

March 2-7: March 2 Monday: Lk 6: 36-38: *36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. 37 "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back."*

The context: In today's passage, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his followers to be merciful, non-judgmental, forgiving and generous. He condemns our careless, malicious and rash judgments about another's behavior feelings, motives or actions. St. Augustine explains it thus: "What do you want from the Lord? Mercy? Give it, and it shall be given to you. What do you want from the Lord? Forgiveness? *"Forgive, and you will be forgiven."*

Reasons why we should not judge others: **1)** No one except God is good enough to judge others because only God sees the whole truth and only He can read the human heart; hence, only He has the right and authority to judge us.

2) We do not see all the facts, the circumstances or the power of the temptation which have led a person to do something evil. **3)** We have no right to judge others because we have the same faults and often to a more serious degree than the one we are judging (remember Jesus' funny example of a man with a wooden beam in his eye trying to remove the dust particle from another's eye?) St. Philip Neri commented, watching the misbehavior of a drunkard: "There goes Philip but for the grace of God."). **4)** We are often prejudiced in our judgment of others, and total fairness cannot be expected from us.

Life messages: **1)** We should leave all judgment to God and practice mercy and forgiveness, remembering the advice of saints: "When you point one finger of accusation at another, three of your fingers point at you." Let us pay attention to the Jewish rabbis' advice: "He who judges others favorably will be judged favorably by God."

March 3 Tuesday: Mt 23: 1-12: The context: For Jesus, it was the third day of "Holy Week" in Jerusalem, a day of controversy and personal attacks. Jesus was under fire, and he lashed out at the religious leaders of Israel for rejecting Him as the Messiah. In the text chosen for the Scripture reading this morning, Jesus pronounced eight woes against the religious leaders, calling them hypocrites and publicly humiliating them because they were more concerned about self-promotion than serving others.

Three sins of the Scribes and Pharisees: Jesus raises three objections to the Pharisees: (1) "They do not practice what they teach" (v. 3). They lack integrity of life and fail to practice what they preach, namely, justice, mercy and charity.

(2) "They overburden the ordinary people" (v. 4). The scribes and the Pharisees, in their excessive zeal for God's laws, split the 613 laws of the Torah into thousands of rules and regulations affecting every movement of the people, thus making God's laws a heavy burden.

(3) "They do all their deeds to be seen by others" (v. 5). Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of seeking the glory that rightly belongs to God. They express their love of honor in several ways, thereby converting Judaism into a religion of ostentation: (a) "They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long" (v. 5).

b) They "love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues" (v. 6).

(c) They "love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi" (v. 7).

Life messages: 1) We need servant leaders in a serving community: The Church is a servant community in which those who hunger are to be filled; the ignorant are to be taught; the homeless are to receive shelter; the sick are to be cared for; the distressed are to be consoled; and the oppressed are to be set free. Hence, leaders should have a spirit of humble service in thought, word and deed.

2) We need to live the faith we profess. Our faith tells us that we are all brothers and sisters, children of the same Heavenly Father. Hence, instead of judging the poor, we should be serving them both directly and through our efforts on behalf of economic justice. Instead of criticizing those of other races, we should be serving them both directly and through our efforts in behalf of racial justice. Instead of ignoring the homeless, we should be serving them through efforts to supply them with adequate housing.

3) We need to accept the responsibility which goes with our titles. Titles and polite forms exist to remind each of us of our specific responsibilities in society. Hence, let us use everything we are and have, in a way that brings glory to God by serving His children.

March 4 Wednesday: Mt 20: 17-28: 20 *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him, with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.* 21 *And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."* 22 *But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able."* 23 *He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."* 24 *And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.* 25 *But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.'* 26

The context: We celebrate the feast of James, the apostle, on July 25th. James was the son of Zebedee the fisherman and brother of John the apostle. He was one of Jesus' inner circle of three disciples who were given the privilege of witnessing the *Transfiguration*, the raising to life of the daughter of Jairus and the agony in Gethsemane. Jesus called James and John "*sons of thunder*" probably because of their volatile character and high ambitions. Later, James was known as *James the Greater* to distinguish him from *James the Less* who wrote the epistles and led the Jerusalem Church community. James the Greater was probably the first apostle martyred by Herod in an attempt to please the Jews (Acts 12:1-3).

