Jesus has hard words for us in the Gospel. Part of his Sermon on the Mount, this passage is where he seems to be letting the vast crowd following him know that while he brings a message of life—and eternal life—it's not without a price.

Most of us have heard the Sermon on the Mount often enough that we can quote from it smoothly and naturally—or at least recognize quotes from it. Living its precepts might not come quite as easily. So it might be good to look at the reading from Sirach that the Church has chosen to pair with this Gospel.

The wise teacher tells his listeners, “If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live.” We don't often think of the ten commandments as something we choose to follow or not. Just as they are famously stated for the most part in a “You shall not” formula, we think most often in terms of breaking them—intentionally or unintentionally.

The reading from Sirach reminds us that in nearly everything we do, we have a choice. Whether we take action or not, we make a choice. And, in fact, as a friend often reminds me when I'm struggling with a course of action, “Not to decide is to decide.”

We think of the ten commandments, the law of Moses, the Torah, as an impossibly high standard. But when we break it down, we discover that it's simply essential to life in community. The impossibility comes through our desire to follow our own whims instead of God's will. We imagine that somehow we would be happier without any laws, without any rules.

We have heard the many passages in the Gospels when Jesus spars with the scribes and the Pharisees over human additions to the law of Moses, rules and regulations that seem both petty and impossible to follow exactly. It must have been tempting for Jesus's first followers to make the leap to complete lawlessness. We know from Paul's letters that some of the early Christians did indeed fall into this trap. If only the things of the spirit mattered, then they could indulge their bodily desires all they wanted.

Jesus tells the people, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” The reason people found it difficult to follow the law, and the reason the scribes and Pharisees felt compelled to add extra rules to make sure that people didn't break the big rules, was because they weren't seeing to the heart of the law: the covenant relationship with God.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is trying to lead people to a deeper understanding of the central commandments of their faith. He hopes to show them that it's not a question of doing the bare minimum to stay on God's good side. Rather, as Christians we are called enter so deeply into our relationship with God that we will treat all people with the care and respect due to them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. If we do that, following the commandments will simply be second nature.

Like Moses and the prophets, Jesus shows us that keeping God's law is not a matter of following the rules as much as it is a matter of life and death. How can we help but choose life?
Following St. Francis has been given quite a boost these days with the words and actions of Pope Francis making news not only in Catholic circles but also in major secular news outlets. Pope Francis has often startled people with something that sounds completely radical, but which is actually drawn from the Gospel so many claim to follow but may not actually know.

Like Jesus debating with the religious leaders of his day, and like Francis challenging pope and bishops of the Middle Ages to reform, Pope Francis has called the Church of our day to focus on the way religion can give life, not merely set boundaries. His pastoral approach has gotten the attention of people who had long ago stopped listening to what seemed to be only a long list of legalistic “thou shalt nots.”

In his remarkable interview last fall, he said, “We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edi
fice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.”

St. Francis must be smiling in heaven, watching as once again the church is being rebuilt for a new age.

Helping children to learn how to behave is a slow process. Once they understand language, we tell them no without bothering with an explanation.

When they are a little more advanced and ask why, we might rely on the trusted “Because I said so.”

Later we explain that they should treat others as they would want to be treated.

If these efforts meet with success, we might finally tell them to behave with compassion for others because they love them—or should.

Today’s Gospel traces a similar progression in moral thought. The Law of the Old Testament may have seemed a list of prohibitions—things to avoid in order to escape divine punishment.

The law Jesus offers is that we stop trying to avoid evil and instead seek out opportunities to do good. Our faith and actions shine brightest when we act out of love rather than fear.

WEEKDAY READINGS

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