

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 15:15-20
<i>Response</i>	Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 2:6-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth; you have revealed to the little ones the mysteries of the kingdom
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 5:17-37

With the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time we come to a very important and a very controversial section of the Sermon on the Mount. It's known as the antitheses. It consists of a series of six statements in which Jesus sets up an antithesis, an opposition, between the teaching of Moses in the Old Testament, the old law, and the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in the new law of the Gospel. So this a very long Gospel reading and it deals with several serious issues: anger, lust, divorce and remarriage, as well as the swearing of oaths. So this is really one of the most important texts in all of the New Testament for Christian morality, for living out the life of discipleship to Jesus.

So we are going to read through the Gospel together and I am going to make some brief statements about each one of those issues that Jesus raises in the antitheses. But before I begin I just want to make two points. I am going to be drawing on two key sources that I would encourage you to read about if you want to dive in a little more deeply. We are not going to have a ton of time in this video. The first source, I have mentioned before, is St. Augustine's famous book on the Sermon on the Mount. There are a number of different translations, this is just one, but if you want to read Augustine, he has a a very classic commentary — verse by verse — on these statements, these antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount. The second source I am going to be drawing on directly is once again the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which gives us very clear and authoritative teaching on the questions of anger, lust, divorce and remarriage, and the swearing of oaths. I

highly recommend that if you want official and authoritative interpretations of these passages that you go with the final word of the Catechism. I'm going to only be able to deal with them briefly here, but they are very important so the Church lays them before us today on the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, so let's read the Gospel together and then I'll try to unpack it to the best of my ability. So Matthew 5:17-37, that is the Gospel for this week. It is a long passage but I want to read it through in its entirety and then explain it. This is what it says:

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

That is the introduction, now the antitheses begin. This week we are are just looking at the first four, so here are the first four antitheses:

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it

out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' 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 what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.¹

As you can see there is a lot to discuss. I tried to break it down to make it clear into five main points. I will look at the relationship between the old and new law and then each one of the antitheses. So let's work through those one at a time. Number one. Jesus begins this section by saying that he has "not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them." Now the standard Jewish name for the Scriptures at this time was The Law and The Prophets — that's how they referred to the two major portions of the Old Testament. This was a common name, they didn't use the word Bible yet, but that's what Jesus means, he was referring to the Jewish Scriptures. So what he's saying here is that everything he is about to say, when he is going to set his teaching in opposition to Moses, isn't intended to abolish the law of Moses, it's intended to fulfill the law of Moses. The Greek word there for fulfill, *plēroō*, literally means to make complete, to bring to perfection. So what Jesus is revealing here is he is showing us that there are aspects of the Old Testament that are not perfect. In other words, they are not what

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

God ultimately wants for his people. They are, as we saw last time, like the Ten Commandments that were given at the bottom of the mountain. They were a standard of righteousness, but they were a lower standard of righteousness. Here Jesus wants to perfect that law of righteousness and bring the disciples up to the top of the mountain where he's going to give them the new law, the Gospel, that's not going to break the old law, but is going to transform it. It's going to transfigure, it's going to transcend it, and bring them up to the level of the kingdom of heaven.

That's what he means when he says that “their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees.” That if it is not greater than that of the Pharisees — which we are at the level of the law of Moses at the bottom of the mountain — they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. So this stands in stark contrast to a temptation that there has been throughout the history of the Church to reject the Old Testament. This goes back to a heretic known as Marcion, who regarded the Old Testament as coming from a different God, a lesser God, than the New Testament. The Church has always rejected that because Jesus rejected it.

He made very clear that his mission, the new law, is fulfilling the Old Testament, not abolishing it. In fact when he says there, if you look at the verse, he says “not an iota, not a dot, will pass away until it's all accomplished.” The word there for iota, he's referring to the Hebrew letter *yod* which is a y, it's the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And then we says not a dot will pass, the dot is a reference to a horn — it is called *keraiia* in Greek. It is just like a tiny extra mark on the edge of certain letters. So what Jesus is basically saying is not the smallest Hebrew letter and not even the smallest part of the Hebrew letter from the law and the prophets is going to pass away. It's all inspired and it's all going to be accomplished, it's all going to be fulfilled and he's going to be the one to fulfill it of course. So that's the main point. He's basically beginning with a caveat that the antitheses he is going to give are not undoing the law, they are fulfilling it.

