

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Preached October 29, 2017; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

Thus says the Lord – these words introduce a series of commands that spell out some of the details of what we heard in today’s Gospel, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. The commands spell out details in a particular way in regard to those who are weakest and most vulnerable among us. Today, however, I want to focus not on these sorts of details, but on the fact of God us commands.

There is a passage in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans in which, after writing that through one man sin entered into the world, St. Paul adds that up to the time of Moses sin was not imputed because men *did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam*. (Rm 5:14) What is this *pattern of the trespass of Adam*? Well, Adam did not just do something objectively wrong, he directly disobeyed the divine command.

From Adam to Moses, however, the knowledge of God and his law was greatly diminished in the human race, so during that time, whether men recognized the wrongness of the action or not, they generally did not intentionally violating a divine command. Through the sin of Adam ‘sin’ entered the world as a sort of disordered impulse within human nature, an impulse to act selfishly and even to hurt others, and men let themselves be carried along in all sorts of ways by such disordered impulses, but they did not have the awareness of violating a divine commandment; they did not see themselves as disobeying God.

Nevertheless, once God gave the law on Mt. Sinai, and once that law was inculcated in the people of Israel, it was no longer just a matter of following the impulse of sin, but of breaking God’s law, just like Adam broke God’s law.

Now on the flip side, what is true of committing sin is also true of doing good works: without the awareness of God’s law the man who performs a good work follows the good impulse of his God created nature, but he does not have the awareness of obeying a divine command.

All of this still holds true today. There are people who are carried either by the good or bad impulses of their nature, who by their choices and actions either develop the good or let the bad take over, but who do not act with the awareness of God’s law. They have no intention of either obeying or disobeying God.

So when someone says, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, but what counts is whether or not you are a ‘good person’”, what is really meant is that what counts is that a person follows the good impulse of their nature. In that regard also an atheist can be a ‘good person’ insofar as he follows the good impulse of his nature.

Now in all of this there is also a question of how a person recognizes what is truly good and truly bad, but I will not enter into that question today. Today, the first point I want to make is that *in simply following the good impulse of nature there is a particular kind of goodness that is lacking, namely conscious obedience to God.*

By entering into a covenant with his people and giving a law as part of that covenant God does something more than just make right and wrong known to us, he makes a unique kind of goodness possible to us in all of our actions: he opens the door to us so that we can obey him. *Obedience to God is a higher motivation that elevates all of our other good actions.* That obedience, however, rests upon faith in the God who reveals himself and makes his law known through the covenant.

With that in mind we can now turn to today's Gospel. The Pharisees ask Jesus about the greatest commandment in the law. Jesus in turn gives him two commandments: *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.*

The whole law and the prophets depends on these two commandments, but the second is itself dependent on the first and the greatest. Jesus says elsewhere, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* (Jn 14:15)

We love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, by directing towards him, above all things, our desire, our feeling, and our thought, but loving him we must then also obey him. Obeying him, we must also strive to love our neighbor as ourselves. Then, in loving our neighbor as ourselves, we are not just loving our neighbor – as any non-believer might do – but we are also loving and obeying the Lord our God.

Jesus says, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* (Jn 14:15) The man Jesus is himself the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father. The ten commandments are also his commandments. As Christians, we now love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, first of all by directing all of our love and obedience towards the man, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is now seated in glory at the right hand of his Father, but is also really, truly, and substantially present in the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament of his Body and Blood. In the Letter to the Hebrews we hear: *Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.* (Heb 5:8-9)

So now, as Christians, we must fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves from the higher motivation of love and obedience to Jesus Christ. Indeed, we must even follow the example of Jesus Christ, who gave his life on the Cross for our salvation and gave us his new commandment: *Love one another as I have loved you.* (Jn 13:34)

Nevertheless, since the time of Adam, 'sin' has entered the world and we experience within ourselves the disordered impulses of our fallen nature. For that reason we also need the grace of the Holy Spirit, given to us by Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, that gives us the power to overcome the sinful impulse and obey the divine command.

When call upon the Holy Spirit, given to us in our confirmation so as to provide us with the strength to overcome every sinful impulse, even in the most difficult and adverse circumstances of life, we should also remember to call on the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, the Immaculate Virgin Mary, full of grace, untouched by sin. We call upon her saying, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."