

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Leviticus 19, 1-2.17-18; I Corinthians 3,16-23; Matthew 5,38-48*)

Our first reading is from Leviticus, the third book of the Bible. It has many laws about Old Testament priesthood and Temple sacrifices, but its central message is a call to holiness for all God's people. If you look up this portion of the book of Leviticus, you will see this call to holiness includes numerous commandments - all of which are summed up in the commandment to love. Jesus expands on this command in today's gospel.

**HOMILY:** Our gospel today is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In an earlier part of his Sermon, Jesus told his listeners they must obey God better than the scribes and the Pharisees do if they want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. That surely shocked his listeners because everyone thought the Pharisees were so holy. Jesus was saying, "to get into heaven you have to be holier than they are!" He then gave several examples of what he meant. Today's gospel focuses on two examples of the way Jesus wants us to live as his children.

The first involves the law of talion. Talion is about revenge and retribution. It is most frequently expressed as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The English word retaliation comes from the Latin word talion. The law of talion requires that if a person harms another or commits a crime, they can only be punished in proportion to the harm they caused or the crime they committed. Thus if John Doe knocks out one of his neighbor's teeth in a fight, the neighbor may knock out only one of John Doe's teeth. The law of talion sounds primitive and cruel. 2000 years before Christ, however, it was necessary for people to live civilly with each other and to keep within appropriate limits a person's desire to take their revenge. Jesus is saying to not seek revenge and if an evil doer must be punished for some crime, justice should be tempered with mercy. This, of course, is a very complicated issue and it keeps lawyers very busy. Those who have authority, parents, teachers, police, courts of law have to maintain order in society. Even God threatens punishment for evil doing, but God is also willing to forgive if we repent. Jesus also expects us to resist evil. Would Jesus, for example, expect a father who loves and protects his family to open wide his doors to a person who he suspects would harm any of them? I don't think so. It's easy to say "turn the other cheek," but when Jesus was slapped in the face during his trial, he didn't turn the other cheek; he confronted the one who struck him with the question: "why did you strike me?" "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong." He stood up for himself. He certainly argued his innocence before the procurator. He did not retaliate in a physical way (remember, he told Peter to put away his sword). He also prayed for those who crucified him. There's no easy answer to every situation that comes along. In my opinion, the only thing I can say about this topic is that seeking revenge is not always the answer to a hurt or an offense. Sometimes holding anger and revenge in our hearts causes us more harm than we can possibly cause the person we're angry at.

Second, we should love our enemies. Jesus' desire is that our love should reach out to others because we are inwardly motivated to be loving people, and it should not be only for people who like us or who do us favors. One line in this paragraph is especially

beneficial for anyone to follow. Jesus said, “pray for those who persecute you.” Most of us have not experienced true persecution, but many people every day have to deal with people who drive them crazy. This line can be a very great help in dealing with others who are hard to get along with. Who knows whether your prayers for someone who is a thorn in the flesh for you might not help them to be more pleasant or agreeable?

Jesus’ list of examples of how we are to live ends with what seems to be an almost impossible commandment: “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” I could talk a lot about that, but this is getting long so I’ll save this topic for another day. I think it will help, though, if we compare what St. Matthew is telling us with a parallel passage in St. Luke. In Luke 6,36 Jesus is saying: “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” I think that helps explain what we hear in today’s gospel.

### **8th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle**

**February 26, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Isaiah 49,14-15; I Corinthians 4,1-5; Matthew 6,24-34*) The Babylonian exile was a horrible experience for the Jews. We hear about it quite often in our Sunday liturgies, and it is the background for our first reading today. After 50 years in exile, the Jews certainly thought God had forgotten them. But God gave a message through the prophet that it was not so. We hear in today’s first reading God expressing the deep and unending love God has for his people.

**HOMILY:** Our Sunday gospels have been focused on the Sermon on the Mount, and it is from this teaching of Jesus that today’s gospel is taken. Jesus had just spoken about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These are three traditional spiritual practices that we can practice anytime, but especially we will hear about them on Wednesday when we come to receive ashes on our foreheads. After speaking of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, Jesus tells us why these practices are important. They help us keep our priorities straight; they help us keep God first in our lives and to not become too attached to the good things in this world.

Specifically, Jesus says no one can serve two masters. I’ll bet a few people here thought: “why not?” I have two jobs and I do them both very well. That may well be true, but the verb “serve” in the sentence “no one can serve two masters” means to serve as a slave. I want to talk for a few minutes about slavery because understanding Jesus from that perspective is very important. To be a slave means we are someone’s property. A slave has no life of his or her own. A slave owner had absolute authority over his slaves - even to the point of life or death. In Greek the word for slave owner is despota. From that word, we have the English word despot. A slave could belong to only one person; therefore, a slave could take orders from only one master. Obviously, if the slave has two masters, when he is engaged in serving one of them, he is neglecting to serve the other. When Jesus says “if a person has two masters, he will love one and hate the other,” he is not talking about emotional feeling, He is talking about the practical function of choosing to serve one over the other. Many slaves were very intelligent and well-educated. They were slaves perhaps because they were prisoners of war, or they were ordered into slavery as a punishment for something they

had done. Sometimes people signed themselves into slavery in order to ensure food and shelter for themselves and their family. I say all this about slavery because we're all slaves to something or someone. We all serve something or someone. Are we slaves to our own ego and pride, or to sports, or to money, or to food, or to lust, or to some other false God that rules our lives. Or do we serve God as our lord and master. Jesus gives us just one example of a person trying to serve two masters when he tells us you cannot serve God and mammon. Mammon is a Semitic word that means money or possessions. Jesus does not intend to condemn only those who are wealthy. A poor person could also be a slave to material wealth because of what they do not have and envy those who do.

Jesus was talking to ordinary people in the Sermon on the Mount. Some were probably rich; some may have been poor. God loves them all. God knows their worries and their fears. He provides for them just as he does for all of creation. We have to trust that for those who love God, all things will work out for the best. (Rom 8,28)

If you hear Jesus say "do not worry about tomorrow," do not think he wants us not to think of or plan for the future. Some of his parables tell us very clearly that we must prepare for things that are to happen. One example is the parable of the five wise virgins and the five foolish virgins. Five were called wise because they were prepared to meet the bridegroom and five were called foolish because they were not prepared. Jesus certainly wants us to prepare for the coming of his eternal kingdom. It's just that we worry about so many things that don't matter or that we can't do anything about. He just wants us to trust him more. Amen.