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Following Jesus, Imitating Him, and Walking in His Light

Biblical Reflection for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time A

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, FEB. 8, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Matthew's Gospel reflects the situation of the early Church after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus affirms the permanent validity of the Law, but with a new interpretation, given with full authority (Matthew 5:18-19, 21-48).

Jesus "fulfills" the Law (Matthew 5:17) by radicalizing it: At times he abolishes the letter of the Law (divorce, law of the talion), at other times, he gives a more demanding interpretation (murder, adultery, oaths), or a more flexible one (sabbath). Jesus insists on the double commandment of love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), on which "depends all the Law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:34-40). Along with the Law, Jesus, the new Moses, imparts knowledge of God's will to mankind, to the Jews first of all, then to the nations as well (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Sermon on the Mount is the place in the New Testament where one sees the power over the law (which Israel had received from God as the foundation of the covenant) clearly affirmed and decisively exercised by Jesus. It is there, on that holy mountain in Galilee, after having declared the perpetual validity of the law and the duty to observe it (Matthew 5:18-19), that Jesus went on to affirm the necessity of a righteousness surpassing that of the scribes and Pharisees, or of an observance of the law animated by the new evangelical spirit of charity and sincerity.

As we continue our reflection on Matthew's great sermon, we hear a long Gospel passage today that may seem to be complex and filled with prohibitions (5:17-37). It is far too easy to "tune out" such a Gospel text, rather than trying to understand its rich meaning. The passage (5:17) begins with a word of reassurance: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

The law remains and will always remain because it comes from our unchanging God. Jesus intends to state the ideals of the new kingdom on earth that is ushered in by his appearance. His whole intention is to bring people beyond legalism -- which seriously affected the Scribes and the Pharisees -- and a literal interpretation of rules, and into the spirit of the law. Jesus teaches that minimal obedience is far beneath the dignity of those who love God and neighbor. To strive for less than perfect love is to strive for too little.

Beyond legalism and literalism

Matthew 5:21-48 contains six examples of the conduct demanded of the Christian disciple. Each deals with a commandment of the law, introduced by "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors or an equivalent formula, followed by Jesus' teaching in respect to that commandment, But I say to you;" thus their designation as "antitheses." Three of them accept the Mosaic law but extend or deepen it (Matthew 5:21-22; 27-28;

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43-44); three reject it as a standard of conduct for the disciples (Matthew 31-32; 33-37; 38-39).

The first example of the conduct demanded of the Christian disciple consists in the victory over anger, resentment and ill will, which are frequently stored in the human heart, even with the outward observance of the Mosaic precepts, among which is that of not killing. "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22). The same holds good in the case of one who has offended another with hurtful words, mockery and derision. It is the condemnation of all yielding to the instinct of aversion, which is potentially an act of injury and even of killing, at least spiritually, because it violates the required love in human relationships and causes harm to others.

Jesus presents the purifying law of charity that re-orders human beings in their most intimate heart of hearts, "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar. Go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). The love preached by Jesus equalizes and unifies all in willing what is good, in establishing or re-establishing harmony in relations with one's neighbors, and even in cases of legal contentions and proceedings (cf. Matthew 5:25).

Jesus offers a second example of bringing the law to perfection concerning the sixth commandment of the Decalogue in which Moses prohibited adultery. Jesus announced, "You have heard what was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you." (Matthew 5:27). He went on to also condemn impure looks and desires, while recommending flight from occasions of sin, the courage of mortification, the subordination of all acts and behavior to the demands of the salvation of the soul and of the whole person (cf. Matthew 5:29-30). Linked to this case is another of Jesus' teaching moments when he said: "Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce. But I say to you." He declared as no longer valid the concession made by the old law to the people of Israel "because of the hardness of their hearts" (cf. Matthew 19:8), by prohibiting even this form of the violation of the law of love in harmony with the re-establishment of the indissolubility of marriage (cf. Matthew 19:9).

In today's Gospel Jesus also taught that one should not be disbelieving or distrustful of one's neighbor when he is habitually candid and sincere. Rather, one should follow this fundamental law of speech and action, "Let your 'yes' mean 'yes' and your 'no' mean 'no.' Anything more is from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

Not to abolish, but to fulfill

Jesus' language of fulfillment must always be understood in relation to the Covenant with the Jewish people and in relation to the Law, the prophets, and the writings. This fulfillment and non-abolition on the one hand indicates the confirmation of the Old Testament, since God's Word is one just as he is one. On the other hand it indicates the fullness of the New, in which God reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 28:19).

Jesus knows the Law perfectly and observes it with devotion. However, he shows himself perfectly free with regard to the Law. He wishes to give the authentic interpretation of the Law (the sabbath, forbidden foods, legal purifications, fasting etc.), and to show its depth and interiority. He goes so far as to declare himself the new lawgiver, with an authority equal to that of God. He himself is the fulfillment of the Law (cf. Romans 10:4). Jesus also shows that he is the genuine continuation of the prophets in his message and his life. Like them, he proclaims faith in the "God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob" (Matthew 2:32).

Jesus also presents himself as a fulfillment of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament. These books, under the form of psalms, proverbs and popular narratives, show an awareness that the people of God is governed on one side by the Law, which indicates the way, and on the other side, by the prophets, who correct the people,

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the kings and even the priests when they go astray.

Precise and challenging love

In the New Testament, Jesus presents himself not merely as the continuation or the end of the Old Testament, but as something completely new, original and superior. Jesus makes God's love very precise and challenging. Love is measured by faithfulness to the smallest details, to the periods and commas of the law. And our ability to follow it is purely a gift from above. Jesus' life was a model of this fulfillment. Jesus could say to his disciples not only and not merely, "Follow my law," but, "Follow me, imitate me, walk in the light which comes from me."

Jesus does not only help us to gain a better understanding of the Bible; but he himself is the perfect and comprehensive Word of God, because he "is the very reflection of His glory, the very imprint of His being, the one who sustains all things by his mighty word" (Hebrew 1:3). He is the Word who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). He is "the true light, which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9). He is the "first and the last, the one who lives" (Revelation 1:17,18). Everything in the Bible and history cannot be definitively understood except in the light of Christ.

Biblical formation

Continuing our reflection on "Verbum Domini" in light of today's rich Gospel teaching, let us consider No. 75 of the postsynodal exhortation that reflected on the theme "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church": "In order to achieve the goal set by the Synod, namely, an increased emphasis on the Bible in the Church's pastoral activity, all Christians, and catechists in particular, need to receive suitable training. Attention needs to be paid to the biblical apostolate, which is a very valuable means to that end, as the Church's experience has shown.

"The Synod Fathers also recommended that, possibly through the use of existing academic structures, centres of formation should be established where laity and missionaries can be trained to understand, live and proclaim the word of God. Also, where needed, specialized institutes for biblical studies should be established to ensure that exegetes possess a solid understanding of theology and an appropriate appreciation for the contexts in which they carry out their mission."

[The readings for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time are Sirach 15:15-20; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10; Matthew 5:17-37 or 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37]

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