

## A Good Heart

22nd Sunday in OT (B). Ave Maria Catholic Church  
Dt 4:1-2, 6-8 / Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 / Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
September 1, 2024. Fr. David M Vidal

In the first reading of this Sunday's Liturgy, Moses said to the Israelites: *"Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live."* God gave the law to Moses, and God's law was written on stone. God's law is not changeable and malleable because it is firmly established on God's truth.

Moses revealed God's law to the people of Israel, as a result, the first covenant between God's people and God took place. It was a covenant of love firmly rooted in the first commandment: *"You shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength"* (Dt 6:5).

Commandments are disciplinary laws having one objective: to correct the human heart. If the human heart were completely upright, no commandment would be needed. But our wounded hearts must be reminded of what is right and good.

Now, commandments are not just external rules. It would be a mistake to understand God's commandments as simply external rules. Discipline does not begin from without. Discipline begins from within.

Discipline from within: Is that possible? We read in the great monastic rule of Saint Basil: *"The love of God is not founded on a discipline imposed on us from outside but is established in us as the capacity and necessity of our rational nature."* St. Basil speaks of *"the spark of divine love which has been hidden in us."*

The spark of love has been placed into our hearts by the Creator. God has created our hearts and imprinted in them a desire to love what is good, true, and beautiful. Fulfilling this commandment of love is not something imposed from without but it is the joy of our hearts!

God's commandments build us up, bring beauty to our lives, and bring freedom to our hearts. They do not limit us but enlarge our capacities to be what we are called to be: saints, holy people, and truly blessed. God's laws only intend to bring excellence to us. For this reason, when we understand God's commands as merely restricting laws, we miss their purpose entirely, and we make them merely a source of punishment.

Discipline does not start from without. The order of a beautiful life begins from within.

That is what the Book of Deuteronomy reveals: *"Take to heart these words which I command you today."* (Dt 6:6). If we take to heart God's words, we will be wise and intelligent people, a great nation, and a holy nation!

The content of the first reading contrasts with the gospel passage, which presents the pharisaic understanding of the law.

The Pharisees tied themselves and others to “oral laws” and “human traditions.” According to the Pharisaic practices, holiness is the product of some legalistic works and has nothing to do with the interior purification of the heart. The Pharisees considered external correctness as sanctity and external correctness was tied to human precepts, such as the purification of cups, jugs, kettles, and beds. However, little or nothing was said about the purification of the human heart.

Now, Jesus opened the Scriptures for them and told them what the prophets had already said: *“Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.”*

Then, immediately afterward, Jesus brought their attention to their interior: *“From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within, and they defile.”*

Many prophets prophesied in Israel; however, they were rejected. Their message was rejected because it demanded a real change. Many prophets repeated what the prophet Joel said, *“Return to me with your whole heart”* (Joel 2:12).

The appeal of the prophet Joel consisted in **“rending hearts,”** and not just in **“rending garments.”** (cf. Joel 2:13). The Pharisees thought that the practice of virtue was essentially external, that it was sufficient to tear their garments, but Jesus taught them that conversion begins from within.

Our conversion starts from within. Our hearts must become capable of being penetrated by the Spirit of Truth. Only the Spirit of Truth can bring about this profound transformation of our hearts.

Here is the final lesson of this Sunday’s liturgy. The second reading of this Sunday’s liturgy declares: *“Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”*

How do we know that the Spirit of Truth abides in us? How do we know that the seed of truth planted in our hearts by God is alive?

We can only know where our hearts are by examining our actions. Do we just talk the talk, or do we also walk the walk? We show what we love in the things we do. Actions speak clearly and loudly. Actions reveal our hearts.

We know that the Spirit of truth abides in us if we are not only hearers or talkers of the word of God but doers of the word.

Let us pray for a good heart—a heart that never grows tired of doing good!

Let us pray for perseverance in our daily struggles while we fight the good fight for eternal life. Saint Manuel Gonzalez, bishop of Palencia, Spain, canonized in 2016, left us this prayer to our Blessed Mother:

*Mother Immaculate! May we not grow tired! Blessed Mother! One request: may we not grow weary. Yes, even though frustration for little success or the ingratitude of men may overcome us, our weaknesses may soften us, and the fury of the enemy may persecute and calumniate us; even though we may lack financial means and human support, and our works might collapse to the point that we have to start again. Beloved Mother, may we not grow weary!*

*Steadfast, determined, encouraged, and always content, with the gaze of our eyes directed to our neighbor and their necessities to assist them, and with the eyes of our souls fixed on the Heart of Jesus who is in the Tabernacle, let us take our post, that one that was given to us by God.*

*Nothing of turning back! Nothing of crossing our arms! Nothing of sterile cries!*

*While there is still a drop of blood to shed, a few coins to give away, and a little energy to spend, a word to say, some breath in our hearts, some strength in our hands and feet to give glory to God and you, my Mother, and in this way to do some good to my brethren.*

*My Mother, this is my final request! To die before growing tired!*