

## Homily for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 12, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Sirach 15:15-20 (Man can choose life or death, good or evil.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 119 (Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!)*

*Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:6-10 (We speak God's wisdom, not the wisdom of this age.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 5:17-37 (I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets, not to abolish them.)*

Today Jesus teaches his disciples how to read and interpret God's commandments *as God intended*. Using three examples from the Old Testament, he first reminds them of a commandment that they have heard many times, and then he instructs them to go well beyond the simple meaning of that law. Appealing to his own divine authority, he demands much more from his disciples than the law itself seems to require. He cites three well-known prohibitions found in the law: "You shall not kill"; "You shall not commit adultery"; and, "Do not take a false oath." Obviously, these are all very grave sins, which should be avoided at all costs. However, as Jesus explains, these commandments are not meant to be applied *narrowly* to only these specific sins. We should not deduce that harming people in lesser ways is perfectly okay, as long as we don't kill anybody. Nor should we think that any form of infidelity to one's spouse is permissible, as long as it doesn't rise to the level of a full-blown sexual affair. Nor should we think that dishonesty is acceptable, except when one is testifying under oath in a court of law. To follow God's commandments in such a minimalistic way makes a mockery of God's law, and deliberately flouts God's will.

God's law is not a *rulebook*, which tells us what to do or what not to do in every situation. Rather, it's a *guide* that helps to form our conscience according to God's will. It teaches us moral principles, which we can then apply in a wide variety of circumstances, including many that are unique to our modern world. God never intended for us to follow his commandments in the same way that an accountant for a wealthy person follows the tax code. We're not supposed to look for every loophole and apply the narrowest interpretation that the law permits. That's merely *complying* with the law, not *fulfilling* it. To fulfill the law and the prophets we must allow God's Word to conform our behavior and our attitudes to his divine will. Jesus shows us how to do that in the case of these three particular commandments, but we must learn to interpret the rest of the law in a similarly broad way.

As Jesus explains, the laws against murder, adultery and false oaths are all meant to address a large *continuum* of sins, from minor infractions to the most grievous sins imaginable. To *fulfill* these laws we must avoid the *whole continuum of sins*, not just the most serious forms, which the laws explicitly forbid. So, for example, if we recognize the grave evil of killing another human being, we should also recognize the danger of getting angry with other people, and the sinfulness of yelling at them or disparaging them. Obviously, these sins are not nearly as serious as killing someone, but they should not be overlooked or considered insignificant. The same is true of a whole range of sexual sins which are less serious than adultery, but can actually lead to greater and greater forms of infidelity, if left unchecked. Likewise, we all know

and teach our children that little lies can easily grow into bigger lies, once we develop a habit of dishonesty. Jesus is making a general point about morality: If we allow ourselves to become desensitized to little sins, bigger sins will most likely follow. On the other hand, if we *do* pay attention to the little sins and repent of them, then we will be less prone to fall into more serious sins.

Unfortunately, most Catholics will find that the traditional way that our Church has taught morality to children conflicts with Jesus' wiser approach to sin. Religious education textbooks still categorize sins as either "mortal" or "venial," giving the false impression that only certain sins are worth taking seriously, and all the rest are relatively minor. That's a terrible way to teach the concept of sin. We should be teaching children (and adults) that the seriousness of every sin needs to be evaluated according to the harm that it causes to other people, to ourselves, and to our relationships with other people and with God. By that reckoning, some so-called "venial sins" are actually quite serious, because they do a great deal of harm. On the other hand, some sins that would ordinarily be classified as "mortal" might not be sins at all, under the right circumstances. For example, staying home from Sunday Mass when you have a contagious disease should count as an act of charity, not a deadly sin.

In today's first reading, Sirach is not attempting to sort through the complexities of moral theology, as Jesus was doing. He's simply making a point about free will. He says that God places before us life and death, good and evil, and whichever we choose will be given to us. Sirach would have no tolerance for someone who tried to justify his sin by saying, "The devil made me do it." In fact, he leaves no room for any excuses. However, one important caveat is warranted, because a great deal of sinful behavior is driven by addictions or other forms of compulsion. And, compulsive behavior, by definition, is not chosen freely. That's why so many of us keep repeating the same sins over and over again, even though we sincerely repent every time. Avoiding sin *completely* probably is not a realistic goal for any of us. The best we can hope for is to understand our weaknesses and propensities to sin and gradually learn how to cope with them better, to avoid the temptations that endanger us the most.

To understand *sin*, we must try to understand our human nature, with its complex and conflicting web of desires, which sometimes lead us to unwise decisions and hurtful actions. To understand *God's law*, we must try to understand how God wishes for our human nature to be *perfected*, so that our desires are directed more consistently toward the good. The purpose of God's commandments is not to control us or to prevent us from having fun, but to help us to live in harmony with one another and with our God. His laws and precepts accomplish that purpose when we interpret them *as Jesus taught*. We can summarize his approach in three simple points:

1. Understand Christian morality in terms of *general principles* for living according to God's will, not just a list of do's and don'ts.
2. Pay attention to *little sins*, and understand how they can lead to bigger sins.
3. When it comes to God's commandments, do not be content to *comply* with the letter of the law, but seek to *fulfill* the spirit of the law.