The Gospel episode: The incident in today's Gospel describes how ambitious, far-sighted and power-crazy James and his brother John were in their youth. They sought the help of their mother to recommend them to Jesus in their desire to be chosen as the two cabinet ministers closest to Jesus when He established His Messianic kingdom after ousting the Romans. But they picked the most inappropriate moment to make this request because Jesus had just predicted his passion and death for a third time.

Jesus' response: Jesus instructed them that it was the spirit of service which would make his disciples great because he himself had come "*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*"

Life message: The leaders in Jesus' Church must be the servants of all as Mary was ("Behold the handmaid of the Lord"). That is why the Pope is called "*the servant of the servants of God.*" The priesthood of the ordained priests is called *ministerial priesthood* because their duty is to give spiritual services to the people of God who share the royal priesthood of Christ by their Baptism (Rev 1:6; cf. 1 Peter 2:5,9). Church leaders must be ready to serve others sacrificially with *agape* love in all humility. In other words, leaders among Christians must be humble, loving, selfless and "the servants of all."

March 5 Thursday: Luke 16:19-31 : 19 *"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. 22* **The context:** The main theme of today's Gospel is the warning that the selfish and extravagant use of God's blessings, like wealth, without sharing with the poor and the needy, is a serious sin deserving eternal punishment. The rich man's punishment was not for having riches, but for neglecting the Scriptures and what they teach.

Objectives: Jesus told this parable to condemn the Pharisees for their love of money and lack of mercy and compassion for the poor. He also used the parable to correct the Jewish misconception that material prosperity in this life is God's reward for moral uprightness, while poverty and illness are God's punishments for sin. The parable also offers an invitation to each one of us to be conscious of the sufferings of those around us and to share our blessings generously with the needy.

One-act-play: The parable is presented as a one-act play with two scenes. The opening scene presents the luxurious life of the rich man in costly dress, enjoying five-course meals every day, in contrast to the miserable life of the poor and sick beggar living on the street by the rich man's front door, competing with stray dogs for the crumbs discarded from the rich man's dining table. As the curtain goes up on the second scene, the situation is reversed. The beggar Lazarus is enjoying heavenly bliss as a reward for his fidelity to God in his poverty and suffering, while the rich man is thrown down into the excruciating suffering of hell as punishment for not doing his duty of showing mercy to the poor by sharing with the beggar at his door the mercies and blessings God had given him.

Life messages: 1) We are all rich enough to share our blessings with others. God has blessed each one of us with wealth or health or special talents or social power or political influence or a combination of many blessings. The parable invites us to share what we have been given with others in various ways instead of using everything exclusively for selfish gains.

2) We need to remember that sharing is the criterion of Last Judgment: Matthew (25: 31ff), tells us that all six questions Jesus will ask each of us when He comes in glory as our judge are based on how we have shared our blessings from Him (food, drink, home, mercy and compassion), with others.

March 6 Friday: Mt 21: 33-43, 45-46: 33 "Hear another parable. There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. 3446

The context: Told by Jesus during Passover week, the parable of the wicked tenants is actually an allegorical "*parable of judgment*," accusing the Pharisees of not producing the fruits of repentance and renewal of life which God expected from them as leaders of His Chosen people. "*I expected my vineyard to yield good grapes. Why did it yield sour ones instead?*" The parable also explains the necessity of bearing fruit in Christian life and the punishment for sterility and wickedness.

