

The Moral Law
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 5:17-37)

The Pharisees practiced a perfect obedience to the Law of Moses, rigorously observing every commandment down to the smallest detail, whether this meant purifying your hands before eating, avoiding work on the Sabbath, respecting God's holy Name, or fulfilling oaths. They were very committed to their religion, zealous in their desire to do right.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also emphasized that his followers must keep the law in all its fullness, down to the "smallest letter." But then he says, "*I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 5:20).

Jesus proceeds to explain how his followers will observe the law in a way even greater than the Pharisees. He wants them to be strict, but not in the Pharisaical way, which looks to above all to external conformity. In some things Christians are actually not as strict as the Jewish Pharisees (for instance with regard to dietary rules). In other more important ways, however, Christians are to be stricter.

For Jesus, the importance of the law is the way it must exist within, written on the heart. Even though the law will be revealed by external conformity of one's actions to the law, holiness or righteousness is not found in that external observance of the law, but only in the love and purity of the heart which acts in a just way. In other words, our external actions, the way we keep or fail to keep the various precepts, must flow from a heart that is holy, from a spirit that is right. As the Pharisees of Jesus' day demonstrated again and again, it is entirely possible to be one thing on the outside, but something totally different inside. "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones and rot*" (Mt 23:27).

In order to illustrate his teaching, Jesus uses three examples, based on the 5th, 6th, and 8th Commandments. In each case, Jesus focuses on the interior person. With regard to the fifth commandment – "*You shall not kill*" – Jesus says we must not even harbor anger. With regard to the sixth commandment – "*You shall not commit adultery*" – Jesus says we must not even harbor impure thoughts. And with regard to the eighth commandment – "*You shall not swear falsely*" – Jesus says nothing external should even be necessary to guarantee our simple and direct word: "Yes," or "No." In other words, we are always to be honest, true, and faithful.

What Jesus does with regard to Christian morality is redirect us from focusing on the “big” things (committing murder or adultery, lying under oath), and direct us to the “little” things (calling your brother a bad name, indulging in a lustful fantasy).

With regard to these “little” things, Jesus is severe. Merely calling your brother “*Raqa*” (i.e., “you idiot!”) merits going before the council of the Sanhedrin! And merely looking at another woman lustfully merits having your eye gouged out and your arm cut off! While employing his typical humor, Jesus is nevertheless making his point. The little things are the big things.

He also emphasizes this truth when he urges his followers to “settle with your opponent now” before coming to the judgement on the last day. Because on that day, there will be no escaping the just Judge, and any unsettled debts will require us to be handed over to prison *until we have paid the last penny*. This is an explicit teaching from Jesus on the existence of Purgatory. And what is important to stress here is that Jesus is referring to venial sins. One is able to leave the prison of Purgatory when the debts are paid. In hell, of course, there is no getting out. Thus Jesus makes clear, there is no escaping the demands of the moral law *in its entirety*. And what is still left undone at the end of this life, must be completed in the next, before the peace of heaven (beatitude) is possible.

Jesus gives us the opportunity to “settle with our opponent” while in this life, via his mercy in the sacrament of Penance – and this will be addressed later in the Sermon on the Mount – but it all presupposes this initial teaching on Justice and the requirements of the Divine Law. There can be no concept of “mercy” unless there is the concept of law and truth. Mercy does not excuse penance and responsibility, but presupposes it. Thus, for the sinner who acknowledges, confesses, and accepts responsibility for the consequences of his sin, there can be mercy and forgiveness. On the other hand, there can be no mercy in the case of someone who arrogantly ignores his guilt, or denigrates the law itself.

There is in our own day a debate over the divorced and remarried, and whether they can be admitted to Holy Communion under certain circumstances. Despite Jesus being very clear and explicit on this issue in the Sermon on the Mount – “*Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*” (Mt 5:32) – there are some who say the Church needs to be “merciful” and allow those committing adultery to receive Holy Communion. This is not merciful. This is an attempt to ignore the moral law, which requires that our lives conform to the *truth*. When you say “Yes” (to the indissoluble bond of marriage), God presumes that is what you mean, and He acts to make two lives one flesh.¹ As a Christian we must accept the

¹ And what God has joined, man obviously does not have the power to separate (Mt 19:6).

consequences and responsibility of that free moral act, and the truth of the new reality it brings about. When you say “Yes,” you must mean “yes.” Our words cannot make the color of our hair black or white (Mt 5:36); neither can our switching our “yes” to “no” by means of divorce decree all of a sudden make us unmarried in God’s sight.

It is despicable and corrupt – truly Pharaical in the worst sense – that some bishops and even cardinals of the Church, are actively seeking to overturn the law of God expressed in the sixth commandment, in order to *accommodate* human sin, when our Lord Himself says that our holiness and moral integrity must be absolute, surpassing even that of scribes and Pharisees. But it is also scandalous that Catholics divorce in the first place, in such great numbers, and seek to be remarried on their terms, in violation of their sacred oaths and vows.

Christian morality is demanding indeed. It is an absolute standard, from which there is no escape, no loophole, no technicality by which we can circumvent its requirements.²

Christ’s teaching on the moral law is therefore premised on two important truths: we must have absolute respect for the holiness of the moral law and its demands, down to the smallest letter (“*Do not think I have come to abolish the law... Whoever relaxes one of the least commandments and teaches others to do so will be least in the Kingdom...*”), and we must recognize that the “little” things are in fact “big” things (“*You will not get out, until you have paid the last penny*”).

² Jesus will conclude this section of the Sermon on the Mount dealing with morality with the exhortation: “*Be therefore perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Mt 5:48).