



## Preaching Resource for World Marriage Sunday 2023

February 12, 2023

### SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sirach 15:15-20

Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34

1 Corinthians 2: 5-10

Matthew 5:17-37a

All of the readings on this Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, which is also *World Marriage Sunday*, offer profound insights into the purpose of God's commandments found in the Book of Sirach, St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, and Jesus' moral teaching in the Gospel of Matthew.

In the first reading from the Book of Sirach, the sacred author explains the central purpose of God's commandments: God wants us to live. *"If you choose, you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you shall live ...."* (Sirach 15: 15). But the choice is ours. God has given us the freedom to choose between *"fire and water, life and death, good and evil..."* (Sirach 15: 16).<sup>1</sup>

Like the decision to marry, fidelity to God is a choice that can never be forced or demanded, not even by God. Love is always a gift to be freely given and received.

The inspired author makes it abundantly clear that God does not compel or bully us into living by his law and precepts. As did the Prophets before him, the author presents God's commandments as an invitation to walk with him in a relationship of love and fidelity.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., *Commentary on the Book of Sirach*, New American Bible, New York: Catholic Book Publishing, Corp., 1992, p. 771.

The Old Testament is filled with spousal imagery that captures the deeply personal relationship God desires with each of us. If you haven't, I encourage you to read the Book of the Song of Songs in the Old Testament. It is a thoroughly passionate poetic expression of God's longing for our love.

A common misunderstanding of God's commandments flows from the simple phrase "Thou shalt not..."<sup>2</sup> From this limited perspective, the face of God is distorted into that of a divine disciplinarian to be feared, who punishes those who do not follow his rules, and who demands obedience and conformity. This bankrupt image of God contains nothing of the truth that our God is merciful and loving.

God's tender love pursues us every moment of our lives. The poet Francis Thomas portrayed God as the *Hound of Heaven* who relentlessly chases after us.

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
But with on hurrying chase,  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat--and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet--  
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

A distorted interpretation of the purpose of God's commandments, law, and precepts, lies at the heart of why some Catholics chafe at or refuse to accept the moral teaching of the Church. It is often interpreted as a long list of "dos" and "don'ts" that fill people with guilt.

This distorted perspective of God's commands can easily lead someone to forget that God's singular and eternal desire is to protect and free each of us from the effects of sin and death. God's commandments are a loving gift from our creator, an aid to help us overcome our brokenness and sinfulness and bind us closer to him so that we might experience his loving embrace forever. His divine intent is to help us keep our hearts in the right place.

In Latin, the eternal desire of God can be called *salus animarum*, the salvation of souls. St. John Paul II personally placed this phrase in the last line before promulgating the Church's Code of Canon law: "... *the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eye.*"<sup>3</sup>

The responsorial psalm refrain beautifully captures the fruit of those who take God's commands to heart and strive to live justly, "Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!"

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<sup>2</sup> Cf., *Ibid.*, Exodus 20: 1-17.

<sup>3</sup> Canon Law Society of America, *Code of Canon Law: Latin English Edition*, Washington DC, 2017, Can. 1752.

God's laws and precepts are filled with the strength and power of divine truth that urge us to become the best of spouses, fathers, mothers, family members, friends, and neighbors, called to reflect his son's love to the world, helping to bring forth the Kingdom of God. They ground us with a firm foundation to help us navigate daily moral decisions as we strive to be faithful to him and in our relationships with one another.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of the content of God's commandments as "a wisdom to those who are mature, not a wisdom of this age ..." (1 Corinthians 2:6). St. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their conduct as disciples of Christ was to be shaped by "God's wisdom," (1 Corinthians 2: 7) not the pagan cultural values and practices of the day. His heartfelt encouragement to the Corinthians still holds for us. God's wisdom helps us to hold firm to what is holy, noble, and true.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew offers us a poignant teaching moment in the ministry of Jesus. In this scene, Jesus gave a richer interpretation of God's law than those proposed by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Because their minds and hearts were frozen and limited to only specific interpretations of the law, the deeper meaning of the law escaped them. In the Gospels, Jesus always encouraged people by his words not to be devoted merely to outward religious observances but to go deeper to allow God's commandments to transform the heart.

