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Simply following God's rules does not make you holy

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

If we listen carefully to the scriptures today, I think we will discover what it really means to like a holy life, what it really means to follow God's law, and through that law, to become holy. I remember back in the seminary, for 12 years, I was taught to follow the rule. They had a rule that guided our day in all its details. Just follow the rule, and you will become holy. We were taught the rule expresses the rule of God, so all you have to do is follow that and you will become holy.

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What really would happen, and did happen, is that you learned to be a conformist. You became one who really was able to conform yourself to all these rules and regulations, but in fact, that did not in fact necessarily make you holy. To conform to something without entering into a deeper relationship with the one who gives that rule or law -- and here we're talking about the law of God -- we simply try to follow the externals of the law and do not understand that the law is intended to lead us into a deeper relationship with God and our brothers and sisters.

That comes from the very beginning of God's call of the chosen people, when they were going through the desert and they fled to Mount Sinai. That was the point at which God entered into a very deep covenant relationship with the people who had escaped from Egypt. That relationship was expressed in God's words, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Then God gave them laws to follow, laws that directed their relationship with God and their relationships with one another.

If we follow that kind of an understanding of what law is, of what the rules are, that it's really to guide us into a relationship with God and with one another, then we can become holy and will become holy. What has happened -- and this is what the Gospel is about -- is that the people of God, the Jewish people down

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

Psalms 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Full text of the readings

through the centuries, have not only had that law of God given to them through Moses, but also had added many human laws and tradition that became as Jesus said, a burden to the people and that when followed blindly, could even make people hypocrites.

You may not have caught the full importance or meaning of what Jesus points out about what he calls dedicating your goods as Corban. That was a way of setting aside your goods or inheritance to God, and by doing that, you could say then, "I have offered to God what you could have expected from me." You would say this to your parents. So they excused themselves of any obligation to honor your father or mother. They followed Corban, and neglect the deeper understanding of God's law.

So Jesus says, "You're hypocrites. You're following an external rule and neglecting the inner depth of meaning that should be there." There were any number of these laws that had been human tradition, that had been created, and that's what the Pharisees and scribes were objecting to. There obviously would be rules about washing before meals and so on, but they didn't become part of God's law. Yet the Pharisees and scribes had whole rituals for doing this.

They claimed if you didn't do it, you were unholy, you were lacking in sanctity. Jesus is proclaiming against this, and is telling people there is something deeper in our relationship with God. In fact, if you go back to Jesus and hear him speaking as a prophet, in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, there is a passage that very clearly shows what Jesus is talking about. It's in the very first chapter. God is denouncing the people, speaking through Isaiah.

"What do I care for your endless sacrifices? I am fed up with your burnt offerings and the fat of your bowls, the blood of fatlings, lambs and she-goats. I abhor this. When you come before me and trample on my courts, who asked you to visit me? I'm fed up with your oblations. I grow sick with your incense, your new moons, your sabbaths and your meetings, evil with holy assemblies. I can no longer bear all of these things. I hate your new moons and anointed beasts. They burden me. When you stretch out your hands, I will close my eyes. The more you pray, I refuse to listen."

God is condemning them because they're following all the rules of sacrifice, but there is one thing lacking. "Your hands are covered with blood. Wash and make yourselves clean. Remove from my sight the evil of your deeds. Put an end to your wickedness. Learn to do good." In what are they lacking? "Seek justice. Keep in mind the abusers. Give the orphans their rights. Defend the widows. Change your lives."

What was happening was they were following all the rules, the rules about sacrifices, feast days and all that, but they were failing to act with justice. They were failing to really worship God by entering into a relationship of love and care for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the neglected, the oppressed, and God says, "All of your religious actions mean nothing because your heart is not correct." Micah, another prophet, put it even more simply in a way, discussing, what is real religion? What really binds us to God?

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Micah says, "You know what it is. It is to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with the Lord, your God." That's what it is. That's how you become holy, by changing your heart, entering into relationship with God where you act with justice towards all others. You love tenderly, you love God with your whole heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself, and then walk humbly with the Lord, your God. Follow God's ways.

This is what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel. He wants us to understand that, yes, there are rules

and regulations that we must follow, that help us to enter into a relationship with God, but it is the relationship with God that is all-important. We must truly love God with our own heart, mind and soul, and all our strength, but then as Jesus says, the second commandment is, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

If we don't carry out those two commandments, the commandment of love, everything else is meaningless. Right now, I suggest that we need to look at what is happening in our country in regard to justice, the poor and what is happening with riches and wealth, and here I think we must conclude that we live in an unjust situation, certainly not one that is blessed by God when you consider that God made the world for all and not for a few, where we have now a gap arising between the rich and the poor.

The richest 1 percent have more than doubled their share of the total income from 10 percent to 23 percent during the years 1979 to 2006. The gap between the rich and the poor is getting greater and greater, and now in the United States, we have the highest number of poor people that we've had in 51 years. The official poverty rate is 14.3 percent, 43.6 million people. One in five children in the United States is poor.

One in 10 senior citizens are poor. There are 49 million people in the U.S. who live in households which eat only because they receive food stamps, visit food pantries or soup kitchens. Sixteen million people are so poor they have skipped meals or foregone food at some point in the last year. This is the highest level since the statistics have been kept, and that's from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

We have a situation in our country where there is a vast gap between the rich and the poor. It's growing larger. The poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer. That's the kind of injustice Isaiah was talking about, Micah was talking about, and that's what Jesus was talking about when He tells us that we must not just obey a law or conform to a law, but we must change our hearts, and learn to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

St. James put it very bluntly in today's second lesson, when he talked about how you must feed the poor and take care of the orphaned and neglected. He said at the conclusion of the lesson, "Be doers of the word and not hearers lest you deceive yourselves." So today, as we listen to God's word, I hope we will determine that we must become doers of that word who act for justice, love tenderly and walk humbly with the Lord, our God. That's how we will grow in holiness, how we will deepen our relationship with God and with one another. That's what holiness means, and we can become holy by being doers of God's word.

[Homily given Sept. 2 at St. Hilary Church, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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