

September 15th, 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

“Idolatry is a temptation of all of humanity in all lands and at all times” John Paul II said on Sept. 1, 2004 during the general audience held at the Vatican. “Whoever adores the idol of wealth, power, and success loses his dignity as a human person.” Quoting St. Gregory of Nyssa, he added, “As those who trust in the true God receive in themselves the peculiarities of divine nature, so also those who turn to the vanity of idols BECOME that in which they trust and, from being men, become stones.”

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14

Moses was on top of Mount Sinai being instructed by God for 40 days and nights. That was too long for the people left down below, who wanted a god to lead them. So they took matters into their own hands and created an idol of gold in the shape of a calf.¹

7The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once to your people, By adoring the golden calf the people have rebelled against God and turned their backs on him, breaking the Covenant. God no longer calls them “my people” but “your people” as he speaks to Moses.² **whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, for they have become depraved.**

8They have soon turned aside from the way I pointed out to them, making for themselves a molten calf and worshiping it, sacrificing to it and crying out, ‘This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ The statue that Aaron had made represented Apis, an Egyptian fertility god. When the sacred author tells us that the people “sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (Ex.32:3-6) he means they indulged in all kinds of immoral celebrations, just as worshipers of other fertility gods did in that time. Aaron might have been trying to save some appearance of loyalty to God by saying that the statue represented Yahweh, the True God, but the people were in fact worshiping a fertility god like the ones they had known in Egypt.³

9“I see how stiff-necked (stubborn) **this people is,**” continued the Lord to Moses.

10“Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them. The punishment that the sin deserves is their death, as the first sin did and the sin which gave rise to the flood.² **Then I will make of you a great nation.**” God is offering to start over in making a people of His own and Moses would be the father of the new nation.

11But Moses implored the Lord, his God, saying, Here Moses “stands in the breach” before God in order to save the people. This is when Moses really learned to pray and his arguments inspired the boldness of the great intercessors among the Jewish people and in the Church.¹² (CCC 2577)

“Why, O Lord, should your wrath blaze up against your own people, Moses reminds God that these are the people that He has chosen and with whom He established the Covenant.² **whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with such great power and with so strong a hand?**

13Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and how you swore to them by your own self, saying, ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky; and all this land that I promised, I will give your descendants as their perpetual heritage.’” Moses appealed to God’s own faithfulness despite the people’s unfaithfulness.¹

14So the Lord relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people. God forgives his people not because they deserve to be forgiven, but out of pure mercy and moved by Moses’ intercession.² Note that Moses is a successful intercessor on behalf of the people.⁴

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Timothy was Paul’s most beloved friend and companion. He became the Bishop of the important city of Ephesus while still young. Paul wrote this letter to him personally for encouragement and advice on how to

administer this great responsibility. The title could be “How to Be a Bishop”.¹⁴ Timothy was martyred in 97 A.D.⁵ Today’s selection is an example of how the Lord can transform even rebellious sinners into remarkable saints. In the end, the tragic tale of Saul the Pharisee became the epic story of Paul the Apostle because of one fact: the grace and mercy of God was poured out upon him.¹⁷

Beloved:

12I am grateful to him who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me trustworthy in appointing me to the ministry. Here Paul is giving thanks for his call to be an apostle.

13I was once a blasphemer This is one who insults or shows contempt or lack of reverence for God. and a persecutor and arrogant, but I have been mercifully treated because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief. Paul persecuted the church. He hunted down believers, had them arrested and murdered before his conversion on the road to Damascus. This was due to ignorance, however, and God treated him mercifully, pouring out grace upon him.

14Indeed, the grace of our Lord has been abundant, Not only did Paul receive strengthening graces at the time of his call, but he has been blessed with abundant graces ever since.⁶ **along with the faith and love** Faith and love are fundamental virtues characterizing the Christian. At times these two are mentioned alone and at other times, the virtue of hope is added.⁶ These theological virtues are infused, that is, they are poured into the soul directly from God. They are the dynamic energy which flows from the divine life of grace.⁷ **that are in Christ Jesus.**

15This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The marvel underlying our faith is that Jesus died for us while we were still sinners!⁴ **Of these I am the foremost.** The depth of Paul’s depravity demonstrates just how merciful and forgiving Jesus is.⁴ The grace given to Paul at his conversion magnified his awareness of past faults.¹⁷

16But for that reason I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life. Paul’s thought is that Christ showed mercy to him, the greatest of sinners, and his conversion should serve as a heartening example for lesser sinners.⁶ Jesus invites sinners to that *conversion* without which one cannot enter the kingdom, but shows them in word and deed his Father’s boundless mercy for them and the vast “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.”¹² (CCC 545)

17To the king of ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. Paul is probably quoting this last verse from an early Christian hymn.⁶ The verse stresses the absolute sovereignty of God, perhaps in opposition to Gnostic ideas about the existence of several deities.¹

