

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Surpassing the Scribes and Pharisees

The Gospel readings for this Sunday is taken from the Sermon on the Mount in the *Gospel of Matthew*. Matthew's Gospel was written primarily for Christians who were grounded in the scripture and traditions of the ancient Hebrews. The gospel also focused on Jews who were considering becoming Christians as well as all who wanted to learn more about this New Way as our faith was first called.

Matthew's Gospel is structured with numerous references to the Torah, the most important part of the Hebrew Scripture. We know the Torah as the first five books of the Old Testament: *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*. In the *Gospel of Matthew* there are five main talks or discourses of the Lord modeled on the five books of the Law or the Torah. The first main discourse of the Law is the most important--the Sermon on the Mount. Just as Moses went up Mount Sinai to bring the Ten Commandments, God's Law to the people, Jesus climbs the mountain of the Beatitudes to present the New Law to the people.

Perhaps with this in mind we can understand Jesus's opening remarks in today's gospel: "I came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them." In the eyes of the Lord the Hebrew Scripture are not only valid, but now that they are being fulfilled they hold a place of greater reverence than ever before. Still, the ancient Law was not enough. The attitudes and lifestyles of the Christian must reflect living the law.

When he introduced the New Law of the Kingdom of God Jesus said something that was absolutely shocking. He said that the holiness of the people had to surpass that of the scribes and the pharisees. How could anyone be holier than the pharisees? They dressed wearing numerous images of their religion--including phylacteries, or miniature lists of the ten commandments hung from their headbands so whenever they turned their head they would fulfill the law: keep these commandments always before your eyes. They fasted. They said loud prayers for all to hear. But Jesus said that his followers had to be holier than these holy pharisees. How could that be possible? Well, Jesus explains, our external actions must be a reflection of what we really are like. If what we do is not a reflection of who we are, then we are hypocrites. Hypocrite, that's the word that Jesus uses over and over to describe the Pharisees. Maybe we also used the word hypocrite when we were teenagers or young adults, applying it to those who were older than us who did not fulfill our ideals. Or perhaps it is a word we use when we come upon a younger person whose lifestyle does not match his rhetoric. Hypocrite is also a word that we all secretly fear others would use about each of us. To avoid being a hypocrite, our whole attitude in life must be Christian.

To demonstrate his point, Jesus contrasts the written law of the Torah with the new attitude of the Kingdom that must motivate this law. For example Jesus says, "You have heard it said that murder is wrong, but harboring hatred is also wrong even if you don't physically kill someone. Why? Because murder is conceived by hatred. The person who hates but does not murder is not a good person. He is just a person who

has followed the social norms perhaps to avoid punishment. It is the same with all the laws and rules of the New Kingdom. The Lord's point is that following the law demands living the lifestyle that gives rise to the law. Living the life of the Lord motivates the Christian, not the minimal performance of the law.

It is important that we convey this message to our children and grandchildren. I know how adamant you all are to provide the best for the children. I also know how active you are in children's education. I and all your priests are edified by your efforts to be the best parents and grandparents you can be. I want to re-enforce the efforts that I know you are making to have your children understand the motivation for their actions. Consider asking the children "why" a particular action is good or bad. For example:

"I saw you playing with your cousin today and sharing your toys with him or her. That was very good. Do you know why? Because people are more important than stuff."

Or, "I heard that you went into your brother or sister's room and borrowed their toy and broke it. That was not good. Do you know why? Because you have to respect other's possessions just as you want them to respect your possessions."

Or "You did very well on your report card. That is very good. Do you know why? Because you are showing a respect for the gift God gave you by developing your mind."

Maybe we need to do the same thing for ourselves. For example:

"I am here in Church. This is good. Why? Because I belong to God and He to me. I need to have this intimate union with Him in the Scripture and the Eucharist at least once a week."

Or, "I really lost my temper with my spouse or my kids. This is bad. Why? Not just because anger is bad, but I sinned against the love that animates our family, the love which really is the Love of God."

You see, it is not in the action itself but it is in the motivation behind the action where the person's true identity is found and formed. We are called to take upon ourselves the very identity of Jesus Christ. We are called to be selfless givers. We are called to be eternal lovers of the Father. We are called to rejoice in His presence in our families. We are not called to be minimalists in the faith. We are called to develop the facility of finding meaning in the laws that God gave us so that our external actions might truly be a reflection of our internal attitudes.

So, is it easier to be a modern Christian than an ancient Jew? Absolutely not. Christianity is extremely demanding upon us all because it calls us to be 100%

committed to living in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But when we make efforts to be wholesome and sincere, than our holiness, yours and mine, will surpass even that of the scribes and pharisees.

Tall order. Absolutely. And that is why we are here today. We are here in prayer to ask God to help us be followers of His Son.