In today's gospel, look at how Jesus reminded his listeners about the incredible power of personal example to lead people to or from God. He decried not only the physical killing of a person but also the importance of letting go of any anger that strikes at the heart of the love of neighbor. He urged his audience, if a person is offended by a neighbor, not to linger and wait but to seek reconciliation quickly in their relationships.

During National Marriage Week, which celebrates the *One Flesh Given and Received* of married couples, it is providential in Jesus' teaching this weekend that he addressed two fundamental attacks against the covenant of marriage: divorce and adultery. As with his other teachings in this passage of Matthew, Jesus turned the tables on his listeners by highlighting the sacred dignity of marriage, spousal commitment to each other, and fidelity. He shattered the notions of those who would cheapen the irrevocable marital promises of a husband to his wife and vice-versa to treat marriage as nothing more than a relational contract, easily dispensed with by a piece of paper.

We all have experienced in some way the frontal assault on the meaning and purpose of marriage. God's vision from the beginning of creation for marriage is ridiculed, challenged, and seen as offensive by some. It does not fit the shallow modern narrative about marriage. Marriage has become, for many: "Believe what you want about it."

Let me take a moment to share with you some of the profound truths of what we believe as Catholics about marriage, which are found in the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*:

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish a lifelong partnership between themselves, derives its force and strength from creation, but for the Christian faithful it is also raised up to a higher dignity since it is numbered among the Sacraments of the new covenant.

A Marriage is established by the conjugal covenant, that is, the irrevocable consent of both parties by which they freely give themselves to each other and accept each other. Moreover, the singular union of a man and a woman requires, and the good of children demands, the complete fidelity of the spouses and the indissoluble unity of the bond...

The intimate community of life and love by which spouses “are no longer two, but one flesh,” has been established by God the creator, provided with its own proper laws, and endowed with that blessing which alone was not forfeited by punishment for original sin.<sup>4</sup>

Listen to the beautiful words found in the nuptial blessing of a marriage in which we hear how God has blessed the covenant of marriage from the beginning:

O God, who by your mighty power created all things out of nothing, and, when you had set in place the beginnings of the universe, formed man and woman in your own image, making the woman an inseparable helpmate to the man, that they may no longer be two, but one flesh, and taught that what you were pleased to make one must never be divided...<sup>5</sup>

Marital love, by its nature, is one of self-giving, mirroring the self-giving of Jesus. Along with the graces that flow from the sacrament of marriage, the Eucharist is a well-spring of nourishment and encouragement to sustain and strengthen the spouses’ sacrificial love for each other. When a couple regularly asks for the Lord’s blessing on their covenant of marital love, they will experience a strength beyond human effort that will help them to remain faithful to each other in the face of temptations against fidelity and permanency.

The commandments of God are not meant to burden us but to give us life. The wisdom of God is a gift to bind us to him and to each other in love. Let us open our hearts anew today to live by God’s wisdom as his chosen people, disciples of his son, faithful and true to him and each other.

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<sup>4</sup> *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*. New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 2016, p. 11, pars. 1, 2, & 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36

## Summary Points

- God desires us to live, be blessed, and be bound to him in love.
- The commandments are a loving gift from God to receive or reject.
- Like the decision to marry, God does not bully anyone into loving him.
- God's commandments are not just a list of does and don'ts. They are so much more.
- They are filled with heavenly wisdom and divine truth. They help us keep our hearts in the right place.
- Jesus taught that marriage is a sacred gift from the creator.
- The Church teaches that the marital love of spouses mirrors the sacrificial love of Christ.
- Jesus continues to offer himself in the Eucharist as a font of spiritual nourishment and strength to married couples.
- Let us open our hearts to live by heavenly wisdom, to be blest.

**For more inspiration for your marriage, visit [ForYourMarriage.org](http://ForYourMarriage.org), an initiative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.**