

The Sunday gospel readings after the Epiphany concern ways in which Jesus manifests himself as God's Messiah in the early part of his ministry. His Baptism, calling the disciples, miracles of healing, changing water into wine at the wedding feast, and teaching are some examples we might find in our gospel reading at this time of year. The primary gospel for this year is Matthew. This year, for several Sundays our readings are sequential readings from the fifth chapter of Matthew, which contains the first portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Through Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, we are invited to recognize him as the Messiah, the One whom God has sent to redeem the world.

Today's gospel reading begins where last week's concluded with these words of Jesus: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:20). That was kind of an abrupt conclusion, wasn't it? The scribes and Pharisees never met a rule they didn't follow and Jesus tells us that we are supposed to exceed their righteousness? Did you find yourself flipping the page to see if there would be more? Well, today we see that there is more. But what we find may make us squirm as much as we did last Sunday if we are thinking that we are supposed to follow the letter of God's laws in order to pass a test or earn points to save us from hell's fire and get us through the pearly gates. Where is the good news in Jesus' expectation that those who are righteous – those who are right with God and their neighbor – must be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees?

As Christians, we can think of commandments in several ways. For example, we can think of a commandment as a law by which an action can be judged right or wrong. For instance, the commandment "Thou shalt not bear false witness" (Ex. 20:16) can be viewed as a rule against deliberately lying. In such a view, the moral challenge is to decide whether or not something is a lie, or perhaps a white lie, or perhaps a strategic lie to spread through the gossip network to heighten anxiety and so a person or a party can get their own way.

Another way to think of a commandment is to view it as a guide in the formation of moral character. In this view, the commandment against bearing false witness is not just about obeying the law, but also about the formation of honest character. In this view, we follow God's law not just for the sake of following it or earning God's favor, but because as we persist in trying to follow the rule, we become people whose character is marked by authentic truthfulness and integrity.

Jesus' message and ministry invite us to approach commandments in the second way. The approach taken by Jesus in the portion of the Sermon on the Mount recorded in today's reading follows a particular pattern or formula: First, Jesus says, "you have heard that it was said;" then Jesus follows with a statement of his own that seems to contradict the law or teaching, "but I say to you." But this is not a contradiction. Instead, Jesus is intensifying the claims of the law in order to clarify and deepen its true meaning for his hearers.

Jesus is following up on what he meant when he said he came "not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it," and to teach a greater righteousness: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The commandments are not just laws to be followed, they are given so that following them will form us in a greater righteousness. With God's help, as we obey God's law, it ceases to be something external to us and is inscribed upon our hearts. St. Paul referred to the law as our tutor (Gal.3:24). It guides us until we know it by heart. Parents remember how this works. You tell your child that the rule is that there will be no playing in the traffic. The child thinks you are the worst parent in the universe. Then, finally, the child understands that *not* playing in the traffic is a pretty good idea and no longer has to be told what the rules are. You athletes, artists, chefs, attorneys, physicians, and engineers know the necessity of practicing certain disciplines in order to excel at what you do, even in the midst of uncertainties and changing times.

Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (Mt. 5:21, 22).

Jesus isn't contradicting the commandment against murder. He is intensifying it toward its fulfillment in our lives. Jesus wants us to recognize that while we may obey the commandment against murder, we can still hate and despise others. We

can abide by the rule and still kill relationships and treat people in murderous ways. Jesus' teaching helps us to see that the fulfillment of the commandment not to murder is to form our hearts and minds so that we grow to view others not with anger, but with love. Obeying the law is only the first step. We fulfill the law by learning to love others, especially our enemies, as we would have them love us. The commandment is given not just so that we won't kill each other, but so that we will become people who will seek out one who has wronged us and work to be reconciled with them.

Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt. 5:27, 28).

Jesus isn't contradicting the commandment against adultery. He is intensifying it toward its fulfillment in our lives. He understands that while we may keep the commandment not to commit adultery, we can still do harm to others in the way we think of them, seeing others as objects and desiring what doesn't belong to us. Jesus teaches that the purpose of the commandment is to grow a faithful heart that cherishes our spouses and respects our neighbors.

Jesus says: "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.' But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'" (Mt. 5:33-37a).

Jesus isn't contradicting the commandment against swearing falsely. He is intensifying it toward its fulfillment in our lives. Jesus knows that even if we can keep from swearing falsely, we can still manipulate others with our words, raise their anxieties with our rumors and half-truths, and lead them astray with our tongues. We can make empty promises in the name of heaven, even at the Altar and the Font, and belittle God's holy name. Jesus teaches us that the fulfillment of the law is not just to refrain from swearing falsely, but that our words ought to be so reliable and honest that oaths aren't necessary. The greater righteousness and fulfillment of this law is to let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no."

The Law of God demands obedience and obligation from those who call themselves God's people. In the Baptismal Covenant, when we make vows to God on behalf of ourselves or our children, we say, "I will, with God's help." We say that because we have already figured out that keeping those promises will be humanly impossible and, therefore, we need divine help in order to keep them, not to mention fulfill them.

Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus came to call and form disciples into a community devoted to the higher righteousness so that the true intent of the law might be fulfilled in them. We follow the commandments not just because they are rules; we follow the commandments so that we might become the people Christ wants us to be, people transformed and equipped for life in God's realm. Once we know that God has reached out to us through the love of Jesus Christ, it becomes our heart's desire to return the love by following and learning from his commandments, so that our lives and the life of our community fulfill everything God had in mind from the beginning. It is not easy. Times change. Circumstances change. We change. As the poet said, "New occasions teach new duties." So, Jesus tells us to set our hearts on him, draw strength and wisdom from him, so that following God's rules will lead us into the life of God to become expressions of what is at the heart of all the rules – loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving others as we want to be loved by them.

We become his disciples not by forsaking the law. We become his disciples by following the law with purpose. Our vocation is not to become moral rule keepers or judges, but so that we will grow to be people who are pure in heart who truly love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, and that we might love our neighbor as ourselves.

Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. . . . For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus always calls people to look deeper, to see beneath the surface of things, to behold a deeper reality. Things, words, and actions are not all they appear to be. There is more! The commandments are not an end in themselves. They are meant to be followed by the faithful toward their fulfillment. Hand in hand with God's Messiah and one another, we enter the Realm of God where there is an ancient wisdom and rule of life that transforms us so that we will become instruments of love divine, expressing God's deepest desires on earth as in heaven.