With that said let's work through each one of them. The first antithesis has to do with anger and insults. Basically what Jesus is teaching in this one is a contrast. In the Old Testament, the book of Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments, Moses forbade murder. “You shall not kill.” In the new law of the Gospel, Jesus forbids anger and insults, so he goes far beyond murder to forbid anger and insults. It is interesting in the passage here that I read that it says “whoever insults his brother”

— that is the Revised Standard Version — but literally in the Greek it says “whoever says *raca* to his brother shall be liable to the council.” Now what does that mean? Well we are not really quite sure. *Raca* was an Aramaic word that seems to have meant something like brainless, numbskull, empty headed or worthless. It was just an insult to say that someone was an idiot. You can see that in the next insult too when Jesus says whoever says “you fool,” the Greek word there is *mōre* and we get the word moron in English from that.

So these are insults that we would make against someone out of anger, where you would disrespect them and deride them because of the emotion of anger. It would be like a curse. In any case, what Jesus says is “anyone who says you fool shall be liable...” Now the RSV says to the “hell of fire.” This one is a little tricky. The New American Bible is better on this. It says “liable to the Gehenna of fire.” Gehenna is in fact the word in Greek. It is a word that comes from the expression meaning the Valley of Hinnom. Hinnom was a valley to the east of Jerusalem where many sacrifices, human sacrifices, and the pagan cults had once dwelt. It was regarded as defiled and it was basically a garbage dump where they would burn trash and dung and other things there. It was always on fire, was wreaking and smoking so it became a kind of earthly image for the realm of the damned, for the realm of spiritual fire and spiritual punishments. So what Jesus is doing here is he is making clear that not only is murder a sin, but anger and insults, even they, are sinful and are liable to judgment.

Now I don't have time to go into this in depth in this video, but one thing I think is important to point out here is that in a first century Jewish context, Gehenna was not simply a realm that was populated by the fire of the damned. Rabbis also would talk about Gehenna as a place of purgation, purification through fire, for people whose sins were less serious or less weighty and that it could be a temporary place of punishment before someone would enter into the life of the world to come. In other words, Gehenna was, in the Jewish tradition, a name for what we would call purgatory as Catholics, a place of spiritual purification that was temporary rather than permanent. I think that you can see that in this passage here. I think that's what Jesus means, although there is some debate about this in the tradition between different Church Fathers. He also talks about going to prison and he says “you'll never get out until you've paid the last penny.” Well if he was just talking about eternal damnation, it really wouldn't make sense for him to say that

because the damned never get out of the prison of hell, but it does make sense if he's talking about what we call purgatory, because this would mean a place of punishment where you would pay the debt of lesser sins, like anger and insults, and that you will not enter into the kingdom until you've paid the last penny for the debt of those sins.

In any case, as Augustine pointed out in his commentary on this, we need to be clear that in this antithesis Jesus is not not forbidding the emotion of anger — like the involuntary movement of anger that we all experience when something bad happens. What he is forbidding though is consent to that anger, consent to that emotion which would lead to us acting on the anger, either by insulting someone else or cursing someone else in outbursts and insults — to say nothing of striking someone else or murdering someone else, which is of course what was forbidden by Moses. So what is Jesus doing here? He is not undoing the law against murder in the Old Testament, he's driving it much more deep into the human heart and getting to the root cause of murder, which is ultimately wrath and anger and ill will, a desire to hurt someone else because they have done something wrong or because they've hurt us or whatever may be the cause. So Augustine makes a very important distinction between the emotion of anger and then consenting to that and committing sin in the heart.

That distinction is also important for the next antithesis. The second antithesis deals with adulterous thoughts. This one is often widely misunderstood or wondered about, so let's look at that for just a second. Jesus points out that in the Ten Commandments Moses forbids adultery, which would be having relations with another person's spouse and breaking the marriage covenant. Jesus, however, goes further and he forbids even lustful looks. So he says “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully commits adultery with her [not in the body, but] in his heart,” in his *kardia* the Greek word is. In the Bible, heart is a not just the seat of our emotions, but it's even more the seat of our will. It's where we choose. It's like the deepest part of a person, it's where we either choose for or against God, we choose good or we choose evil. It is where we consent, it is where we give consent. That's what Jesus means by committing adultery in the heart.

