

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – February 12, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 900 words

Why do we break God’s commandments? The question doesn’t have a simple answer. Sometimes we might break a commandment because of weakness; other times, because of ignorance. Still other times we might break a commandment because of pressure from others or from within. In all of these cases, there is either a lack of knowledge or of freedom on our part concerning what we are doing.

But then there are those times when we break God’s commandments with full knowledge and full freedom. We know it’s wrong; notwithstanding, we choose to do it anyways. This fact – of a free choice with full knowledge that it goes against the law of God – still begs for an answer to the question why we do it. It touches upon what St. Paul calls the “mystery of iniquity” in his writings: and so, being mysterious, there is a certain sense in which a complete answer is not possible. Sometimes, it would seem that within our hearts there is an “I want”¹ that irrationally clamors for attention, even when we know it’s wrong.

But apart from that mysterious, irrational “I want” that can surge up from within, I think there is another reason why we sometimes make free choices, with the full knowledge that they go against the law of God. It is because we don’t trust that God’s way is the best way. It’s because we think that a little subversion, or even a big subversion of his law, is somehow necessary for our own good or the good of others.

An easy example of this is the so-called “little white lie”. Sometimes we might think it’s necessary to tell one. Sometimes we might say, “Well, at least it wasn’t a big lie”. But did God ever ask us to compare and weigh evils? Did God ever give us permission to do any moral evil, no matter how apparently small? The answer, of course, is no. The first reading explains it very clearly: “The eyes of God are on those who fear him; he understands man’s every deed. No one does he command to act unjustly, to none does he give license to sin.”

God does not need our lies – or any other compromise with what is good and true. Rather, what he needs us to do – if he would be victorious through us – is to follow his moral law trustingly. This is why our first reading says, “If you choose, you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live”. Sometimes we might indeed think that some subversion of the moral law, big or small, is really necessary. Or perhaps we just do not trust that God’s way is best. Whatever the case may be, he never expects us to do evil.

There are two principles at the foundation of the moral law: the first is, “Do good and avoid evil”, and the second is, “One may never do evil that good might come of it”. These are clear enough principles; they do not really need much explanation. Yet as we go through life we come to see how difficult it can be at times to live them out. We come to see how much we must grow in the trust of God. For some, the moral law even becomes a burden, for they begin to see it as nothing more than a list of rules, and such a perspective only breeds resentment.

Christ, in today’s gospel, wants to give us a different perspective: “Do not think”, he says, “that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law...” He calls us to radical fidelity to an unchanging moral law, but he does not propose it merely as an abstract set of rules to be followed. No, it is something that he himself has fulfilled – something that he has lived out.

¹ C.S. Lewis, in his excellent book *The Abolition of Man*, famously wrote in this regard, “When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked, what says ‘I want’ remains.”

Seen in this way, the moral life for us is imitation of Christ. Can you imagine Jesus telling a lie, or looking lustfully at someone, or having unrighteous anger – all themes that he touches upon in the gospel? Can you imagine him breaking any of the other commandments? Of course not! We are called to imitate him in his faithful and uncompromising fulfillment of the moral law. We are called to imitate the one who, in fact, also gives us the divine help that we need to live the way he wants. He never asks of us more than we can bear, with his grace.

In all of our decisions, there is only one way that we may take that leads to life; Christ tells us in the gospel: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father, except through me”. The way to life is imitation of Christ, who has fulfilled the moral law in its entirety, and offers us the grace to be able to do so ourselves. Do we trust that God’s way is best? As we meet the Lord Jesus today in the Holy Eucharist, let us renew our resolve to live in a way that imitates him, and ask him for the grace that we need.