Luke 15:1-32

There is no chapter of the New Testament so well known and so dearly loved as the fifteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel. It has been called “the gospel in the gospel,” as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell.⁸

1Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus,

2but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The Jews were forbidden to have anything to do with a known sinner. They were shocked at Jesus’ actions for they believed that if you talked to a sinner, ate with a sinner, spent time with a sinner, you must be a sinner.⁴ Since table-fellowship is an expression of friendship and acceptance,

the Pharisees were scandalized that Jesus ate with disreputable men. The following parables indicate that God does not simply welcome penitent sinners, he seeks them out.⁹

3So to them he addressed this parable. Matthew includes this parable of the lost sheep in the instructions on the obligation of pastors of the church. He emphasizes the seeking. Luke uses the parable to answer why Jesus welcomes sinners and emphasizes the joy of finding.⁶

4“What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? The longer the sinner remains in sin, the harder it is for him to repent. Serious sin, when intense or repeated, greatly weakens the will, chills the love of God in the soul, dims the beauty and attractiveness of grace and holy things, and so gradually blinds and hardens the sinner.¹⁵

5And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy. A lost sheep will lie down helplessly and refuse to budge. The shepherd is forced to carry it, even over a long distance.⁶

6and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ St. Gregory the Great commented that Jesus is the shepherd who recovers the lost sheep of mankind. Hoisting it upon his shoulders signifies how he takes upon himself both the nature of man and the heavy burden of man’s sins.⁹

7I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. God, too, knows the joy of finding things that have gone lost!⁸ It is not that God really loves sinners as such more than those who do not sin, but that, in our way of thinking and speaking, he feels more for them than for the just because they are more in need of his help and mercy, and they thus awaken in him a greater expression of divine love.¹⁵ As human parents we can have some appreciation for this situation. Erma Bombeck used to say that she had two favorite children: the one that was sick until he was well and the one who was gone until he returned.

8Or what woman having ten coins. Each one was worth an entire day’s wage.⁹ and losing one would not light a lamp. The “lamp” refers to supernatural graces and inspirations, faith, and the preaching of the gospel.¹⁵ and sweep the house. The Palestinian peasant’s house was very dark, lit by one little circular window about eighteen inches across. The floor was beaten earth covered with dried reeds and rushes. To look for a coin on the floor like that was very much like looking for a needle in a haystack. The woman swept the floor in the hope that she might see the coin glint or hear it tinkle as it fell among the rushes.⁸ searching carefully until she finds it? The mark of a married woman was a head-dress made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. It was almost the equivalent of a wedding ring. It was so significant for a woman that it could not even be taken from her for the payment of debt.⁸ To lose one of these coins was very significant. In this story, the coin represents a human soul. As the woman made a diligent and anxious search for her lost piece of money, so Almighty God seeks the recovery of his children who are lost in sin. Each human soul is precious to Our Lord and his Heavenly Father.¹⁵

9And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.’ When one has lost God and then finds salvation in Jesus Christ and rediscovers the meaning of his life, he rejoices. So precious does the good he has found seem to him that he cannot keep the joy to himself. He wants to share it with those around him. It can take many forms, but we must realize that the smile of the apostolate surpasses all other techniques of action!¹³

10In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God. This is the equivalent of “in heaven” in the previous story. over one sinner who repents.” This is a new thing which Jesus taught men about God—that God actually sought and searched for men.⁸

11Then he said, “A man had two sons. Among the parables of Christ, this is the most beautiful. It is the pearl and crown of all the parables of Scripture.¹⁵ The story of the Prodigal Son reveals the

boundless mercy of God. Though our sins offend the Father, he is ever willing to show us compassion and restore us to family life. In many ways the parable narrates the continuing struggles of the spiritual life, where conversion and repentance are part of an ongoing process. At another level, the parable narrates the exile and eventual homecoming of historical Israel. After the reign of King Solomon, Israel split into two kingdoms, becoming like two brothers living side by side in northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) Palestine. By the eighth century B.C., the Assyrians had carried off the northern tribes of Israel into a far country where they forsook God and worshiped idols—a sin the prophets called harlotry. In the New Covenant, God welcomes home his exiled son by lavishing him with mercy and restoring him to full sonship.⁹ From another viewpoint, both groups that were listening to Jesus: tax collectors/sinners and Pharisees/scribes are called to be sons.

