

[Readings: Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Matt 5:17-37]

One of the more heart-wrenching funerals I have served in my priesthood took place not in church, but in the funeral home. A father was being buried that day, and one of his sons who was serving a sentence in the county jail, was escorted by two county sheriffs to his father's casket. At the eulogy, the son spoke about how great of an example his father had been to him, and then spoke of his regret at choosing to do something wrong which brought shame to his family, especially to his father.

"If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you." The readings this week exhort us to keep the commandments but also tell us that doing so is not as simple as it may first appear. Fortunately, Scripture gives us guidance in the sometimes complex call to "follow the Law of the Lord." Rule Number One: Realize that you have a choice. God sets before you "fire and water," Sirach says -- life and death, good and evil. You'll get what you choose. God is not going to compel you one way or the other.

In what ways do you feel blessed in your commitment to follow God's commandments?

Wisdom is a saving gift of the Spirit. Think of a time when Wisdom has revealed herself to you and righted your course.

Honestly assess how do you use God's commandments -- as ever-present guides for greater love or as tools to judge others?

Rule Number Two: It's about more than just following the rules. We hear Jesus say that the key to keeping the commandments is the state of your inner self. When it comes to the things of God, the important direction is inside-out, not outside-in. Our bodies, our sexuality, our talents are to be used responsibly.

Rule Number Three is the really Good News: You don't have to go it alone. You can lean on God's wisdom. "Immense is the wisdom of the Lord." God sees all and understands all, and though that wisdom is mysterious, it is revealed to all who love God.

Years ago, my Dad nicknamed my twin sister's husband "Chief Running Dummy." Why? Because every time my brother-in-law would buy some new gadget or gizmo, the first thing he would do is throw out box along with the owner's manual and say proudly, "I know how to do this." And then he would spend half his time running back and forth between the appliance and the garbage can to find the owner's manual!

Out of deference to my Dad, when Larry bought his first boat – an aluminum fishing boat – he bought peel and stick letters and put the name of his boat on the hull: "Running Dummy." On its maiden voyage, Larry lowered the boat at the launch and it immediately began taking on water: Larry forgot to plug the water holes!

When we live this way—start it up and full speed ahead, without considering the rules of the road—it can lead to trouble, treachery and death. We often regard laws as barbed wire designed to entrap our freedom,

Our Responsorial Psalm is not a song praising the Law of Moses or the Commandments. The Law is more properly understood as a "word to the wise." Have you ever heard that expression: "Here is a word to the wise?" That's where it comes from: Psalm 119.

When I was a young boy in grade school, I entered the kitchen of my home and saw my Mom preparing a recipe for a chocolate cake. On the counter was a HUGE chocolate bar with a familiar brown and white wrapping around it. It had a familiar name on the wrapping: HERSHEY'S. I wanted a bite of that bar.

Mom warned me: "You won't like it. It's baker's chocolate. It isn't sweet." I begged for a piece anyway. Have YOU ever tasted baker's chocolate? YUK!

This, my friends, is the moral life in a nut shell, a chocolate-flavored nut shell. Through the commandments, through the teachings of Jesus in today's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, God says this to us about sin: "You won't like it. It ISN'T sweet." It may be very attractive and alluring, even seductive. But once we have tasted the bitter consequences of our sin and the effect it has on us and on others, "it isn't sweet."

When Jesus extends the Law in today's portion of His Sermon on the Mount, He's not doing it to make life harder than it already is. Jesus "builds a fence around the law," as the rabbis phrase it. He tells us that the road to murder begins on the path of anger; adultery's highway has an entrance ramp from lust. Jesus knows that even good disciples can become angry, that they suffer from broken relationships, that they can be tempted.

When we were kids and we asked our parents "Why?" and they didn't want to spend time in virtuous discussion and debate, what did they say as their immediate response? "BECAUSE I SAID SO!" Which then made me think of other authoritarian "parent-isms" that we were not allowed to respond to, such as when your Mom says, "Did you hear me?" (They heard you all the way in China).

Or when my Dad would say "Do I look stupid to you?" (No, I'm not even going there!) As we grow older and are able to handle more complex explanations, we do have a right to know the "why" of our religion's rules and regulations. Almost forty years of priesthood later, I am still learning and understanding why the Church teaches what she teaches.

I have also learned what the philosopher Sophocles said about the law: No one has a more sacred obligation to obey the law than those who make the law. You can also add: those who enforce the law. That includes popes, bishops, politicians and, yes, even parents.

Jesus doesn't erase the Law but extends its horizon, in a way that will challenge any disciple. What would it mean to become the kind of person who can control their anger, who is not disturbed by lust, who recognizes one's fragility before God? It would mean that one was pursuing holiness, allowing the foolish wisdom of God to shape our whole lives.

The interpretation of the Law provided by Jesus, in this sense, is not a checklist easily accomplished. It is a horizon of holiness given to the Church and to each of her believers. The disciple learns to love this horizon. And such love, as the Gospels show, comes to us as a gift, as divine grace. AMEN!