

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 2.16.20

Sirach 15:15-20/1Corinthians 2:6-10/
Matthew 5:17-37

A T.I.P. ON FULFILLING THE LAW

I love watching Olympic ice skaters, especially the solo skaters – the beauty, grace and strength of the finalists going for the gold. Whenever a skater falls from a ‘triple axel’ or stumbles from a quadruple jump, the entire audience gasps with one voice. I do too as I watch and cringe at any missteps. I recall a scene from the 2014 Olympics at the Sochi arena in Japan. Each skater fell at some point of their routine, some more than once. How could any of them win?



None gave a perfect performance. Yet, in the eyes of the judges, one of them, Yuzuru Hanyu from Japan, outshone them all, becoming, at 19 years of age, the youngest gold medal winner in the event since 1948. It sounded like sour grapes when the second-place winner from Canada said right after the awards: *“At these kind of competitions, it’s who makes the least mistakes; honestly, I just made one too many.”*

In light of our lengthy and challenging gospel passage today, if we were to tell our Lord we just made “one too many mistakes,” our excuse wouldn’t get us very far. Jesus is setting the bar very high for those who would be his followers. His judgment is not just

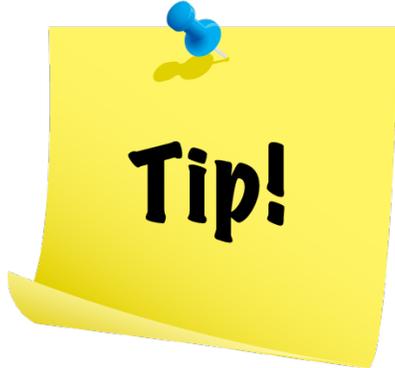
on our external performance, that we didn’t kill anyone, but on our internal attitude as well: *“But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.... everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* In his challenging admonitions, Jesus sets in motion a series of challenges and demands which were to lead his disciples far beyond even the perfect outward observance of the law.



Wow! How can any of us measure up to such standards? The truth is: We can’t. At least not on our own. A true disciple is always a work in progress, a sinner in need of forgiveness, a seeker who doesn’t have all the answers, only better questions. We live by the mercy of God.

In Christ, however, we’re able not only to follow the law, but to complete it. Jesus recognized that all human law is incomplete; it can never be anything but a shadow of the great divine law which he gave us, the two-fold command of loving God above all things and loving our neighbor as ourselves. There is a “scribe and Pharisee” in each of us that is tempted to idealize and idolize the incomplete. In his mercy, the Lord speaks to us again in the gospel and asks us both to keep the law-- regardless of its incompleteness – but to go beyond it, so that we may

fulfill the law whose purpose is to create a loving community. If we are to have a reverential attitude toward the law that respects its basic importance while also recognizing its basic incompleteness, we might take the following tip (T.I.P.) regarding all law.



The “**T**” of this tip stands for the fact that every law is both **true** and a **trap**. A law is **true** because it says something about ourselves – our needs and our possibilities. The laws about our bodies and our health, the law of gravity, the laws of communication; they govern our well-being. If we obey their truth and correspond to their requirements, we’ll prosper. If we don’t, we’ll pay the price. As the wise sage says: *The person who does not obey the law of electricity in a 2,000 volt electrical line will make an ash of himself.*

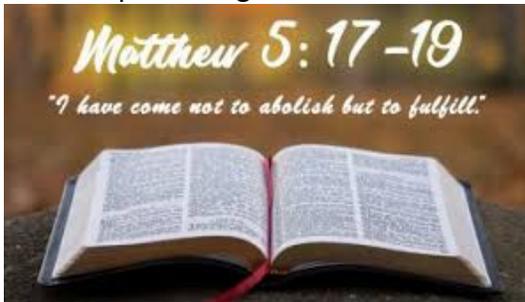
If every good law holds truth within it, it also holds a corresponding **trap**. The trap is that laws, even the best of laws, only tell us what NOT to do, or tell us the minimum we MUST do. This is the basic weakness of law that Jesus exposed time and again, especially in his harsh words to the scribes and Pharisees. People who ground their lives in obedience to laws become minimalists, trying to get by with the very least. It was this insight that led

Jesus to say that he gave us only one law: to love God and one another as he loved us. Jesus’ only law is the maximum we are called to do: to love as Jesus loves. There is no limit to that law, no boundaries, no trap. But it is radically different than the laws we know, each one of which prescribes the minimum. All other laws suffer from being only a fragment, a fraction of the one law of universal, unlimited love.

The “**I**” of the T.I.P. stands for **important**, but **imperfect**. Laws are **important** because they are safeguards for consciences that have begun to slip, for attitudes that have become so selfish that we forget our responsibilities to ourselves and others. Because they tell us of our minimum duties, they’re like a red flashing light for us – a warning signal. Sometimes our bodies tell us such laws. With pain, headaches, sometimes even breakdowns, our bodies can scream basic laws to us: that we need to get enough rest, to eat properly, to set aside our work at times, to get to the doctor’s office.

But as important as law is, it’s also **imperfect**. No law can totally govern every situation. Our Catholic tradition has always held to the basic inadequacy of law and the importance of recognizing when a law doesn’t apply. Faced with an emergency or a critical situation we might need to act above or outside the law. Every good law is important but imperfect and requires a responsible use of right reason for its proper application and even, forceful opposition to law that is inadequate or oppressive.

A final tip on the law (the “P”) is that every law is **practical** and simultaneously **powerless**. Laws deal with external actions and are therefore powerless to touch and develop the deeper part of our lives, our attitudes. It’s very **practical** to have a speed limit in a small town like Lafayette, but the police officer won’t care how you **feel** about the law if you’re stopped for a speeding ticket. As long as we keep the law, the intent is fulfilled, but it’s **powerless** to motivate our hearts. That was another reason Jesus was so skeptical about laws. He observed people who had an almost fanatical obsession about keeping the externals, but the spirit was gone.



That temptation is just as real for us today. We can be persons, even a church, that lives ‘by the book’ instead of ‘with the Book’ of God’s Word, the Word that fills us with the Spirit of the living God. The law is only the “tip” of the iceberg, a tiny part of the way we are called to live on earth in our love for God and one another. The rest of the “iceberg” is composed of such guides as the gospel, the beatitudes, our conscience, the heritage of our faith, the breath of the Spirit within us, the wisdom of our leaders, the insights of friends and community and sound common sense. That’s why Jesus came to fulfill the law. That’s why he said our holiness must exceed that of the law-

givers and law-observers. Today Christ invites us to celebrate the proper role of law in our life. When we know that role, we can sing more faithfully with the psalmist: *Happy are they who follow the Law of the Lord!*

John Kasper, OSFS