This is one of those times too where I have found that Augustine is a very helpful commentator because he makes a distinction — and the tradition makes a

distinction along these lines as well— that Jesus does not say whoever experiences desire for a woman, because attraction to another person is a natural passion, it is a natural emotion and can come on involuntarily. What Augustine says Jesus means is that if we surrender to a disordered desire, if we surrender to a lustful attraction either by willing to fantasize about another person or, Augustine says, if we consent to that lustful thought so that if we had the opportunity we would act on it, he said that is where the sin lies, in the consent of the heart, because the person has already committed adultery in the heart, even if it hasn't happened in the body. That's the deeper meaning, that's the precise meaning of what Jesus is getting at here.

I bring this up because one time I remember I was teaching this years and years ago and a student said “well this is impossible It's impossible not to look at a woman lustfully.” And what he was trying to express was the natural experience of feeling attraction for the opposite sex, and I had to be clear with him that that's not what Jesus is condemning here. It's not a question of what you experience, of the passion itself, it's then what you do with that desire. Is it cultivated interiorly? Would you act on it if you could? If so then you have given consent to that lustful and disordered desire, and one of things we have to do, and what Jesus is going to call the disciples to do in the new covenant, is we have to struggle against sin not just in the body and in the outward, but in the heart itself, which is where sin originates, in concupiscence, in those disordered desires. We have to wrestle against them.

Jesus gives us the recipe for doing that with his very vivid imagery. He says “if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and toss it away. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.” Now this is a great example of how in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus uses a figure of speech known as hyperbole. What is hyperbole? Hyperbole is when a teacher exaggerates in order to make a point. If you have ever taught a class you know how to do this. Frequently students don't pay attention, so to get their attention what do you have to do? You have to exaggerate. You have to gesticulate. You have to do something to get their attention in order to help them remember the point. Jesus obviously doesn't intend for us to take this literally. He doesn't want a bunch of one-eyed or one-armed disciples running around. He is not enjoining anyone to actually cut out their eyes or cut off their hands. Those are metaphors for custody of the eyes with regard to

lustful looks, controlling how we look, where we look, at whom we look and with what desires we look; and also to custody of the body, being in control of our members, only doing things in the body that are in accord with the law of God and with the end for which our bodies are created.

Obviously adultery would not be one of those, it would be contrary to the body and to what the body is given to us for. So Jesus uses these metaphors to basically say “look, do whatever it takes to fight against the sin of lust in the heart, because it is better to lose those limbs and enter into the kingdom of God with one hand or one eye than it is to be cast into Gehenna with all of your body parts.” That's the imagery he is using here. So it is a very shocking and memorable image to stress the seriousness of sexual sin committed in the heart. By the way, Jesus didn't make this up, this is already part of the Old Testament. If you go back to the Ten Commandments, the last two Commandments are “you shall not covet your neighbor's wife” and “you shall not covet your neighbor's property.” So already in the Old Testament God is trying to get his people to see that sin begins in the heart with the will.

Okay, the third antithesis. There is so much we can discuss here, it regards divorce and remarriage, which may be his most controversial teaching in all of the Gospels. So obviously we don't have enough space to deal with it in depth here. What I want to try to basically do though is make clear, as clear as possible, exactly what Jesus is saying and what he isn't saying in this particular section of the Sermon of the Mount. Before I begin though a caveat, whenever we say the word divorce in modern times, in contemporary times, we mean the dissolution of the marriage, we mean the end of a marriage. But the word divorce and the reality of divorce in Jesus's day is different. Whenever you see the word divorce here, the Greek word is *apoluo* and it literally means to dismiss or to send away, because that was how a man would divorce his wife. He would send her out of his house. He would dismiss her from his house and that act accompanied with a bill would be a formal and public dismissal or divorce of his wife. But it doesn't mean, for Jesus, the end of the marriage, and you'll see that in just a second when we get to the end of the verses. I want to make that clear so I'm actually going to translate the word literally, I am going to say dismiss, so you can feel the effect of it and get its meaning and its context. Let's walk through it step-by-step then.

