

Jesus comes as the fulfillment of the law and tells us that “until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place” (Mt 5:18). Jesus is not referring to the end of time with an apocalyptic end to the world. The “passing away” of heaven and earth he speaks of is the “turning of the ages” when Jesus will die and rise again (Footnote).

Jesus challenged the Pharisees and scribes for their lack of understanding of the law. They used the law to restrict people rather than to free them. When Jesus speaks of the smallest letter of the law, he is not trying to outdo the Pharisees in the narrowness of their thinking. He is trying to help us understand the law as it was meant to be interpreted.

As a guiding rule, we need to remember the big picture. The first and greatest commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Dt 6:5). The second greatest commandment is to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:31). Having the proper lens with which to view the law, we can now dig deeper into the smaller letters that Jesus speaks of:

- “You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:21). We think back to the first killing in the bible. When Cain kills his brother Abel, we see a man who is so filled with anger and envy, that killing is the end result of murderous thoughts that began long before he struck his brother down. The fine letter of the law about not killing calls for us to not harbor anger in the first place. “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (5:23-24). Forgiveness reconciles us to one another. It is a letting go of anger and a dying to self in order to let go of our grievances.

Now let us tie this interpretation of Jesus to his own passion and death. We know that Jesus was falsely condemned to death. Certain Pharisees and scribes harbored murderous thoughts against Jesus. They feared losing power and control and falsely reasoned that they could hold onto power by destroying the life of Jesus. They had him arrested and stirred the crowd to call for his crucifixion. Jesus could have responded with force, but he chooses a non-violent response. He chooses to suffer to set us free from sin and death. We see this played out on the crucifix as he asks his Father to forgive those who have condemned him to death. We see mercy and reconciliation offered to the good thief who is promised a share of paradise.

In the midst of the rising tensions of the pandemic, we see what happens when we do not let go of anger. Over the last few months, we have seen people’s anger boil up into violence. Airline stewardesses have been assaulted with unruly passengers unable to seek peace and reconciliation. Clerks in stores have seen individuals fly off the handle when asked to wear a mask. Violent and senseless attacks in cities around the world have brought death as evil-minded individuals have shot indiscriminately into crowds. Violence that festers only escalates into more extreme violence.

We are only human and there are times when we will recognize angry thoughts percolating within our own hearts. We can feed the anger, we can stoke the fire, but at a great cost. “Whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:22a). Alternatively, we can turn to God for help. We may not find an immediate answer. But as we turn to him in prayer, as we bring our cares and concerns before him, the Lord can help to dissipate our anger and to see issues from another person’s perspective. Let us echo the words of Jesus from the cross in our hearts and in our minds: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).