

“If you choose, you can keep the commandments, they will save you”, so says Sirach in the first reading. “Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!”, our Psalm response today. There should be no doubt, we are called to follow God's law, it leads to blessings in this life and ultimately to eternal salvation. The law's significance is made clear through scripture, but what is the law we are to follow?

In the Gospel, Jesus talks to his disciples about the Decalogue, that is, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are the foundation for the Jewish law, what we call the Old Law. In Jesus' time it was commonly understood that the Messiah would be the authoritative interpreter of the law. But in today's Gospel it appears that Jesus is not only interpreting the law, he seems to be making the law more strict, expanding the simple commandments into more complex rules. But there is something more significant happening here.

When we were young, our parents made simple rules to keep us safe and to help us learn to live in harmony with our family and friends. As we matured, those rules evolved to be more appropriate for our age and understanding. For example: we teach a toddler not to bite his playmates. As he matures, we don't just tell him not to bite, we refine the no biting rule to include guidance for getting along with those he is with. We add things like sharing, asking nicely, and saying please and thank you. Not biting is still a part of the rules by which he governs his behavior, but that basic rule expands to take on a broader meaning. Its purpose is to begin to build the moral and ethical foundation from which he can make the proper decisions to have successful relationships in his life.

Similarly, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments to help the Israelites function in the society they were forming, to give them a moral framework to guide their behavior in their daily lives. The commandments were simple, appropriate for the infant nation that God had made his own. But as that nation grew and became established in their homeland, the Israelites were ready for a more refined law. We see Jesus doing that in today's Gospel as he interprets the Ten Commandments. But we need to look more closely at what he is saying.

The scribes and Pharisees considered themselves to be righteous because they carefully followed the law. But Jesus did not consider the scribes and Pharisees to be righteous, because simply following the law does not make one righteous. When Jesus tells the people that their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, he is saying that there is something more important at stake than the letter of the law.

Jesus is guiding the people to an understanding of the broader meaning of the law.

Just like a good parent, God refines the rules as his children mature. The simple rule not to kill those with whom you have a problem, is fulfilled by not being angry or disrespectful with your opponents and to reconcile with those you have offended. Not killing is still the rule, but the broader interpretation includes not hurting others, physically or emotionally, not gossiping about others, forgiving others when they have offended us, asking forgiveness when we have offended them. We are called to treat others with respect and dignity in all our dealings.

The rule to not commit adultery is fulfilled by showing respect for the dignity of the opposite sex. Seeing others simply as objects of desire is demeaning. Not committing adultery is still the rule and its broader meaning includes respecting our and other people's bodies, striving for purity, avoiding looking at impure TV shows or movies or impure pictures in magazines or on the internet. It includes being modest in the way we dress, avoiding provocative clothing that encourages lustful looks from others. Our society is suffering greatly because of its failure to follow the intent of this commandment. It is the cause of many broken relationships and marriages, not to mention the awful things that are done to people in the quest for pleasure and satisfaction.

What Jesus is trying to do here is to teach the people, us included, the underlying purpose of each commandment. He is not making stricter rules, he is carrying the interpretation of the commandments to their logical conclusion, and calling the people to understand the broader meaning of the law. God's people are mature enough to understand the law's purpose.

But there is something else here beyond just understanding the intent of the law, something we might overlook if we think like the scribes and Pharisees. We are called to let go of the idea that to be righteous all you need to do is follow the rules. Jesus doesn't want us to make the same mistake that got the scribes and Pharisees in trouble in the first place. That is, to look at Jesus' expanded commands as simply stricter rules to follow. We might successfully resist getting angry with others, or not calling them names, but if we have no respect for them, do not treat them with dignity and do not attend to their needs, we are no better than the scribes and Pharisees. We might successfully avoid looking lustfully at others, but if we continue to entertain impure thoughts, we have missed Jesus' point.

The bottom line here is that Jesus is calling us to a change of heart. He is

beginning to teach us about a new law, the law of the New Covenant, the law of love. Each of his exhortations in today's Gospel calls us to examine our relationships with each other and to change the way we treat each other. They are guidance for changing our hearts, guidance for examining our behavior with respect to others. They are not simply stricter rules to follow. They call us to conversion in our everyday lives, in our deepest, most private thoughts, and in all of our actions.

