing. As we grow in discipleship and commitment we often experience a similar initial sorrow as we decide to abandon some attachment we love, for Someone we choose to love more, Jesus. But it is a short sorrow, and as Jesus goes on to teach in this passage this brief sorrow is replaced by surpassing joy which is a hundredfold in comparison, and eternal in value.

“Maria Cristina of Savoy, the young, pretty, and cultivated queen of Naples, said... ‘Although I am healthy, rich, beautiful... What then? And I possess gold and silver... What then? Almost unique in wit and learning... What then? Even if I were to enjoy the world for a thousand years... What then? Soon we die and nothing remains: Serve your God and you will have everything then!’”*

This week’s first reading says, “Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me.” Today’s materialistic secular world is rampant with false advice and seductive entrapment to believe that the person who has the most toys wins. Having been bombarded by these messages it will be very difficult to change the way we relate to possessions and money. Perhaps the very first application we should make is to daily, consistently pray asking God for understanding and a spirit of wisdom similar to Maria Cristina of Savoy. Then we might realize that he who has the most toys really loses, and he who serves God, wins.

* *Illustrissimi: Letters from Pope John Paul I*, by Albino Luciani (page 127).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/101418.cfm>

First Reading — Wisdom 7:7-11

1. How would you summarize the value of wisdom?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 90:12-17

Second Reading — Hebrews 4:12-13

2. What does “the word of God is living and effective” mean to you?

3. Give an example of how God’s Word discerns our thought and intentions.

Gospel Reading — Mark 10:17-30

4. Where do you see yourself in this story?

5. How would you respond if Jesus issued the same invitation to you?

6. What are some warning signals that would warn us that we are in danger of trusting in money?

7. What motivations do you see for sacrificial living?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—October 21, 2018

Introduction: The humanness of the disciples should bring us great consolation, while the magnanimity of Jesus should bring us great hope. The disciples were so human like us, yet ended up so godly due to Christ's grace.

In this week's Gospel reading we are reminded that the path of discipleship is a process of growth, and not a plateau of godliness that is once and for all achieved. Rather than getting discouraged when our sinful humanity is revealed we must remind ourselves that we are a work in progress, and that as we are brought closer to the Light, defects are more easily seen. So often, consciousness of our sin is an indication that we are drawing closer to Christ. The disciples had been with Jesus for some time, in the very presence of the Son of God, yet James and John's, selfish desire for grandeur and position had not been eliminated from their lives. Nor were the sinful response of pride and resentment by the other ten disciples. They too were in the process of growth and hadn't "arrived," even though they were Jesus' twelve handpicked disciples.

Jesus' question to James and John shows his magnanimity as did his example of servanthood. "Can you drink this cup," Jesus asked. In their ignorance and perhaps arrogance they replied, "We are able." Rather than resent their ignorance and arrogance Jesus informs them that they would be included in his salvific process. Replying Jesus says, so to speak, when I am hanging there drinking the dregs of humanity's sins and redeeming all people with the fiery baptism of the cross, you will be there, represented by me. Jesus' great generosity and nobleness of spirit overlooked their foolishness and sin to include these still flawed disciples in his work of salvation.

For followers of Christ who also remain so flawed and foolish, Jesus gives hope in this account of his dealings with James and John. For his grace is not extended only to the non-existent deserving and perfect of this world, but to all who are flawed and foolish who choose to believe and trust in the cup of salvation that he consumed on our behalf.

"Stumbling our way toward home, we worry to ourselves about the unworthiness of our love, only to discover that it has already been attended to. It was taken care of in that representative moment, that vicarious moment, in which he cried out, 'Father into your hands I commend my spirit,' and so saying he handed over to the Father all that he had assumed in the womb of Mary.

"...To fret about the quality of our love is to miss the point. Yes, we examine ourselves, confess our failing and pray for grace to offer the best. But it will never be good enough, unless with all its flaws it is handed over and taken up into his love for the Father."¹

This is the hope of salvation; that we who are so human can be received and accepted by God. Isaiah prophesied of this amazing love and this saving transaction where, in exchange for the suffering of Jesus we would be made righteous. What hope is present in this prophesy; "he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied." Jesus satisfies God's demand of justice for us. "The righteous one, my servant, [shall] make many to be accounted righteous—and he shall bear their iniquities." What a glorious exchange. This is the hope of salvation upon which we must fasten our eyes, and anchor our thoughts. For as we come to approach and love Jesus, the glorious Light of the World, our sins and flaws will become even more apparent in his light. If we look inward for some reassuring hint of self-righteousness we will shrink back in fear. But if we focus on Jesus our high priest and the glorious exchange he procured for us we will then be able to draw near to Christ's throne "with confidence."

