

6 Epiphany 2020

Loving God;

We often have great difficulty following the spirit of the Laws that you have given us. Too often we spend so much energy on finding ways to cut corners, so we are not caught and punished. Guide us back on the right path so we serve you out of a great place of Love. Amen

I have discovered over the years that if one has a desire or the ambition to workout, to lose weight, or to start body building; there are various levels and ways to accomplish the goal. Yes, some are better than others, but it really depends on where you start, what you can afford, and how determined you are. I was never really interested in body building. I have a daughter who is very much into this and a cousin who used to teach weightlifting for Lansing Community College and still looks amazing into his 70's. Having a treadmill or weights at home never lasted or produced results for me. There were simply too many distractions to exercise at home. Even now, I have a membership at the Y and have gone twice. If I am going to walk, I enjoy being outside and not inside on a treadmill. Until a couple of years ago, I was walking about 4 miles a day. Definitely not now. I bet that everyone here has tried to lose weight at one time or another. I had tried Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, Nutri-system, calorie counting, weight-loss meds and finally, gastric bypass surgery. I still struggle. When it comes to exercise and improving health there are basic as well as hardcore roads to travel. From

exercising at home, to fitness camps that specialize in exercise hell. The desired outcome is the same, but the road is very different.

In his book, *Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business*, Charles Duhigg discusses high achievers who seem to be able to do just about everything. Some people are like that! What makes them so successful?

Duhigg, comparing his own life to theirs, says he felt as though he was splashing around in a **kiddie** pool, while the others were swimming in an **Olympic** pool. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus seems to present a similar comparison. It is **not** an easy message for some of us to hear. He discusses three of the 10

Commandments as passed down to the Israelites through Moses: "You shall not murder," "You shall not commit adultery," and "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor". The 4th thing he talks about concerns divorce. The 10

Commandments are rules or laws as we know. Jesus isn't saying that these rules are not important. In verse 17 of this chapter he says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to

fulfill them". So why today's discussion? Have you ever worked with someone who does only what she or he has to do and no more? Just fulfilling the minimum requirements of any job. Granted, the minimum is better than not completing a job at all. But those who go above and beyond are very much appreciated. Jesus

is saying that obeying the rules is the minimum requirements for God. Even the **Pharisees** obeyed the Law and created many more on their own, for the people to follow. Jesus stretches out the rules and looks underneath them to find the true meaning that is required of all of us. He says that following the rules is not enough. Jesus is really talking about living an ethical life and a life of Love.

An ethical person not only understands and obeys the rules; he or she also knows -- and embraces -- the purpose behind the rules. When Jesus wanted to lay out the ethical agenda for God's world, he didn't ditch the rules that were long ago written down by God on tablets of stone and then handed to Moses. Instead, he "fulfilled" those rules by embodying them and teaching them with authority (5:17; 7:29). For Jesus, the principles behind the rules were even more important. It wasn't just about what was written in stone; it was about the character and law of God written on the hearts of God's people (Jeremiah 31:33).

The scribes and Pharisees knew the law backward and forward, and, as the self-appointed legal conscience of Israel, they were bound and determined to make sure everyone obeyed the law to the letter. The scribes acted as lawyers for the law of Moses, and the Pharisees believed that God's kingdom would come only when the people of Israel all obeyed that law perfectly. For most of them, it was never about the why, only about the how.

Honestly, that is what makes this message uncomfortable for us today.

First of all, the people were astounded by what Jesus was saying. That is not difficult to understand because of how Jesus said it. The 10 commandments came from God through Moses to the people. The Israelites held this in the highest regard and great reverence. Now Jesus comes along and says: “You have heard it said.... **But I say.**

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,[a] you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult[b] a brother or sister,[c] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell[d] of fire”.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart...”

“you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 34 But I say to you, do not swear at all...”

Jesus was making it very clear, that he was superseding what Moses had said years ago. He was fulfilling the law. Just following the letter of the law was no longer enough. It was now time to leave the kiddie pool and start swimming in the Olympic pool.

The Law against committing murder is a basic rule that most of us understand. We all want to live in a world free of the fear of being murdered. Jesus however recognizes that the underlying motive is really anger. Simmering anger is destructive. About 5 years ago, a Jordanian pilot was burned to death by the Islamic State, and the news was full of angry talk. "I demand none of them amongst us be kept alive," said the pilot's grieving father." A politician in Jordan said, "Let's kill their children! Let's kill their women!"