12and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. Under Jewish law, the first-born son received a double share of the inheritance. (Deut. 21:17) The younger son in this case was entitled to a third of the estate.¹⁶ It was unusual and even shameful for a son to demand his inheritance before his father’s death. Here the prodigal son compounded his father’s dishonor by squandering his inheritance in sin.⁹

13After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. This means unrestrained sensuality and spendthrift extravagance.⁶

14When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. The “famine” represents the degradation and spiritual poverty to which sin reduces the sinner.¹⁵

15So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. Feeding pigs was forbidden by law in 2 Maccabees: “Cursed is he who feeds the swine.” The swine is enumerated among the unclean animals in both Leviticus and in Deuteronomy. In the Maccabean period abstention from pork became one of the key symbols of Jewish observance. Only the most desperate conditions would force the son to take this disgraceful position. Working for a Gentile employer, he would be expected to violate the weekly Sabbath as well.⁹ For the son to tend swine for a Gentile means that he had fallen as far as a Jew could fall.

16And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, These pods are a figure of the miserable fleshly and earthly substitutes for divine grace and the pleasures of divine fellowship.¹⁵ but nobody gave him any.

17Coming to his senses This shows the beginning of repentance.¹⁵ he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. His hunger is like the anxiety and emptiness one feels when far from God.¹¹

18I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son;

19treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.” Repentance is a returning to our Father’s house through the whole of our lives. We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart which means a desire to change, the confession of our sins, and a firm decision to improve our life which is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving.¹¹

20So he got up and went back to his father. This is called the parable of the Prodigal Son because the word “prodigal” means excessive, immoderate and wasteful, the opposite of frugal. In a sense, it is the father who is the real prodigal! In the same way, Jesus is the prodigal, the spendthrift, the profligate, the one who squanders his love on those who need it most.⁴ While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, The sinner turns his back on God but God does not turn away

from the sinner. Rather, he is ever hoping and watching for his return.¹⁵ and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.

²¹His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' This humble cry for mercy is a wonderful virtue on the part of the prodigal son.

²²But his father ordered his servants, The father responds before the son has a chance to say, "treat me as a worker." 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. The father gave the son a robe of honor and a ring that gave unlimited buying power and shoes which set him apart from slaves and hired servants for they usually went barefoot. The father restored him to full family membership.⁸ The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet are symbols of that new life for anyone who returns to God and to the bosom of his family, which is the Church.¹² (CCC 1439) Our hope is in Jesus in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins and the *sign* of his forgiveness is in the sacraments of his Church.¹² (CCC 2839)

²³Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. In contrast to the cattle left to graze on grass, this beast was destined for a special feast as it was stuffed with grain to put on extra weight and tenderness. It is a mark of great esteem to spend this valuable possession for a celebration.¹⁰ Then let us celebrate with a feast,

²⁴because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' This can be a restoration from spiritual death to eternal life. Then the celebration began.

²⁵Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing.

²⁶He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean.

²⁷The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸He became angry, The older brother's attitude signified the bitterness of the Pharisees who wrongly saw God's acceptance of sinners as a violation of covenant justice. The father in the parable is innocent of such a charge for he is simply forgiving and loving to his son, who recognized his errors and turned to his father for mercy.⁹ and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. The elder son's anger is expressed by the refusal to go in; the father's love is expressed by his coming out to meet this elder son.¹⁰ The father goes out to the elder son as he went out to the younger. He wants both of them to be happy.¹⁶

²⁹He said to his father in reply, The elder son omits the polite address, "Father," used by the younger son. 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. The language is quite bitter. The goat is a much more common and cheaper commodity. Notice that he wanted it to celebrate with his friends, not with his father. He is alienated even though he never left home!¹⁰

³⁰But when your son returns, who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, It is remarkable here that the imagination of the elder son supplies a lurid version of the younger son's life which the narrative itself has not given.¹⁰ for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' We betray our spiritual poverty as the older brother did, by our inability to be prodigals ourselves, by our inability to squander our love and concern, by our tendency to be frugal with mercy. But we need not despair because the Prodigal Father squanders his love even on our pettiness.

³¹He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.'

³²But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” The story does not tell us what the elder brother decided as we must each make that decision ourselves.

Some of the material for this commentary has been taken from: (1) Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998” by Lawrence E. Mick, (2) “The Navarre Bible: Pentateuch,” (3) “Understanding The Scriptures” by Scott Hahn, (4) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers:2004” by Aelred R. Rosser, (5) “The Founding of Christendom” by Warren H. Carroll, (6) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (7) “Responding To God” by the Dominicans of the Central Province of St. Albert the Great, (8) “The Gospel of Luke” by William Barclay, (9) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke,” (10) “The Gospel of Luke” by Luke Timothy Johnson, (11) “The Navarre Bible: St. Luke,” (12) “The Catechism of the Catholic Church,” (13) “St. Joseph Commentary On The Sunday Readings” by Achille DeGeest, O.F.M., (14) “You Can Understand The Bible” by Peter Kreeft, (15) “The Parables Of Christ” by Charles J. Callan, O.P., (16) “The Collegeville Bible Commentary: LUKE” by Jerome Kodell, O.S.B., and (17) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letters of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.