¹ *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (page 235).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/102118.cfm>

First Reading — Isaiah 53:10-11

1. How many aspects of salvation can you discover in this passage? Which is most meaningful to you?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 33:4-5,18-20,22

Second Reading — Hebrews 4:14-16

2. How should an understanding of Jesus intercession for us affect our lives?

3. What does the writer of Hebrews mean by “hold fast to our confession”?

Gospel Reading — Mark 10:35-45

4. How would you respond if Jesus asked, “What do you wish [me] to do for you?”

5. Why do you think the disciples were indignant? What was the root of their response?

6. How did Jesus demonstrate being servant and being the “slave of all”?

7. Redefine in light of Jesus’ discourse, what it means to “serve.”

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—October 28, 2018

Introduction: This story of Jesus' encounter with Bartimaeus is a favorite of children, and should also be one of the favorites of adults. When our oldest son was about three years old, we had been reading Bible story books to him regularly. He was more familiar with the story of blind Bartimaeus than we realized. At a room packed family reunion he had a profusely runny nose. After urgently calling to his mom for a tissue several times without getting her attention he proclaimed, "Mommy, have mercy on me, my nose is running!" He had learned the lesson well, that a cry for mercy did not go unheeded with Jesus, and he expected that it would not go unheeded with his mom either.

But as adults we are more like the multitudes that followed Jesus than like Bartimaeus. He was physically blind, knew it, and knew that only God's mercy would be able to meet his need. The multitude was equally blind in a spiritual sense as they so clearly demonstrate later in Jesus' life and ministry by turning their back on him and consenting to his crucifixion. But they were oblivious to who Jesus was and unaware of their spiritual blindness, not knowing their condition, and not humble and needy enough to plead for mercy. Similarly, we often stumble our way through life not recognizing our own blindness.

Jesus' response to Bartimaeus should give us great hope, and his response stands out in great contrast to the many who surrounded him and blind Bartimaeus. They all heard Bartimaeus' cry but from many the response was a verbal rebuke to be silent and not disturb Jesus, or them, with his pitiful condition. Jesus on the other hand not only heard Bartimaeus with his ears but he also heard him with his heart. Jesus always hears us. Always! Jesus always will hear the lone voice in the crowd crying out for help.

No doubt in all of his years of blindness, Bartimaeus had spent much time contemplating his condition. I doubt if he ever really expected to be healed of his blindness, but when Jesus passed by he must have realized that this person was different. His call for mercy this time was not the ordinary beggars cry for spare coins, but genuine awareness that this "prophet" was purported to really heal people. So out of his need he called out in faith and hope, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And we know the rest of the story.

Jesus is still asking us, "What do you want me to do for you?" In John's gospel he says, "Ask and you shall receive that your joy may be complete." Do we believe that Jesus really wants us to ask? Do we believe that he really cares enough to answer? Do we care enough, to ask for the proper things and avoid the mistake of which James speaks, asking and not receiving "because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (James 4:3) I must confess it is easy to lose sight, if you'll pardon the pun, of who Jesus is and of who we are in him. It is easy to lose sight of the privilege we have to bring our needs to him. And as Francis de Sales explains in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Jesus is always present to hear our cry: "Although faith assures us of his presence, yet because we do not see him with our eyes we often forget about him and behave as if God were far distant from us. We really know that he is present in all things, but because we do not reflect on that fact we act as if we did not know it. This is why before praying we must always arouse our soul to explicit thought and consideration of God's presence... Therefore, when you prepare to pray you must say with your whole heart and in your heart, 'O my heart, my heart, God is truly here!'"¹

¹ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, by St. Francis de Sales, (pages 84,85).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/102818.cfm>

First Reading — Jeremiah 31:7-9

1. How do you feel these Israelites should respond to God?

2. What can we learn from this passage?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 126:1-6

Second Reading — Hebrews 5:1-6

3. Why do you think God has such intense concern for the poor and needy of the world?
4. How does this passage in Hebrews describe a priest's primary role?

Gospel Reading — Mark 10:46-52

5. Besides physical blindness what signs of blindness do you see in society?
6. How do you respond to other's blindness?
7. What steps would you recommend for assessing the degree of one's own blindness?
8. How can we cultivate our faith so that our petitions to Jesus are faith based?