First in verse 31, Jesus says “it was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” Here Jesus is quoting Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, who permits a husband to dismiss his wife — to send her out of his house — as long as he gives her a written formal bill of dismissal, or bill of divorce. Now that was permitted in the Old Testament, but in verse 32 Jesus says “but I say to you that every one who dismisses his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress...” Pause there. What is Jesus saying here? Well it's very simple, in the economic situation of the first century A.D., if a man dismissed his wife, if he sent her out of his house, she would end up with two options. She would either have to remarry or she would have to enter into a life of prostitution. In other words, either one of those options would force her into a state of adultery, because she'd either be having relations with a new husband while she is still married to her old husband, or she be engaging in relations with men in the context of prostitution. So Jesus here is saying whoever dismisses his wife is sinning because he's forcing her into a state of adultery, forcing her to commit acts of adultery, with one exception, except in the case of unchastity. The Greek word here for unchastity is *porneia*. We get the word pornography from this, so it's pretty easy to figure out what that means. *Porneia* is any act of unlawful sexual intercourse. So why does Jesus give this exception? Well if you put it in context it makes sense. Think about it again, “I say to you that every one who dismisses his wife, except on the ground of [sexual immorality, or adultery in this case], makes her an adulteress.” So the logic of it is this, if a man dismisses his wife he's forcing her into a state of adultery, whether either by forcing her to remarry or by forcing her into a life of prostitution, unless she's already made herself an adulterous by committing some unlawful act of sexual intercourse within the context of the marriage. So that's the logic of his statements.

Now to the third point, and this is the most important one and the most controversial one. The final part of Jesus' teaching is whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery. Full stop. Why does he say that? Well because he's presupposing here that marriage is indissoluble, that Jewish marriage is permanent, it is unto death. So anyone who marries a woman who's been dismissed by her husband is marrying a woman who is still married to that husband. So the fact that she's been dismissed, that she's been sent out a house, the fact that she's even been given a bill, for Jesus doesn't mean that that marriage is over, because for Jesus all marriages are permanent. So although Jesus permits a man to dismiss his wife in

one situation, in the case of infidelity, he never permits remarriage. That's the main point. He never permits a man to marry a woman who's been dismissed, because marriage is permanent, marriage is indissoluble. This is ultimately the root of the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. That a valid marriage cannot be broken, based on Jesus' words elsewhere, "what God has joined together let no man put asunder." In other words, no human being has the power to break a marriage because marriage is made by God, it's established by God, it's a bond that is God-made not man-made.

Again, what I have just given you is really the tradition of the Church. So in his famous commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, going all the way back to Augustine, Augustine says these basic two points. The sole reason for the separation of spouses, or for the dismissal of a spouse, is infidelity; and if someone should end up separated from their spouse, or as we would say divorce, they have two options: to remain unmarried or be reconciled with their previous spouse, because remarriage is not an option because of the permanence of marriage, because of the indissolubility of marriage. That is the interpretation of St. Augustine, going all the way back to the fourth century.

Now with that said, one last point. There are some translations which will render that exception clause differently. So for example, the New American Bible will say not "except for unchastity," but rather "unless it's a case of unlawful marriage." Now what does that mean? Well in the 20th century some scholars came up with the idea that when Jesus says *porneia*, he's actually referring to a case of incest. In other words, to a case of a brother and sister who would be married to one another. He is all allowing for them to separate because the marriage would be unlawful, because it would be by nature incestuous. Although that interpretation is possible, none of the ancient Church Fathers ever took it. It seems unlikely too that in a Jewish context, which is what Matthew's Gospel is written to and who Jesus is addressing, that those kind of incestuous marriages, which were practiced among pagans, would actually be enough of a problem for Jesus to feel that he would need to address it. So in my opinion that interpretation is unlikely, and it is definitely the minority opinion in the history of the Church. The more likely interpretation is that the exception clause has to do with a case of adultery or infidelity.

