

# Living for Jesus “from the inside out”: obedience of heart

## The Gospel: Matthew 5:17-37

<sup>17</sup> "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raca,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna. <sup>23</sup> Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup> But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna. <sup>31</sup> "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.' <sup>32</sup> But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

<sup>33</sup> "Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.' <sup>34</sup> But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God's throne; <sup>35</sup> nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup> Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No.' Anything more is from the evil one.

## Contemplating Jesus in the Gospel

Jesus is being pursued / harassed by the scribes and the Pharisees because they judge him to be unorthodox and disrespectful of the Law. They think that he disrespects the Law because his behavior does not match their expectations regarding “obedience” to the Law. For example, in Mark’s Gospel, we see Jesus healing a man with a withered hand *in the synagogue, on the Sabbath*. This episode so angered the Pharisees that, when they left the synagogue, “they immediately began to plot with the Herodians how they might destroy him.” (Mk. 3. 6)

Small communities and towns, then as now, are rife with gossip. As a result, Jesus knows that it would not be long before the scribes and the Pharisees spread their malicious judgment of him and that the people at large would become the breeding ground for their murderous gossip. In response, therefore, to their accusations against him, Jesus assures those listening to him that he has not come to abolish, but to fulfill the law and the prophets.

In making this affirmation, Jesus takes an indirect (well, maybe not so indirect) “swipe” at the scribes and the Pharisees by implying that they, who are convinced of their own orthodoxy and love of the law, are, in fact, missing the mark. To be clear, “Orthodoxy” or love of the law is not the bad guy here. Jesus is not calling into question their orthodoxy or their love for the law. Rather, he is calling into question the *criteria by which* the Scribes and the Pharisees *discern orthodoxy and love of the law*. “Unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of God.” (Matt. 5.20) In other words, Jesus is saying something like: “The scribes and the Pharisees are convinced that they are holy and that their holiness is proven or safeguarded by all of their obedient actions, most especially all of their obedient religious actions. Unfortunately, obedient actions, even obedient religious actions, do not prove or produce holiness. Unless you live a holiness that is deeper than this, you can have no part with me.”

It must have been shocking and disconcerting for the people at large to be told that the holiness shown by their religious leaders was not enough; and not only that, but to be told that if they *imitated* this holiness, they would actually *be excluded* from the kingdom of heaven. We can imagine the bitterness with which the religious leaders received this assessment of all their efforts to become holy, to prove their holiness. Jesus, however, was not speaking to them; he was speaking to the people at large. To have said to them that unless their holiness surpassed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, they would not enter the kingdom of God, Jesus must have perceived their sincere (even anguished?) desire to belong to the kingdom of heaven. And so, in response to this sincere desire, not only does he jolt them out of what might have been a false assumption, but he instructs the people in *true criteria* for orthodoxy, love for the law and religious obedience.

Not coincidentally, the first example with which Jesus illustrates his affirmation speaks directly to the hostility that the scribes and the Pharisees harbor toward him. The law forbids murder. “Check.” We might think of ourselves as holy because, at the level of our behavior, we have never physically murdered another or snuffed out their physical life. However, Jesus indicates that this behavior is not enough to demonstrate obedience to and love for the law. Behavioral obedience to the law is meant to be the fruit of interior obedience to the law. Specifically, behavioral obedience to the prohibition to take the life of

another is meant to be the fruit of a heart that refuses to kill the life of another *within ourselves* by anger or hostility (as manifest in abusive language used toward or about another, or by holding another in contempt). Stated positively, behavioral obedience to the prohibition to take the life of another is meant to be the fruit of a heart that welcomes (loves) the other just as they are. Isn't this the very attitude which Jesus Christ shows in *his own welcome* of the scribes and the Pharisees, to whom he offers salvation? Isn't this the very attitude that Jesus Christ shows in *his own welcome of us*?

Jesus continues to address the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees when he teaches the people that, before they permit themselves to worship God, they must take action to be reconciled with any brother who they know has / holds anything against them. Behavioral obedience to the law's requirements regarding worship of God is meant to come forth from a heart that loves. To behaviorally obey religious requirements to worship God with a heart that bears malice, anger, and hostility toward another is to "pretend" at worship and to offer insult to God.

The next example Jesus uses to illustrate the profound relationship that must exist in behavioral obedience to the law and our heart is the law forbidding adultery. We might judge ourselves to be righteous because, at the level of our behavior, we have never chosen to have sexual intercourse with the spouse of another. However, behavioral respect for the spouse of another is meant to come forth from a heart that interiorly honors all others. Jesus continues to teach us with this example that our violation of others happens in our hearts far before it happens in our behavior, and that mere avoidance of prohibited behavior is not enough in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. For our hearts to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must refuse to permit ourselves to violate others in the thoughts and sentiments of our hearts.

At this point, we feel the crescendo of Jesus' teaching in the violent metaphors he uses to illustrate what we must do in order to enter the kingdom of heaven: we must pluck out our eye if we are unable to govern our eye and we must cut off our hand if we are unable to govern our hand. By placing eye (metaphor here for that with which we desire) and hand (metaphor for that with which we behaviorally reach out to obtain our desire) in partnership, Jesus is yet again teaching us the relationship that must exist between our heart (where we are alone with the living God) and our behavior (with which we show our heart to the world). Jesus is teaching us that as human persons, we are a marriage of spirit and body / behavior, and that this marriage must be manifest in all we do. When we divorce our behavior (especially our religious behavior) from our spirit, we fail in our religious observance, even when, at the level of behavior, we are compliant and obedient.

## Jesus' Invitation

Jesus knows how difficult it is for the human person to live a life of religious obedience in freedom. When it comes to religious obedience, we tend to obliterate our freedom, because we are afraid of God, and focus on our behavior. It is far easier to show religious obedience at the level of behavior than to 1) face God in the fullness of our freedom and 2) to embrace the *metanoia* of which our obedience is meant to be the fruit.

One reason for our preference to focus on our behavior is that behavioral religious obedience gives us a feeling of security. Compliance = goodness. Compliance in the eyes of religious authority = great goodness.

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Gospel Reflection  
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
16 February 2020

The panic that can be engendered when we ask ourselves *why* we obey show religious obedience might help us become aware that we could be desiring security and not God. The minute we desire security over God, we become puppets in the hands of those whose words might rob us of this security, especially when the “those” are in religious authority. Because this feeling of security would be crushed by the disapproval of those in religious authority, we obey and we “behave.”

But Jesus did not come to make his home “in our behavior.” Jesus came to make his home in our heart so that he might purify our hearts and strengthen our freedom. He came to make his home in our heart so that, in freedom, we might love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Matt. 22.37 – 29). May we desire to please the Lord, permit him to show us his transforming kindness, and live for Jesus “from the inside out.”

