

Homily for February 27, 2021

The Ethical Disciple

The classical view of ethics, understands that where ethics is primarily played out is inside each person's heart, moment-to-moment. In fact, the Greek word that philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle used to describe the drama of the moral life is *ethikos*, which means "***pertaining to character.***" For them, ethics involved much more than an isolated ethical moment or rules that come into play when facing a certain moral situation. For them, practically every moment is an ethical moment because ethics is fundamentally about a person's character—the disposition to live a certain kind of life. Ultimately, ethics is intensely personal. It considers where a person's life is heading and what kind of person one is becoming. It's primarily about how one treats the people in his daily life. In sum, ethics is not simply a question of what—"What should I do in this situation?"—but even more fundamentally, a question of who—"Who do I want to become?"

These are questions about our *telos*—an important term I want to make sure you understand. *Telos* is the Greek word for end, purpose, or goal. We all want to be happy. But to achieve a happy, flourishing human life, we must first have clarity about what we're really aiming for. An archer can't hit the target if he doesn't see the bullseye. A hockey player can't score if he doesn't know where the goal is, a pilot can't complete his flight if he doesn't have a destination. And we, as human persons, can't live a successful life—a truly happy life—if we don't keep our *telos*, our purpose, in mind.

It is this word *telos* that in our Gospel for today is translated as "perfect", as in:

You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

So what does this really mean, now that we understand that the word *telos*/perfect means "goal"? We are to understand the goal of our life is tied to our character. Back in Leviticus the Lord says "Be Holy as I am holy". What does it mean to be holy? It means to be whole, complete, everything we are made to be.

The place where holiness is formed is in our relationships. Here in Matthew 5 Jesus has been talking about how our "*telos*" is intricately tied to our relationships, the theme of the Sermon on the Mount's first of three chapters.

Throughout the chapter he is contrasting the conventional understanding as to how we relate to others and how we are to relate to others as those who are his disciples.

There is a formula called the "antithesis" used throughout. "You have heard it said, but I say to you".

Remember that our understanding of how to engage in interpersonal interactions is not informed by other people, but by our Father, who goal for us is a character that is ethical, integrated and whole.

We attain this goal by loving as God loves. We naturally love people who love us. Mosaic Law encouraged the Israelites to go a bit further and love their brethren as themselves. But Jesus goes even further; his love extends to those who don't love him at all—even to his enemies. Isn't this what the cross of Christ is all about?

Therefore Jesus ends this part of the sermon with a focus on the most difficult of relationships, those pertaining to our enemies.

But how do we get to the point where we can love even our enemies? By soaking up God's love. The more immersed we are in his tenderness and mercy, the more barriers in relationships will start to break down. Our hearts will begin to soften. We will want to treat people the same way God treats us. And that will make us stretch outside of our everyday boundaries and reach out to even more people.

and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his ordinances, and will obey his voice;¹

that you are a people for his own possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments,²

¹ [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Dt 26:17). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

² [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Dt 26:18). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.