

LESSON 10

THE NEW COMMANDMENT AND THE WORKS OF MERCY

BACKGROUND READING



As we journey toward Heaven we look for, and need, signs that we are on the correct path and headed in the right direction. At the Last Supper, Christ gave us the New Commandment, which He declares is the surest sign that we are His disciples. The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy are also signs given to us by Christ, through His Church, that help us to choose the right way to respond to our brothers and sisters in the human family.

The New Commandment

When Jesus washed the feet of His Apostles at the Last Supper, He showed that His love was one of service. He was their master and teacher, and yet He washed the feet of his disciples, which was the task of a servant. After this act of service, He gave the Apostles the New Commandment, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Then He institutes

the greatest sacrifice of all, the sacrifice of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist, which unites all of us with His sacrifice on the Cross. The New Commandment contains the law of the entire Gospel. He tells us to love one another as He has loved us.

The surest way to walk the path of life is to take up our crosses and live lives that are offerings of love. A life of sacrificial love also shines out to the world like light in the darkness. Our culture is a selfish culture. It values material gain, escapism, and self-indulgence. Sacrifice is only seen as worthwhile if it helps us get ahead. But the values of Christ’s Kingdom, where we love God before all and our neighbor as ourselves, is the surest way of declaring ourselves as disciples of Christ. More than our words, our deeds of humility and love are what will show the face of Christ to others.

The Works of Mercy

To follow Christ is to walk as He walked and to do as He did. On our path to Heaven, we must treat each human person that we encounter

as we would treat Christ. When we live out the Works of Mercy we are fulfilling the command to love one another as Christ has loved us.

The Works of Mercy are divided into two kinds, the spiritual and the corporal. The word “corporal” means “of the body,” and the Corporal Works of Mercy meet the bodily needs of the person. They are: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy meet the spiritual needs of the person. They are: instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish sinners, bear wrongs patiently, forgive offenses willingly, comfort the afflicted, and pray for the living and the dead. Although both are essential to the Christian life, the Spiritual Works of Mercy are more important. This is because they address needs that are related to the ultimate end for which we are created: beatitude, or an eternity in Heaven with God. In other words, we perform the Spiritual Works of Mercy for our neighbors to help them get to Heaven.

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Christ lists out the Corporal Works of Mercy and He also says, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). Jesus not only taught us how we were to treat others, but He clearly and definitively identified Himself with all of humankind. To love our brother or sister is to love God. To love God is to love our brother and sister. Great dignity is bestowed upon all human persons through this common identification. But there is also a warning given to us as well. If we neglect our brothers and sisters, we also neglect Christ. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, those who love their brothers and sisters enter into the Kingdom of God, those who neglect them – because of busyness, thoughtlessness, the cares of the world, or selfishness – choose to go into the “eternal fire” (25:41). Ultimately Christ shows us that we will be judged by our love. Here again Christ shows us how sacrificial love leads to life, but that love of self and sin leads to death.

LESSON 11

THE FIRST THROUGH THE FOURTH BEATITUDES

BACKGROUND READING



Everyone wants to be happy. St. Augustine wrote, “All men agree in desiring the last end, which is happiness.” By “last end,” St. Augustine means “purpose in life.” In other words, St. Augustine is saying that all people everywhere want to achieve their purpose, and that purpose is happiness. The reason why our purpose is happiness is because God created us to be happy. The Church teaches that God placed the desire for happiness in each of our hearts. But what is true happiness?

The Sermon on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount (where Jesus gave us the heart of His teaching and proclaimed the Kingdom of God), Jesus gave us the Beatitudes to show us what it means to be happy. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus begins each beatitude with the saying, “Blessed are ...,” and then continues each statement with a teaching about who is “blessed” and what their reward will be. Some translations of Scripture use the phrase “Happy are...” instead of “Blessed are...” This is not a coincidence! The meaning is the same.

Jesus used the words blessed and happy differently from the way the words are typically

used today. In fact, the kind of happiness Jesus talks about seems paradoxical. He uses examples like “Blessed are those who mourn,” or “Blessed are those who are persecuted.” These examples do not sound happy to our ears! We think of happiness as an emotion that brings us pleasure. And because of this, our happiness cannot last. But the blessedness and happiness that Jesus had in mind lasts forever. It is the happiness of those who hope in the Kingdom of God. It is the blessedness of those who walk on the path toward life.

The First Four Beatitudes

Jesus, in an act of great charity, modeled for us the ideal Christian life. He asks nothing from us that He has not already done, and He asks us to do what He has done by giving us the Beatitudes. Our response to His charity is to imitate Him with the guidance of His Beatitudes. Examining the Scriptures will show us how Jesus lived the Beatitudes and how we can, too.

The first beatitude states: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven” (CCC 1716). Jesus exemplifies being poor in spirit by remaining completely

detached from earthly things and being reliant on the Father. Many people identify with Jesus because He lives as they do – a life without material possessions. Jesus’ words are also about being completely spiritually humble and completely dependent on God. Jesus demonstrates this beatitude in His Agony in the Garden when He asks, “My Father, if it is not possible that this cup pass without my drinking it, your will be done!” (Matthew 26:42). Jesus does not pridefully assert His own wishes. Rather He humbles Himself before the Father’s will. In so doing, He wins for all of us the Kingdom of Heaven. If we humbly recognize that we are God’s poor servants, that all our possessions are gifts from God, and that we are dependent on God for every minute of our lives, we will enter His Kingdom.

The second beatitude is: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (CCC 1716). We mourn for what we lack; we weep for what we had and is now gone. Jesus mourned when his friend Lazarus died. Lazarus’s sister Martha came to Jesus, saying, “Even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you. I know he [Lazarus] will rise, in the resurrection on the last day. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God” (John 11:22, 24, 27). Even as she grieved, Martha believed in Jesus, and her faith kept her strong. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead to show us that resurrection is in Jesus, and we will rise on the last day in Jesus. Belief in Jesus and in the eternal life He gives comforts

us and strengthens us when we grieve. God blesses us when, even as we mourn for what we have lost, we believe in Jesus and long for the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness.

In the third beatitude, Jesus teaches us: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (CCC 1716). The word “meek” does not mean weak. To be meek is to be gentle, humble, teachable, and patient while bearing wrongs. Jesus tells us that He is meek: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matthew 11:29). Jesus demonstrates His meekness throughout His Passion (Matthew 26-27). He endures betrayal, arrest, beatings, whippings, false accusations, and ridicule with quiet strength, never losing His temper or striking back, never retaliating or resisting. He is firm in doing the will of the Father.

The fourth beatitude tells us: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (CCC 1716). We all hunger and thirst for food and drink because our bodies need these things. In this beatitude, Jesus reorients our attention to something we should more deeply hunger and thirst for: righteousness. Jesus miraculously fed five thousand people to care for their physical needs. He also taught them with His words and example, in order to awaken in them an awareness of their spiritual need for righteousness. Jesus, in His perfect relationship with the Father, is perfect righteousness. Jesus wants us to hunger for righteousness so that He can satisfy our hunger by giving us Himself.