

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

February 15, 2026

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.)*

The readings today offer us some interesting reflections on obedience to God's will and its opposite — sin. Sirach presents obedience to God's commandments as a clear, binary choice with equally clear consequences. If we choose to keep the commandments, they will save us. If we choose to do evil instead, then we shall die. This is precisely how Moses first presented God's Law to the Israelites centuries earlier. There is a path to life and a path to death; whichever we choose will be given to us. As Sirach says, God does not command anyone to act unjustly, nor does he give anyone license to sin. Through his commandments, God reveals his will to us, allowing us to know right from wrong, and then it's up to us to choose the path of righteousness and reject the path of sin.

This simplistic approach to morality has some benefits, but also some pitfalls. On the plus side, Sirach leaves no room whatsoever to excuse or justify our sinful behavior. We can't say, "The devil made me do it," or, "That other person made me angry, so I was entitled to lash out in response." No, if we choose to sin, then we must *own* that decision and not try to blame it on anyone else. The downside of Sirach's way of thinking about sin is that it ignores the complexity of our human nature and the *limitations* on our free will. Most of our sins are driven by some degree of *compulsion*. That's why so many of us lament, "I have to confess the same sins every time!" Yes, unfortunately, we do. Each of us is especially vulnerable to certain temptations and prone to certain types of sin. That's a sign of the woundedness in our human nature, not just the moral weakness in the individual sinner. No matter how much we yearn to be perfect, our will to choose the good doesn't seem to be *completely free*. Subconscious desires keep interfering, in ways that we don't completely understand. However, with persistence and a great deal of self-reflection, we can learn to understand the *sources* of our moral weakness and our propensity to sin, and that growth in *self-awareness* can give us greater freedom to reject temptations when they come, or to avoid them altogether. Most sinful habits cannot be overcome by sheer will power. We need to ask ourselves, "Why do I keep doing this thing that I know is wrong?" When we strive to understand what is driving our compulsive sinful behavior, *then* we have a real chance to make a lasting change.

Not surprisingly, Jesus' approach to God's law is much more sophisticated than Sirach's. He not only insists on "keeping" the commandments, but he further demands that his disciples follow them *as God intended*, fulfilling the purpose for which the commandments were given. Jesus reminds his disciples of some commandments that they have heard many times, and then teaches them to interpret those laws in an *expansive* way, going well beyond the literal meaning of the text. Appealing to his own divine authority, Jesus demands much more from his

disciples than a simple reading of the law seems to require. The three prohibitions that he cites — “You shall not kill”; “You shall not commit adultery”; and, “Do not take a false oath” — all refer to very grave sins, which obviously should be avoided at all costs. However, Jesus explains that these commandments are not meant to be applied *narrowly* to only those specific sins. We should not deduce that harming people in lesser ways is perfectly okay, as long as we don’t kill them. 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 keep God’s commandments in such a minimalistic way deliberately flouts God’s will and, thus, makes a mockery of God’s law.

As Jesus explains, the laws against murder, adultery and false oaths are all meant to address a wide *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, then 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 murder, but they can lead to greater forms of violence, if we’re not careful. The same is true of a whole range of sins which are far less serious than adultery, but can lead to greater forms of infidelity, if left unchecked. Likewise, we all know from our childhood that little lies can easily grow into bigger lies, once we develop a habit of dishonesty. In general, if we allow ourselves to become desensitized to smaller sins, bigger sins will most likely follow. On the other hand, if we *do* pay attention to the minor sins and repent of them quickly, then we will be less prone to fall into more serious sins.

God’s law is not a *rulebook*, which tells us what to do or what not to do in every particular 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, even to situations that are unique to our modern world. God never intended for us to follow his commandments in the same way that an accountant follows the tax code, looking for every loophole and applying the narrowest interpretation that the law permits. That’s merely *complying* with the law, not *fulfilling* it. It’s what Jesus refers to as “the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.” We must allow God’s Word to mold our behavior and our attitudes to his divine will. Jesus shows us how to do that in the case of these three commandments, but we must learn to interpret the rest of the law in an equally broad way.

God’s commandments are intended to *help us* to live in peace and harmony with one another. His laws and precepts accomplish that purpose when we interpret them *correctly*, according to Jesus’ teaching, not in a minimalistic way that seeks to grant us license to sin. And the better we *understand* ourselves and our own motives for sin, the better we can conform our *free* human will to God’s *perfect* divine will.