

August 26, 2015

First Reading 1 Thessalonians 2: 9-13

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how hard he worked with them “day and night” to spread the word of God and to keep from being a burden to them. He is grateful that they accepted his preaching as the word of God. He says he treated them like a father treats his children, so that they might conduct themselves so as to be worthy of the lives to which God had called them.

Gospel Matthew 23: 27-32

Jesus in very strong language lambastes the Pharisees, chiefly for their hypocrisy – pretending piety while concealing selfish motives. He refers to their saying they would not have mistreated the prophets. But, he implies, they are plotting his death.

Both readings deal with the connection between belief and behavior. In the Epistle Paul emphasizes first that the Thessalonians know that he has not tried to profit from his preaching to them. (He starts by pointing out that fact. He’s not exactly bragging – sometimes you have to point out the obvious. This Mass reading ends with Paul’s point that he’s concerned about their conduct, so that they might be worthy of the God they now serve.

In the Gospel Jesus severely criticizes the Pharisees, who made a show of strict observance of the Jewish religious rules and laws. But Jesus contends that their morals or interior goals did not reflect reverence for God. So, this reading considers the other side of behavior, that is, our religious attitude may be focused only on the conduct, not on the intentions of pleasing God. In this case the person may be considering how to impress others, or even him/herself, rather than trying to please God.

We know as Christians, because Jesus told us several times and proved it by his example, that responding to God’s invitation to a fuller life with Him, would mean often denying our own desires. In most cases this self-denial will lead to suffering, even extreme suffering, as Jesus showed us and told us. (When we first believed, it was probably really ‘good news’ – that God loves us and wants our love in return, and that will lead to happiness or joy. But love urges us to action for the one loved, and God and His Son, Jesus the basic action is to keep the Commandments. Keeping the Commandments often means going counter to our own inclinations.) This last point is the point Paul is making to the Thessalonians. And Jesus is reprimanding the Pharisees severely for solving the conduct vs intention difference by faking their conduct.

Where does this leave us? Jesus described himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We should try to get to know who we are and what our motives are, and try to reflect that person in our actions. (That would take care of the urge to pretend a greater holiness that we own.) Then we should change our selfish intentions, so that they conform to God’s instructions as given in the Commandments and in His inspirations. Ask His help with that.