Such anger is understandable, but revenge and punishment will not bring peace to the Middle East. Violence is a cycle deeply rooted in human nature, and revenge killings have kept this wheel turning for thousands of years. "An eye for an eye" was an attempt to break that cycle by declaring that you can only take an eye from a person who has taken your eye -- you cannot go out and kill their women and children.

For Jesus, the goal is not revenge but reconciliation. He always wants us to work for peace. "When you are offering your gift at the altar," says Jesus, "if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (vv. 23-24). He does not say that you have something against your brother or sister and therefore you extend your forgiveness to them. He is saying that if your brother or sister has something against you, you need to go and seek reconciliation even if you don't feel you did anything wrong. That is so easy. We want justice, not reconciliation. Jesus expects much more of us.

We know that committing adultery is never the way to go despite all of the ways that we rationalize it. People get hurt. But Jesus takes it further, recognizing that lust is at the center. This is where the weakness begins. Again, no surprise.

Women have been marginalized and objectified by men for a long time. In the time of Jesus, they were considered the property of men, to do with as they willed. Still today, men objectify women. We all know the case of a former president who thought that a certain sexual act with an intern was not really sex. Again, a situation where lust started the cycle. Although not as common, women can also objectify men. We don't hear about that as much. Jesus is warning us

that even though we might not actually follow through with the act, it is not healthy to do one thing with our minds and another thing with our bodies. They need to be in sync.

Concerning oaths, Jesus highlights the rule "You shall not swear falsely but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord" (v. 33). Once again, this is a very sensible rule that encourages people to keep their promises.

But Jesus offers a higher challenge to anyone who wants to swim with him: "Do not swear at all" (v. 34). Instead, "let your Yes be 'Yes, and your No', No. He says that anything more than this comes from the evil one" (v. 37). Jesus is saying that all words should be truthful, not just words spoken under oath.

Finally, he talks about divorce. At the time, a man could simply hand his wife a document basically saying that she was no longer relevant to the relationship and was to leave. Even today, many women who find themselves in a divorce, have no means of support and often no job skills. They can find themselves struggling to survive. Are there situations where divorce is acceptable and even necessary? Of course, but it should not be simply a matter of convenience.

It is not easy for us to leave the safety of the kiddie pool and venture out into deep waters.

When it comes to obeying the spirit of the law vs the letter of the law, I think the following story might help:

A few years ago, an event at the US Scrabble Nationals in Orlando left the Scrabble fraternity reeling. A 13 year old competitor, described by the National Scrabble Association as “one of the top young Scrabble players in the country”, was discovered hiding blank letter tiles, which can stand in for any letter when making a word, for future use in later rounds. When challenged, the boy admitted hiding the blank tiles and forfeited his wins. Now this is a case where the player certainly did not honor the spirit of the law which would have been not to cheat and dishonor his opponent and the game. However, technically, I don’t think that he broke the letter of the Law because after all, the **tiles were** blank. So, no letters. OK, not the best example. Maybe this is better. Three years ago, I went on a cruise with three of my children and their families. Most of the time, I was back in the room by 9:00 at night. However, the grandchildren were running around the ship playing games until much later. There were game rooms where they could spend their money to win tickets which they could then trade in for prizes. Most of the time, the prizes are not worth the money spent to get them.

The morning we were leaving, a knock came at the door and ship's security was there. They wanted to see the boys about something. Evidently, the boys had told their parents that kids had given them tickets so they could trade them in for pretty nice prizes. The security guards were there to get the prizes returned. As it turned out, the boys had found a stash of tickets in the garbage cans and gathered them up. They then turned them in for the nice prizes. All of this was on the ship's security cams. Now technically, the boys had not broken the letter of the law because the tickets were found in the garbage and therefore nothing was stolen. This is also why the ship just wanted the items returned. However, the boys had indeed broken the spirit of the law because they knew that they did not win the tickets by playing a game and therefore obtained the prizes in an unethical way. Or at least their parents made sure that they realized this.

Doing the right thing because it is the right thing and not just out of fear of being caught and punished, can be difficult for any of us to do. If we obey God only out of a fear of Hell, well that will keep us out of trouble for the most part; but if we follow the Way of Love, keeping the Spirit of the Law, God walks with us every step of the way.