

ORDINARY SUNDAY VI "A"
FEBRUARY 11/12, 2017

In his annual Christmas greeting to members of his working staff at the Vatican (the Curia) this past December, Pope Francis pointedly criticized those who hold to a rigid "letter of the law" approach while discounting the equally valid "spirit of the law" in matters under their responsibility.

Certainly, the Pope respects and protects the teachings, practices and laws of the Church found in Scripture and Tradition. At the same time, the Holy Father is reminding us that discipleship and church membership is more than minimally following teachings, practices and laws. Fundamentally faith is about relationship—relationship with God and with each other. Our love and devotion to God is shown by how we love and treat other people.

In today's Gospel, Jesus likewise challenges us to go beyond minimally keeping the commandments for the law's sake—how far can I go until it becomes a sin; shifting the emphasis to the issue of relationships with each other.

It's not enough just to refrain from murder. Jesus knows we can still hate and despise others. We can follow the law and still kill relationships, still treat people as if they were dead to us. The commandment is given not just so that we won't kill each other, but so that we will be the type of people who will seek out someone who has wronged us and work to be reconciled with them.

It's not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. Jesus calls us to stop all the ways we demean and belittle others in the area of sexuality, or the viewing of others as objects for satisfying my physical desires as is the case in the use of pornography. The lustful glance, the undressing with the eye, even if it keeps its distance treats others as objects and takes what does not belong to us. Jesus calls us to a faithful heart which respects the dignity of persons; of our spouses and neighbors.

It's not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding swearing falsely or lying to others. Jesus knows that even if we keep from swearing falsely, we can still manipulate others with our words and lead them astray with our tongues. We can make frivolous oaths in the name of heaven and belittle God's holy name. Jesus calls us not just to refrain from swearing falsely, but that our words be so reliable and honest in our dealings with others personally or professionally that no oaths need be taken, that we are, "as good as my word."

Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus came to call and form disciples in a community devoted to a higher righteousness than just rigidly or minimally "following the rules." Jesus reminds us, as Pope Francis reminded the Curia, that we follow the commandments so that we might become the type of people Christ wants us to be, people formed and fashioned in the kingdom of God.

The author of Sirach tells us: "If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live." (Sir.15:15) To which St. Paul adds: "We speak of God's wisdom, mysterious, hidden... What eye has not seen, and hear 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." (I Cor. 2:7,8-9)

12 February, 2017
Father Jim Deora