

Light on the Lessons

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 22, Proper 17); Cycle A; August 30, 2020

Participant Guide

I Getting Started

1. Choose one of these options to defend: Christian faith helps us to [A] avoid suffering, [B] endure suffering, or [C] triumph over suffering.

2. A prominent theme in the Old Testament declares that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will be punished, so good, faithful folks shall prosper in material terms. This thought lies behind the popular booklet, “The Prayer of Jabez,” and other writings promoting the “gospel of prosperity.” What would be a Christian critique of that notion?

II Check the Texts

1. Jeremiah 15:15-21

A. What does the prophet lament in verses 15-18? What does Jeremiah hope for in verses 15?

B. How does Jeremiah seem to feel about his ministry as a prophet, verse 16? Why then does he lament his plight?

C. Compare the image of God’s hand in verse 17 with the same image in Ezekiel 3:14 and Isaiah 8:11. What are the differences in the meanings of these images?

D. What do you think is Jeremiah’s “incurable wound”? Why do you think he views God as “waters that fail”?

E. What title would you give to verses 19-21? How would you express the gist of what God is saying in verse 19?

F. What does God promise the beleaguered prophet in verses 20-21?

2. Romans 12:9-21

A. What motive lies behind these exhortations from Paul? Do these behaviors arise from us to please God, or do they flow somehow from God’s grace? (Clue: The context may help. Review Paul’s argument in previous chapters, especially 8:1-17.)

B. Which of these exhortations do you think apply mostly to relationships within the Christian community? Which seem to involve the believers’ relationships to the world at large?

C. Why do you think hospitality is important in verse 13?

D. Read Mark 2:13-17. Which verse in this lesson does that Gospel passage suggest? Where do you find a note that suggests that Paul realized we can’t always behave perfectly in this world? In light of Romans 7:14-20, why do you think Paul bothers with these exhortations to good aspirations?

E. Did Paul reject the best ethical thinking of the pagan world? Read Philippians 4:8. With what verse in our Romans lesson does that verse connect? How does that answer the question about Paul? Read Philippians 4:9. What is Paul adding to the pool of ethical resources?

F. Read Proverbs 25:21-22. Where does Paul quote it in this lesson? Which idea in Jeremiah 15:15-21 does this teaching challenge?

G. Choose one exhortation that you think is especially pertinent to Christians today and explain why you chose it.

3. Matthew 16:21-28

Recall last week's Gospel, Matthew 16:13-20, to fix the context of this lesson. It is also important to remember that suffering was not part of the agenda in any of the popular expectations for the coming Messiah.

A. Thinking of Peter's confession in verse 16, how do you explain his violent reaction to what Jesus says in verse 21? Read Isaiah 53:4-12. Why would early Christians latch on to this and similar passages to interpret the meaning of Jesus?

B. Compare verse 21 with Mark 8:31. What are the differences in the time reference? In the use of the verb at the end. What significance do you think these differences have?

C. How does verse 21 explain why verses 24-26 appear here? What point does Jesus make in connecting these two ideas? To what does the image of "cross" refer?

D. What is the common thought that connects verse 25 with two kingdom metaphors, Matthew 13:44-46.

E. In verses 27-28, what seems to be an error on Jesus' part? Read the following episode, Matthew 17:1-8. How might that possibly explain verse 28?

III What Does It All Mean?

1. How have you experienced God's activity in your life this week?

2. What difference do you find between suffering on behalf of the Gospel (e.g. persecution for one's faith) and general suffering (e.g., cancer, unemployment, and such)?

3. Talk about times when the "hand of God" in your life brought strength and inspiration, and times when the same hand felt like a burden.

4. In times when you have struggled, how have you experienced the presence of God in your life?

5. Why do you think the urge to repay evil with evil is so strong in people?

6. If the world could experience only three goods or virtues, which three would you choose?

7. What one thing more than any other do you think important for living together in harmony, mutual love, and peace?

IV Into the Week

1. You go home and someone asks, "What did you learn today?" What do you reply?

2. Send an expression of concern and support, such as a "Thinking of you" card, to someone you know who is going through a rough patch.

3. Continue to claim at least 10 minutes each day exclusively for refreshing your spiritual life. During this time of meditation, say the following aloud but softly for at least two or three minutes: "God loves me. I am forgiven. I can forgive. Thank you, Jesus."