

SUNDAY OF THE THIRTIETH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME - A

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Legalism follows the precise letter of the law at the expense of failing to perform the true intention of the Law. The story is told that a particular businessman was checking out of a hotel and he was in a rush. He overslept; the alarm didn't ring as loud as it should, and with security measures, he risked being late for his flight. As he approached the front desk at the hotel, he realized that his briefcase was missing. Still in a rush, he looked at the bellhop and said, "Boy, run up to room 432 and see if I left my briefcase there. And hurry up! I'm late leaving for the airport." So the businessman waited anxiously at the front desk. Finally, the bellhop came up running and panting and told him, "Yes, it's still there!"

Sometimes precise obedience can entirely miss the intent of what has been asked of us. Parents tell their kids to get to bed early, though a teenager's definition of "early" might be 100AM. Wives might tell their husband to mow the front lawn and all they mow is the front. Might today's Scripture readings be challenging us to question if we're living the law at all despite our fidelity toward it?

In the first reading from the Book of Exodus, we recognize the importance of the intent of the law. We see Moses standing before the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, telling them how their covenant bond with God should impact their lives. They have experienced first hand God's grace and mercy; in spite of their faults, God brought them out of Egypt, gave them food and water in the desert, and even gave them the privilege of being His chosen people. If living the letter of the law was most important, and Israel obviously failed at that over and over again, then God had every reason to punish them. But he didn't! It seems like the Law is a necessary means of promoting conversion by governing morality in the life of Israel.

In last week's Gospel, the Sadducees failed in trying to trap Jesus with a question about the law. "Teacher, should we pay the tax?" In this week's selection from Matthew, the Pharisees try to do the same. They send in a skilled lawyer to challenge Jesus with another question: "Of the hundreds of laws in the Torah, which of these is the greatest?" The Pharisees recognize that most people wouldn't have a working knowledge of all 600+ laws and that their employed lawyer would be in a position to undermine Jesus' credibility.

Jesus' response is quick and to the point. He quotes a command of Deuteronomy to love God with every fiber of being. But then, he goes over the top by providing the second from Leviticus to love your neighbor as yourself. What's the Lord's lesson? I think he's trying to say that laws are important and good, but you don't have to "cross every 't'" and "dot every 'I'." Rather, you should live the intent of the law and strive to do the very best. Anything less will take away from their service to God as models of what it means to be God's people. In other words, failure to live the intent of the law is the greatest violation of the law itself!

A good example of how to live in accordance with the law is found in the Second Reading. Paul can hardly contain his joy over the way the members of the Church of Thessalonica have responded to the Gospel. He can actually say that they are models for all believers because they were doing all they could to live by the two greatest commandments in the law.

It seems like our Church is made of up tons of laws, and it might sometimes be difficult to gauge whether or not we are living in accord with all of them. I think today's Gospel invitation to us, though, is to first work on whether or not we live the greatest two commandments first before we even begin to question our fidelity to the rest. Do we put other things ahead of God? Ipods, relationships with spouses or significant others, hobbies – all of these sometimes remove us from unconditional love of the Lord. And do we love others as much as we love ourselves? How do we show that love?

The law is important, but so is the intent. Are you so busy with following the law that you forget the law in the first place?