The fourth and final antithesis we are going to look at regards the swearing of oaths. So once again Jesus goes back to the Old Testament and he says “you have heard that it was said ‘You shall not swear falsely.’” That's a reference to Moses commanding the people both not to bear false witness, like in the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20), but also just not to swear falsely, like in the book of Leviticus 19. By contrast, Jesus says “don't swear at all, but let your speech, whatever you say, be the simple truth. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” What are we to make of this passage? Well there are couple of things we will want to highlight here. In context, it appears that by the first century A.D., Jews had developed a custom of engaging in what we would call a light oath. It wasn't the most solemn form of an oath, it would be a lighter oath. So someone would swear not by God's name, but they would swear by heaven or they would swear by earth or “I swear by the city of Jerusalem” or “I swear by the hair on my head.” In other words, they would swear by something other than God that they would do X, Y or Z. One of the dangers of these lighter oaths is that people would begin to take oaths very lightly. That they would do them frequently and without regard for the gravity and the seriousness involved in swearing by something. So Jesus here is forbidding those kinds of oaths and he's enjoining his disciples not to swear at all, but to simply speak the truth. Don't keep vowing by this or vowing by that, that you are going to do this or you are going to say, or that this is true or that's false. Just say what you mean. “Let your yes be yes and your no be no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.” In other words, it's a temptation. — the evil one there being a reference to the devil.

Now this passage, just like the divorce and remarriage passage, becomes controversial. One of the reasons being that if you look elsewhere in the New Testament, you will see that there are examples of people, like St. Paul the Apostle, using the name of God in a solemn oath. I am not going to give you examples of this so you can look at 2 Corinthians 1:23 or Galatians 1:20. So the question becomes is this a contradiction? This is a great example of a time when we look to the tradition to see how this text has been interpreted throughout the centuries. Did the ancient Christians interpret Jesus as absolutely prohibiting all oaths using the name of God? Or was he prohibiting the frequent use of oaths, especially these light oaths using other lesser things like heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or whatnot? Here I am going to refer to the Catechism because this is an authoritative teaching of the Church. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church 2154, it says this,

“following St. Paul, the tradition of the Church has understood Jesus' words as not excluding oaths made for grave and right reasons (for example, in court). And it gives the two passages from St. Paul. So if we recall that the New Testament is inspired by the Holy Spirit and we put Jesus's statements here in the context of the whole canon, it leads us to the conclusion that this is not an absolute prohibition of oaths, but rather a relative prohibition of oaths that is meant to emphasize, for his disciples, that they should simply speak the truth and not take oaths lightly, but simply let their “yes be yes and their no be no.” Why? Because that is why speech is given to us, in order to speak the truth.

Well that was rather lengthy, but I tried my best to keep it short. In closing then, what do we make of the first and second readings? Why are these readings chosen to go with the Sermon on the Mount? We can do this rather quickly. The first reading for this week is from the book of Sirach, which is only in the Catholic Old Testament, Sirach 15:15-20 and basically it's a meditation on free will. One of the questions people will have when they hear the Sermon on the Mount is “is this possible?” Can I really do this? For example, Martin Luther, one of the Protestant reformers, said that laws of the Sermon on the Mount aren't possible for someone to keep. There are certain Protestants who actually deny that free will was a reality, so the Church puts our first reading here from the Old Testament — it's the classic text on free will and it basically says that to act faithfully is a matter of one's own choice. That before a man is life and death and whatever he chooses will be given to him. So in other words, we do have the freedom to choose, the freedom of our will is a reality. It also goes on to say that God is omniscient, he sees everything, and that he knows every deed that we do. So everything that we do, we are free to do it, which means that we also are going to be judged by it. So the lectionary here is juxtaposing this text on the freedom of the will with the Sermon on the Mount to really highlight for us the seriousness of moral life in Christ. We are responsible for our actions, we are free to choose the good and that God gives us the grace to do what he calls us to. St. Augustine was very clear on this, Jesus didn't command anything for us that he didn't also give us the grace to carry out.

You can see that in the beautiful Responsorial Psalm, and I will end with this. The Responsorial Psalm is Psalm 119 for this week, and it is a blessing. It says “blessed are they who walk in the law of Lord” — in other words, who keep the

Commandments. But in verses 33 and 34 of that Psalm, we get one very important line. It says this:

Teach me, O LORD, the way of thy statutes;
and I will keep it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep thy law
and observe it with my whole heart.

What is this showing us? That already in the Old Testament they recognized that in order for me to keep even the old law I need God to give me the grace, I need God to show me the way, I need Him to give me the strength to do his will. And the same is even more true of the new law of the Gospel. Apart from God's grace, we can't do anything. Jesus says that "apart from me you can do nothing." But with his grace we can keep these commandments and steadily and slowly, but surely, grow in holiness, root out anger and lustful thoughts, and be faithful in our marriages. That is really what this sections of the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount is all about.