St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that the Old Law was meant to govern man's passions and prevent sin, but it could not move him to righteousness, it could only prepare him for righteousness. The New Law, the law of the New Testament, perfected the Old Law. Through our Lord's teaching it made the precepts of the Old Law more definite and clear. But Aquinas also points out that this is only a secondary purpose of the New Law. The New Law is primarily the law of grace given through faith in Christ. It is only through grace that we can become righteous, and it is through grace that we are saved.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel provide us with guidance on how to cooperate with the grace he offers in the New Law of love, guidance on how to love each other. But to cooperate with his grace we must first accept that grace. That change of heart to which he calls us becomes more than just cleaning up our act. It means accepting Jesus' call to faith, to personal relationship with him, to conversion from our old ways of just following the rules to cooperating with him in his love of all people.

Where do we begin? Let us all examine our relationship with Jesus. Are we stuck in going through the motions, just following the rules, or are we cooperating with the gift of grace he has given us? Are we following the Old Law or are we living the New Law of love?

Reading 1 [Sir 15:15-20](#)

If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you;
 if you trust in God, you too shall live;
 he has set before you fire and water
 to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand.
 Before man are life and death, good and evil,
 whichever he chooses shall be given him.
 Immense is the wisdom of the Lord;
 he is mighty in power, and all-seeing.
 The eyes of God are on those who fear him;
 he understands man's every deed.
 No one does he command to act unjustly,
 to none does he give license to sin.

Responsorial Psalm [Ps 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34](#)

R/ (1b) **Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!**

Blessed are they whose way is blameless,
 who walk in the law of the LORD.

Blessed are they who observe his decrees,
 who seek him with all their heart.

R/ **Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!**

You have commanded that your precepts
 be diligently kept.

Oh, that I might be firm in the ways
 of keeping your statutes!

R/ **Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!**

Be good to your servant, that I may live
 and keep your words.

Open my eyes, that I may consider
 the wonders of your law.

R/ **Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!**

Instruct me, O LORD, in the way of your statutes,
 that I may exactly observe them.

Give me discernment, that I may observe your law
 and keep it with all my heart.

R/ **Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!**

Reading 2 [1 Cor 2:6-10](#)

Brothers and sisters:

We speak a wisdom to those who are mature,
 not a wisdom of this age,
 nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away.
 Rather, we speak God's wisdom, mysterious, hidden,
 which God predetermined before the ages for our glory,
 and which none of the rulers of this age knew;
 for, if they had known it,
 they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

But as it is written:

*What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard,
 and what has not entered the human heart,
 what God has prepared for those who love him,
 this God has revealed to us through the Spirit.*

For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God.

Gospel [Mt 5:17-37](#)

Jesus said to his disciples:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away,
not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter
will pass from the law,
until all things have taken place.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments
and teaches others to do so
will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments
will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses
that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

“You have heard that it was said to your ancestors,
You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you,

whoever is angry with his brother
will be liable to judgment;
and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raqa,’
will be answerable to the Sanhedrin;
and whoever says, ‘You fool,’
will be liable to fiery Gehenna.

Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar,
and there recall that your brother
has anything against you,
leave your gift there at the altar,
go first and be reconciled with your brother,
and then come and offer your gift.
Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court.
Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge,
and the judge will hand you over to the guard,
and you will be thrown into prison.

Amen, I say to you,
you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said,

You shall not commit adultery.

But I say to you,

everyone who looks at a woman with lust
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
If your right eye causes you to sin,
tear it out and throw it away.

It is better for you to lose one of your members
than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna.

And if your right hand causes you to sin,
cut it off and throw it away.

It is better for you to lose one of your members
than to have your whole body go into Gehenna.

“It was also said,

Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.

But I say to you,
whoever divorces his wife - unless the marriage is unlawful -
causes her to commit adultery,
and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors,

*Do not take a false oath,
but make good to the Lord all that you vow.*

But I say to you, do not swear at all;
not by heaven, for it is God’s throne;
nor by the earth, for it is his footstool;
nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.
Do not swear by your head,
for you cannot make a single hair white or black.
Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’
Anything more is from the evil one.”