

Fr. Curtis Miller February 15-16, 2020

Homily for the 6th Sun. of O.T.

Some years ago, when my parents had just started dating, my dad was driving my mom home from a date on a snowy night. Driving up the narrow dirt road, they met another car coming down the hill. My father politely pulled over onto the shoulder, which was level with the snowy road. Except it wasn't a shoulder. It was a ditch, full of powdery snow, which promptly swallowed them up. My dad had to hike up the road to my mom's family farm and get my grandfather to tow his car out of the ditch with his dozer. So much for first impressions!

If you snowplow or snowmobile, you probably appreciate the bright-colored stakes or guideposts that show you where the edge of the road or trail is, and help keep you on the right track. (My father probably could have used some that night.) Those guideposts are a good analogy for what God's commandments are meant to be for us: guideposts that keep us on the right road, leading to eternal life.

Sometimes we can think of God's commands as arbitrary restrictions on our freedom. If we didn't have all these laws, then we could be free. But God's commands actually make us freer. He knows what's good for us and what's dangerous, and so His commands keep us on the safe path.

If we could just do whatever we wanted, without any guidance from God, then we would actually be less free. We would be enslaved by our bad habits, pulled down to our baser inclinations, instead of soaring higher and becoming better. Consider athletes or musicians who have trained hard, followed a strict regimen of drills and practices, so that they can perform under pressure, they can execute the perfect move or hit the right note. They are not less free because they followed all those rules. They now have a higher freedom or ability to do something impressive, exciting, or beautiful. That's what following God's commandments does in our lives: it opens up new freedoms and possibilities.

When God freed the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, He also gave them the Ten Commandments so that they would know how to use their new freedom. While they were slaves, they didn't need commandments because most of their choices and actions were dictated by their slave masters. Now that they were free, they needed guidelines for how to live well. In a similar way, when we were young children, most of our decisions were made for us by our parents or others. As we grew older and more mature, we had to follow more rules, and we became more responsible for our choices and actions. The goal of maturity is to no

longer need someone else standing over our shoulder, making sure we follow all the rules. These rules become internalized, part of who we are, enabling us to do the right thing naturally, with less effort.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says that He came not to abolish, but to fulfill the law. Jesus actually intensifies the commandments. No longer is it enough to just not kill; now we must avoid even thinking angry thoughts about them. No longer is it enough to just not commit adultery; we must be on our guard against even looking at anyone as an object of selfish pleasure.

Jesus' intensification of the law is very wise because it keeps us from saying, "How far can I go before it's a sin?" That's the wrong question. It's like asking how close we can stand to the edge of the cliff; if we're asking, we might already be on shaky ground. But if we're stopping ourselves at the first sign of a sinful thought, that's a guardrail that holds us back from sinful actions.

Jesus seems to make the law harder, even impossible to follow. Yet when we can humbly acknowledge our inability to perfectly keep the law, then we are able to receive the grace and strength that Jesus offer us. "All things are possible with God."