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"Go and Do Likewise": the Law of God and Mercy

A new article in the series on mercy. We are asked to "shape our hearts in accord with the lines marked out by the Beatitudes, making a reality of the ideal Christ sets forth for us: 'to be merciful even as your Father is merciful.'"

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A doctor of the Law once approached Jesus to ask what he should do to

attain eternal life. What he really wanted it seems was to test the orthodoxy of this rabbi from Nazareth, unsure what to make of him.[1] But our Lord was not annoyed; he entered into conversation with the man, answering him with another question. *What is written in the Law; how do you read it?*[2] The doctor of the Law replied with words from the *Shema, Israel—Listen, O Israel*, which all Israelites learned as children: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind;*[3] and he added from the Book of Leviticus, *and your neighbor as yourself.*[4] *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*[5] And our Lord replied, *You have answered right; do this, and you will live.*[6] The doctor of the Law had not expected his question to be answered with such disarming simplicity. *But he, desiring*

to justify himself,[7] posed a new question: *And who is my neighbor?*[8] Our Lord did not give up. He wanted to gain his questioner's confidence. So his next words went straight to his heart, and to those of men and women of all times. In language at once simple and solemn, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Being a good neighbor

In the poor man who was attacked on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho, the Church Fathers saw Adam and, because Adam means simply *man*, the whole of mankind with him, wounded by its own sins—our own sins. In the Good Samaritan they recognized Jesus, who patiently comes to heal us, after others have come and gone who had no real power to save the world. He, in contrast, can and wants to. This is how an ancient and venerable homily imagines his meeting with

Adam—which is also his meeting with each one of us—when He descended into the underworld: “I am your God, who for you and for all those to be born from you, have made myself your son. And now I say to you that I have the power to declare to those who are enchained, ‘Come forth,’ and to those who are in darkness, ‘Be enlightened,’ and to those who sleep, ‘Arise’.”[9] With Jesus, his anointed ones —“Christians”—are likewise called to bring salvation, to be good Samaritans. Like their Master they too must bind up people’s wounds and pour on oil and wine.[10] They must be good innkeepers until the Samaritan returns. “This inn, if you reflect on it, is the Church. Now it is an inn, because our life is a journey; it will be our home that we shall never abandon, once we have arrived safely in the kingdom of heaven. Meanwhile we gratefully accept the care given in the inn.”[11]

These are the horizons that our Lord wants to open up to the doctor of the Law, and with him all Christians. He does not reproach him for his limited understanding. He leads him first to reflect, and then to dream: *Go and do likewise.*^[12] As often with the Gospels, it is wise not to pass over the abrupt ending of the story too quickly. The answer to Jesus' question about who was the wounded man's neighbor is certainly clear: *the one who showed mercy on him.*^[13] What is not so clear is why our Lord asked that question, which turned around the question asked by the doctor of the Law. "Jesus shifts our understanding: it is not just about seeing the other as someone like myself, but of the ability to make myself like the other."^[14] Faced with a narrow attitude that limits our field for doing good, weighing up for example whether or not the other person belongs to our group or will later return the favor, our Lord

responds by inviting us to broaden our perspective, to become a neighbor to the other person.

The word “neighbor” then changes from meaning the type of person who deserves my attention, to meaning a quality of the heart. In order to teach us, God turns around the question “Who ought I do good to?” and transforms it. What had been a matter of discussion and argument in the rabbinical schools (What is the limit? How far do I have to go in taking pity on other people?) becomes a bold challenge. “For the Christian,” said St. John Paul II, “every human being is a ‘neighbor’ to be loved. He should not ask himself whom he should love, because to ask ‘who is my neighbor?’ is already to set limits and conditions . . . The right question is not ‘who is my neighbor?’ but ‘to whom should I become a neighbor?’ And the answer is: ‘anyone in need, even if a stranger to

me, becomes a neighbor I must help’.”[15]

This is what being close to others means, the “art of accompaniment” that Pope Francis stresses,[16] in reminding us of our call to be close to our neighbor, to be “islands of mercy in the midst of a sea of indifference.”[17]

The path to the fullness of the Law

We could see this dialogue with a doctor of the Law as a path from the moral teaching of the Old Testament to the fullness of moral life in Christ. As St. Paul reminds us, the Law of the Chosen People is good and holy,[18] but not final and complete. It was designed above all to prepare their hearts for our Lord’s coming.

The Pharisee’s question about *which is the great commandment in the Law*[19] seems to reflect a sense of dismay at the multitude of precepts

that their legalistic view had added on to Jewish religious life. Jesus complained elsewhere to the doctors of the Law that they loaded *men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.*[20] Worse still, human traditions had sometimes been used as an excuse for not obeying a divine commandment. Our Lord condemned the attitude of those who made their offerings to the Temple an excuse for not helping their parents.[21]

Therefore Jesus turns their eyes to what is fundamental: love for God and neighbor. He thus confirmed his words that He had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. *I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfil them.*[22] The Covenant God had made with his People included commandments whose original intention was not to impose burdens,

but on the contrary to lead them into paths of freedom. *See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day . . . then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to take possession of it.*[23]

The land promised to the Jews is a figure of the inner land that men and women of all times can enter, if we live according to the true meaning of God's commandments. They are the doorway to reach communion with God, because any other land will be inhospitable. "You need a heart in love, not an easy life, to achieve happiness." [24]

