

Homily for August 31, 2003
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8
James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

God's law is meant not to oppress but to set free.

Children chant and sing-song the ditty: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." How erroneous this really is! Broken bones mend, but we do not always recover from cruel words. Words can prevent us from becoming the best we might be, and we often use them as weapons against each other. But the opposite is true as well. Words can be healing; they can transform us. "You are not alone; I'm here" can give us strength and courage. "I love you" can turn life from black and white to technicolor. There's definitely power in words.

In the Jewish tradition, the Ten Commandments are frequently referred to as the Ten Words. Unfortunately, many of us today view these laws as restrictions on life. The Israelites did not. They considered them guides for living lives of wisdom and truth. They cherished the laws, because following them was the way they lived out their covenant, their relationship, with God. If we look carefully at these Ten Commandments, these Ten Words, we see that they do indeed sketch a picture of a God committed to justice. The God behind the law requires that people live honorably in society, respecting one another's persons and property. These are certainly words of life.

But notice that strict adherence to these words can produce the opposite of what they were intended

to affect. Rather than enhance life and direct us to God, scrupulous adherence to the Ten Commandments can restrict life and result in smug self-satisfaction. In fact, it can even become a weapon. This is exactly what is portrayed in our gospel of Mark chapter seven.

People who felt threatened by what Jesus was saying and doing watched not only him, but also looked carefully at and scrutinized his followers. They looked and they watched, and finally they caught some who were picking corn as they walked along on a Sabbath day.

The scrupulous responded to themselves instantly: "Why hadn't he warned his disciples? Why hadn't he reproached them? Why did he let this pass without a word - this action by law forbidden on the Sabbath?"

These attackers did not appeal to that law to create space and freedom. They did not appeal to that law to guarantee or improve the human lot. They did not appeal to that law to enable life and joy. They did not appeal to that law out of love of God. They appealed to it to litigate and win, to profit and to gloat, to catch and to kill.

And according to our story, Jesus looked at them, looked at their faked, pious faces full of hatred and greed, and he said, "You hypocrites, how far are

God's intentions from your hearts; how false is the reverence you seem to pay. Is that God's command, to catch and to kill, to hunger and to lust, to rule and to reign, to exploit and to plunder? You say that you stand for justice, but you only intend to profit yourselves at whatever the cost."

Jesus did not say that the law was no good. He did not say that the law should be abolished. He did imply that the law could be used in such a way that it kills, that it stinks, that it makes human life impossible. And it can and it does at times.

Jesus' words are a warning to us. If we do what those people from Jerusalem did - watch to be sure that everything is done according to the letter of the law in order to catch and fleece - we are not sincere. We are hypocrites too, making human life impossible. In this Gospel, Jesus chides those who demand rigid observance of the law, even when circumstances might require an interpretation of that law. Jesus respects the law, but teaches that the Ten Words are meant to be guides, not shackles. And he insists that our attitude toward them should spring from the heart. Only then will they be words of genuine truth and life.

Even a good thing like the law, even an excellent thing like God's law, can be turned into something that kills - as it did in the case of Jesus, when they nailed him to the cross in the name (so they said) of God's law. But even then - even then, God's truth and God's will become victorious in resurrection.

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