

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – October 25, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 7:15 & 11:00am Sunday Masses – 995 words

We typically think of Mark's gospel as being the most concise, but this Sunday it is the reverse: this passage from Matthew is so brief, but the parallel passage in Mark fills in more information. For example, we usually think of the Pharisees and Scribes as being a conniving bunch, always looking for a loophole, a way around what the moral law required – always looking for a way to make the law serve them. But when we read the passage from Mark we see that this man who questioned Jesus was one of integrity, who was impressed not only with prior things he had taught, but also with his answer here in this moment. "Well said, teacher" – he proclaimed; and Jesus, responding, said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God".

What Christ had just taught effectively closed all the loopholes that so many of the Pharisees and Scribes – other than this one of integrity, at least – otherwise strove to keep open: if love was the interpretive key to the law, then it meant that the law always had to be oriented to the good of others. It was not meant to be self-serving, calculating – much less, a basis for corruption. This man who stood before Jesus saw this with clarity, even as several of his co-religionists, if we may so call them, had already lost their innocence and were blinded by the corruption of their clan. Christ proclaimed to them all that we should love the Lord God first and above all, then our neighbor as ourself – and that the whole law depended upon this key.

What Jesus did here was to provide an authentic interpretation – that is, an authoritative, definitive explanation – of what the law truly meant. To love is to will the good of another; to fulfill the law involves loving God above all, as well as neighbor and self. Justice, according to the immemorial and classical definition, is the "constant and perpetual will to render to everyone his due". And divine revelation clarifies for us that that which is due to another is to love. "Owe no man anything, but to love one another", as St. Paul taught in his Letter to the Romans. Love and law are closely connected! When that connection is separated, we start to find loopholes, lacunae, and penumbræ; worse still, we see the law as a dead letter that can be manipulated.

As convinced and convicted Christians, so much of this is clear enough. Yet we always run the risk of losing sight of the basics and fundamentals, and of falling into traps set by the world, the flesh, and the devil. If someone stopped you on the street and asked you to explain Christian morality, you would say readily: that it is to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourself. But how are we tempted – whatever the source of that temptation? Regularly, we are tempted to do the reverse: self first, neighbor second, God last. Especially in our time, living as we do in a frenetic world, torn in every direction by activity and distraction, it happens that we fall into habits of giving God short shrift – and even of justifying that as the best we can do.

"If I had more time", we protest, "I would make sure that I prayed every day, that I did spiritual reading, that I stopped to visit the Blessed Sacrament, and that I made time for serving the poor and underprivileged." Time, no doubt, passes quickly. No doubt, this world is hard to keep up with. Yet, if we are honest, we should admit that we find time for whatever is important to us. And some of us, in humility and with tears, might well have to admit: we have not always held God as most important in our lives. Yet the ironic thing is that when we get things backwards – as is precisely the case in what I am describing – we fail to love ourselves aright! We put ourselves first, yet we are not any better for it. We remain tired, worn out, and frazzled.

Yes, if we miss Mass with fault on Sundays and Holy Days, fail to say our prayers daily, neglect the Sacrament of Confession – which we should ideally receive at least monthly if we want to make progress in our spiritual lives and overcome our faults and failings –, and rarely find time to serve others, then our love of God, at best, is running on fumes; more likely, and much worse, we are may be in mortal sin, and thus spiritually separated from God – on a path that does not and

cannot end well. The Lord himself teaches us that he is to be our first priority. “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness”, Jesus teaches in another passage of the gospel, “and all will be given to you besides”. Yes, when we truly resolve to put him first, everything else falls into place – and we feel more complete, more at peace. God’s plan works.

Therefore, this Sunday we are invited to consider that although Christ’s authoritative interpretation of the law in the light of love does close the loopholes that the Pharisees, Scribes, and others routinely found, yet it does not mean that we are automatically protected against other pitfalls that may lie in our paths – especially in the crazy world we live in today! We, rather, must be intentional about examining ourselves and our priorities, and asking whether God is first and we and neighbor second, whether we are making the time for what is right and giving to God his due, as well as our neighbor his due – which is always to love. Giving to God his due means right worship and daily prayer; giving our neighbor his due means whatever is good and true. Only with this proper order in our lives do we find fulfillment, peace, happiness, and salvation.