The meaning of the parable: As an allegory, this parable has different meanings. Like the Jews, the second- and third-generation Christians also understood God as the landlord. The servants sent by the land-owner represented the prophets of the Old Testament. They were to see that God's chosen people produced fruits of justice, love and righteousness. But the people refused to listen to the prophets and produced the bitter grapes of injustice, immorality and idolatry. Further, they persecuted and killed the prophets. As a final attempt, the landowner sent his son, (Jesus) to collect the rent (fruits of righteousness) from the wicked tenants (the Jews). But they crucified him and continued to lead lives of disloyalty and disobedience. Hence, God's vineyard was taken away from His Chosen People and was given to a people (Gentile Christians) who were expected to produce the fruit of righteousness. The parable warns us that if we refuse to reform our lives and become productive, we also could be replaced as the old Israel was replaced by the "new" Israel.

Life messages: 1) We need to be good fruit-producers in the vineyard of the Church. Jesus has given the Church everything necessary to make Christians fruit-bearing: i) the Bible to know the will of God; ii) the priesthood to lead the people in God's ways; iii) the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the remission of sins; iv) the Holy Eucharist as our spiritual food; v) the Sacrament of Confirmation for a dynamic life of faith; vi) the Sacrament of Matrimony for the sharing of love in families, the fundamental unit of the Church. We are expected make use of these gifts and to produce fruits for God.

2) We need to be good fruit-producers in the vineyard of our family. By our mutual sharing of blessings, by sacrificing our time and talents for the welfare of all the members, by humbly and lovingly serving others in the family, by recognizing and encouraging each other and by honoring and gracefully obeying our parents, we become producers of "good fruit" or good vine-branches in our families.

March 7 Saturday: Lk 15: 1-3, 11-32: *Tax collectors and sinners were seeking the company of Jesus, all of them eager to hear what He had to say. But the Pharisees and the scribes frowned at this, muttering: «This man welcomes sinners and eats with them». So Jesus told them this parable: «There was a man with two sons. The younger said to his father: 'Give me my share of the estate'. So the father divided his property between them. Some days later, the younger son gathered all his belongings and started off for a distant land where he squandered his wealth in loose living. Having spent everything, he was hard pressed when a severe famine broke out in that land.32*

The context: Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel has been called "the gospel within the Gospel," because it is the distilled essence of the Good News about our Heavenly Father. The whole chapter is essentially one distinct parable, the "Parable of the Lost and Found," with three illustrations: the story of the lost sheep, the story of the lost coin and the story of the lost son. These parables remind us that we have a God Who welcomes sinners and forgives their sins when **The context:** Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel has been called "the Gospel within they return to Him with genuine contrition, resolved to reform. In addition, He is always in search of His lost and straying children.

The lost son: This parable speaks about the deep effects of sin, the self-destruction of hatred and the infinite mercy of God. This is a story of love, of conflict, of deep heartbreak, and of ecstatic joy. The scene opens on a well-to-do Jewish family. With the immaturity of a spoiled brat, the younger son impudently extracted his share from his gracious father. He sold out his share of the inheritance and then squandered the money in a faraway city. Then, bankrupt, the prodigal son ended up feeding pigs, a task that was forbidden to a Jew (Leviticus 11:7; 14:8). Finally, when he "came to his senses" (v. 17), he decided to return to his father, asking for forgiveness and begging to be given the status of a hired servant. When he saw his son returning, however, the father ran to him, embraced him, kissed him and gave him a new robe, a ring and new shoes. The father also threw a great feast for him, to celebrate his return, killing the "fatted calf" reserved for the Passover feast so that all might rejoice at the wanderer's return.

Life messages: 1) We need to meet the challenge for self-evaluation: If we have been in sin, God's mercy is seeking us, searching for our souls with a love that is wild beyond all imagining. God is ready to receive and welcome us back no less than Jesus welcomed sinners in his time. We should also ask God for the courage to extend this forgiveness to others who have offended us. 2) Let us confess our sins and regain peace and God's friendship. The first condition for experiencing the joy and relief of having our sins forgiven is to see them as they are and give them up. We have to be humble enough to recognize that we need God's forgiveness to be whole.