Though the ritual and legal precepts of the People of Israel ceased with the coming of Christ, the Ten Commandments, also known as the

Decalogue, are permanently valid. They summarize the key principles for loving God: putting him before everything, respecting his holy name, dedicating days to him as Christians do on Sundays; and also for loving other people: affection and respect for our parents, protecting life, purity of heart, etc. How many generations of Israelites meditated on the truth and fatherly care contained in these words! *Your testimonies are my heritage for ever . . . the joy of my heart,*^[25] an example of the mercy of God who does not want us to lose our way, who wants us to have a full life. The world may sometimes seem to discard the Commandments as outmoded, suitable only for mankind's "infancy." But there are many examples of societies and individuals collapsing when they thought they could ignore them. These ten "words" of the Lord are the constants for mankind's inner life; if

they are distorted, people's hearts becomes warped.

So that you become children of your Father

The Decalogue is taken up in the New Law established by Christ on saving us by giving his life on the Cross. The New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ. [26] Hence we no longer have just a moral goal to aspire to: we now aim to live in Jesus, to become more and more like him, letting the Holy Spirit transform us so that we can fulfil his Commandments.

How can we become more like Christ? Where can we see what He is like? The Catechism says that “the Beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity.”[27] These Gospel teachings show us our Lord's portrait, his face revealing the Father's compassionate love for all men and women. They

take up the promises made to the Chosen People and perfect them, directing them no longer merely to the possession of a territory but to the Kingdom of Heaven.[28]

In St. Matthew's Gospel the first four beatitudes refer to an attitude or a way of being: *blessed are the poor in spirit*,[29] *those who mourn*,[30] *the meek*,[31] *those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. [32] They invite us to have complete confidence in God rather than in our own resources, to face suffering with a Christian spirit, and to be patient day after day. To these beatitudes are added others that put the emphasis on action: *blessed are the merciful*, [33] *the pure in heart*,[34] *the peacemakers*. [35] And the remaining ones make clear that in following Jesus we will have to suffer difficulties, [36] but that we should always react cheerfully. For "happiness in Heaven is for those

who know how to be happy on earth.”[37]

The Beatitudes certainly show us the mercy of God, who is determined to give unlimited joy to those who follow him: *rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*[38]

Nevertheless they are not a series of maxims painting a utopia, a better world that it will be someone else's job to bring about, or a false consolation in the face of life's difficulties. The Beatitudes are also demanding appeals that God makes to each person's heart, urging us to commit ourselves to work for goodness and justice here and now on this earth.

Thinking frequently about the Beatitudes, maybe in our personal prayer, helps us to find ways to apply them in our daily life. For example, meekness is so often shown in “the cheerful smile for those who bother

you; that silence when you are unjustly accused; your kind conversation with people you find boring and tactless; the daily effort to overlook one irritating detail or another in those who live with you...”[39]

If we try to live according to the spirit of the Beatitudes, we will little by little acquire attitudes and criteria that help us to fulfil the Commandments more easily.

Cleanness of heart enables us to see the image of God in each person, viewing them as someone worthy of respect and not as an object to satisfy twisted desires. Being peaceable leads us to live as God’s children and to recognize others as his children, following the *more excellent way*[40] of charity *that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*,[41] transforming injuries into opportunities to love and to pray for those who do us

harm.[42] In short, shaping our hearts in accord with the lines marked out by the Beatitudes makes a reality of the ideal Christ sets forth for us: to be *merciful even as your Father is merciful*. [43] We become bearers of God's love, and learn to see others as the neighbor who needs our help. In Christ, we are the good Samaritan who acts mercifully to fulfil fully the law of charity. And then our heart grows larger, as did our Blessed Lady's.

[1] Cf. *Lk* 10:25

[2] *Lk* 10:26

[3] *Deut* 6:5

[4] *Lev* 19:18

[5] *Mt* 22:40

[6] *Lk* 10:28

[7] *Lk* 10:29

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Homily on the Holy and Great Sabbath* (PG 43, 462)

[10] Cf. *Lk* 10:34

[11] Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 131, 6

[12] *Lk* 10:37

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Pope Francis, Message, 24 January 2014

[15] Saint John Paul II, Speech, 2 February 1999

[16] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 169

[17] Pope Francis, Message, 4 October 2014

[18] Cf. *Rom* 7:12

[19] *Mt* 22:36

[20] *Lk* 11:46

[21] Cf. *Mt* 15:3-6

[22] *Mt* 5:17

[23] *Deut* 30:15-18

[24] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 795

[25] *Ps* 119[118], 111

[26] Cf. Saint Thomas, *Summa* I-II, q. 106, a.1, c, and ad 2; quoted in Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritas Splendor*, no. 24

[27] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1717

[28] *Ibid.* no. 1716

[29] *Mt* 5:3

[30] *Mt* 5:4

[31] *Mt* 5:5

[32] *Mt* 5:6

[33] *Mt* 5:7

[34] *Mt* 5:8

[35] *Mt* 5:9

[36] *Mt* 5:10-12

[37] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 1055

[38] *Mt* 5:12

[39] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 173

[40] *1 Cor* 12:31

[41] *1 Cor* 13:7

[42] Cf. *Mt* 5: 44-45

[43] *Lk* 6:36

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