

7th Sunday In Ordinary Time Year A (February 23rd, 2020)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

These verses from Leviticus, which is the third book of the Pentateuch, are particularly arresting because they present the commands as the Lord's own words.²

¹The Lord said to Moses,

²“Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy. Holiness is the key theme of Leviticus and the word “holy” appears more often in Leviticus than in any other book of the Bible. Israel was called to be totally consecrated to God.⁸ These commands describe how the Israelites are to imitate the Lord's holiness which is linked to love of neighbor.²

¹⁷You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him. Neighborly love could entail challenging law-breakers to follow the law; however, this must not result in grudges or revenge.²

¹⁸Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” You shall love your neighbor as yourself is cited by our Lord as the second of the two most important commandments of God. Although in the present context the word “neighbor” is restricted to “fellow countrymen,” in Luke 10, 29-37 Christ extends its meaning to embrace all men, even enemies.¹

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Brothers and sisters:

¹⁶Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? In Jewish understanding God lives in his Temple; that is where his glory dwells. The Samaritan woman knew that Jerusalem was where Jews worshiped, where the Temple was; but Yeshua replied that the time would come when “the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth”. According to the present verse, that time has come.⁴

¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy. The temple was the place where God's presence was made known in the glory cloud as it appeared above the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. There, and there alone, His holy Name could be pronounced. In Romans 12:1 Paul calls on Christians to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God.” In so doing he completes the transference of the temple image to us. As Jesus' body was both the temple and the sacrifice of the New Covenant, so are our bodies to be both temples and sacrificial offerings as part of our participation in that Covenant.⁷

¹⁸Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool, so as to become wise. This sort of talk about bodies being temples and sacrificial offerings might well sound like nonsense to the worldly-wise. Unless one has the faith to see that Jesus is the center of human history and the measure of all things, one will not see in Him the exemplar of the fullness of human happiness.⁷

¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written: God catches the wise in their own ruses,

²⁰and again: The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.

21 So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you,
22 Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you,
23 and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Matthew 5:38-48

In this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the phrase "you have heard the commandment..." five times. Matthew arranges the discourses of Jesus into five major sections reminiscent of the five books of the Pentateuch. Jesus then extends, tightens, or strengthens that law by phrasing it in a new commandment. So, Jesus is clearly acting as the voice of the law as had Moses.⁷

Jesus said to his disciples:

38 "You have heard that it was said, **An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.** This legal rule about revenge is rooted in Exodus 21:22-25, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. Jesus completes this teaching by emphasizing kindness and compassion, true holiness in light of today's First Reading. Written in the singular (not two eyes and multiple teeth), this law was originally intended to curtail the extent of revenge by an evil person.² This law was meant to limit retribution, it was never an invitation to inflict punishment for personal injuries or extend personal vengeance beyond the injury suffered. The punishment had to fit the crime but not exceed it. Jesus eliminates such a policy of retaliation from personal life.³

39 **But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.** The setting of the saying is personal relations on a small scale.⁵ **When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well.** The specification indicates the blow comes from the back of the assailant's left hand and therefore constitutes an insult rather than a violent assault. The idea is that, when insulted by a slap on the cheek, you should simply turn away and not retaliate.⁵

40 **If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well.** The shirt refers to the garment worn next to the skin and the cloak was the outer garment.⁵

41 **Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles.** Roman soldiers in NT Palestine reserved the right to recruit and compel Jews into temporary service. Simon of Cyrene was forced under this custom to carry Jesus' Cross. Jesus calls for ungrudging generosity beyond the required call of duty.³

42 **Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.** This deals with a beggar and one seeking a loan. The injunctions to give alms and lend without concern for repayment are based on Deut. 15:7-11: "You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him."⁵

43 **You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.** This is probably a reference to Israel's warfare laws. Because Gentiles in Canaan worshiped false gods, they were enemies of God. Moses thus called Israel to exterminate them under Joshua and the Judges, lest Israel imitate their idolatry. Against this background, Jesus counters Jewish disdain for Gentiles who continue to live in Palestine. He broadens the meaning of neighbor to include Gentiles, even their Roman persecutors.³

44 **But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** Jesus himself put this into practice with those who crucified him. The saints have always followed his example—like St. Stephen, the first martyr, who prayed for those who were putting him to death. This is the apex of

Christian perfection—to love, and pray for, even those who persecute us and calumniate us. It is the distinguishing mark of the children of God.⁶ Deliberate hatred is contrary to charity. Hatred of the neighbor is a sin when one deliberately wishes him evil. Hatred of the neighbor is a grave sin when one deliberately desires him grave harm.⁹ (CCC2303)

⁴⁵that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. The Father's impartial treatment of all people is a model for Christian mercy.³

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? Jews who undertook to collect taxes for the Roman rulers were the most despised people in the Jewish community. Not only were they serving the oppressors, but they found it easy to abuse the system so as to line their own pockets by exploiting their fellow Jews.⁴

⁴⁷And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?

⁴⁸So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The Catechism tells us that “The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle.”⁹ (CCC2015) As God invites the unjust to respond to him through the evidence of his love, so the disciples of Jesus must be the bearers of the same love toward their enemies.¹ Jesus advocates moral righteousness higher than the Old Covenant—it is a standard of mercy. Just as Israel was to imitate God in being “holy”, so Jesus calls the Church to imitate God's perfect compassion. The Father is kind and merciful to the good and evil alike, so his children must extend mercy even to their enemies.³

Some of the information for this commentary is taken from: (1) St. Joseph Edition of The New American Bible, (2) “Workbook for Lectors, Gospel Readers, and Proclaimers of the Word: 2011” by Mary A. Eble, PhD and Margaret Nutting Ralph, PhD, (3) “The Gospel of Matthew” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (4) “Jewish New Testament Commentary” by David H. Stern, (5) “The Gospel of Matthew” by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., (6) “St. Matthew” Compiled by the Theology Faculty of the U. Of Navarre in Spain, (7) Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (8) “The Bread Of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken and Marie Finn, and (9) “The Catechism Of The Catholic Church: 1994”.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.