



Our Christian Moral Life

RCIA at St. Sylvester Church
Segment 14

The lesson for tonight is titled “Our Christian Moral Life”; however on your syllabus it is titled “The Ten Commandments” with a subtitle of “Christian Moral Life.”

While clearly the Ten Commandments are key in understanding God’s desire for us to lead moral lives, the Ten Commandments are really just the starting point.

As you will hear tonight, the moral quality of our lives should encompass a much deeper understanding of God’s commandments and his desires for us, so we will also be talking about how the Beatitudes fit into our view of morality as well as all sacred scripture, and most importantly, the Law of God written in your hearts.

Opening Prayer

Lord,

You call us to a new life every day...in the ways we think, the words we speak, and the actions we take. Lord, help us to ponder and understand your deepest desires for us in living your commandments. Give us the grace, through your Holy Spirit, to know your love for us completely and to choose your love in all that we think, all that we say, and all that we do.

Amen



But before we get into the discussion, let's prepare ourselves to receive God's message to us with an opening prayer asking for help to properly understand all we will hear.

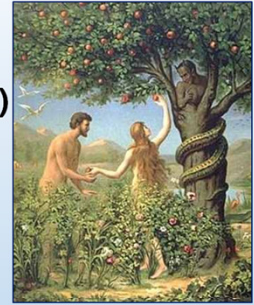
Let's bow our heads and please listen and follow with your hearts as I recite our prayer to God.

Tonight

- Background, morality, sin
- God reveals the Ten Commandments
- Jesus gives us the Beatitudes
- Striving for a Christian Moral Life

- Tonight we will first hear a little background on why it is that we have to be concerned about purposefully living a moral life.
- We will hear a little of how striving for a moral life fits in with salvation history and why something so obvious still remains a struggle for humanity today.
- I will share some key points that the Catholic Church teaches about morality and sin, which guide us on a path of righteous living.
- With this background, our discussion will illustrate the continuity of the Ten Commandments from the time of Moses to our modern era.
- We will then hear about the elevated sense of morality that Jesus calls us to in his Sermon on the Mount, where he introduced the Beatitudes.
- All of this information builds toward our need to develop and commit to a personal understanding of how this must work within the details of our unique lives.
- Listen carefully to what I present and let it encourage you to think about any of your own life experiences that have left you with questions. I welcome any thoughts, questions, and maybe even answers you feel moved to share.

Background



- Man given free will – made in image of God (**CCC 1701-**)
 - To be human requires daily decisions on all kinds of things
 - Forces many moral choices between good & evil
- Before the Fall
 - God provided everything necessary for Adam & Eve
 - Only one commandment: Obedience to God
 - Knowing God's love as His children, their decisions were simple, but...
- After the Fall
 - The relationships between God and men have been tenuous
 - Many examples of obedience to God (Noah, Abraham, Moses....)
 - Just as many examples of sinful/immoral choices
 - Several cycles of new/broken covenants between God and mankind

- Humans are the pinnacle of God's creation. He made us in his likeness and image in many different ways, but the aspect that bears on morality is his gift of free will. Free will is the power and authority to act on our own and to function as sentient beings.
- This is the God-given source of our basic human dignity. Not that his other creatures are not owed a sense of dignity, but human dignity is elevated above all else to be equal with God's own dignity.
- Being created in his image comes with a lot of responsibility, for ourselves and to each other. Free will is what enables us to love or not to love; to obey or not to obey; to live or to die.
- Before the fall of mankind, there had been no real test of this responsibility. Adam and Eve were provided everything they needed. They had little need to make any significant decisions to live in the Garden of Eden.
- The first real test of mankind's free will was the temptation by the serpent to disobey God and eat the fruit that he had forbidden them to eat. We know how that turned out.
- This caused an irrevocable change in our nature as humans and now we all have a propensity to sin. As a result, we are now responsible for making significantly more daily decisions many of which require us to choose between right and wrong – good and evil.
- Since the fall of mankind, the relationships between God and humans have been tenuous. There have been many good and righteous people throughout history. But there have been many bad people as well making selfish and evil decisions.
- And even the good and righteous people often make some bad choices throughout their lives. This has been the case throughout all of salvation history. This is the reason that the Catholic Church is very specific in its teachings about morality.

What is Morality?

- God desires us to choose good and avoid evil
 - He enables this through moral law, which is the work of divine Wisdom
 - Biblically speaking, this is Fatherly instruction to his children (CCC 1950)
- There are different, interrelated expressions of moral law
 - Positive law – revealed by God explicitly (the Ten Commandments)
 - Natural law – written in the human heart (our conscience)
 - Civil & church law – regulated societies inspired by God
- Elements indicating acts/decisions as good or evil
 - Objective choice, intention, circumstances (CCC 1749-1761)
 - Encompasses our freely chosen thoughts, words, and actions



- Clearly God is not satisfied with the status of mankind's fallen nature. He desires eternal union with us. He desires that we choose good over evil so that our separation from him doesn't become eternal.
- He has enabled us to freely choose what is good by providing the moral law. Moral law is a collective, interrelated expression of God's desires for righteousness in all aspects of our being. His divine Wisdom is at work in his revealed law (such as the Ten Commandments), in natural law (our conscience), in civil law, and ecclesiastical law. These are all intended to shape humanity's moral choices to guide us back to him. Biblically speaking, moral law is the Father's instructions to his children to enable right choices and right living.
- The Church is deliberate in establishing a way of considering the moral good or evil of human decisions to act. It cannot cover every conceivable set of circumstances where morality could be assessed. So the Church has identified three basic elements to weigh in considering the moral sense of human behavior: objective choice, intention, and situational circumstances. If you haven't already read CCC 1749-1761, I encourage you to do so and understand the elements of moral choice.
- Let me alert you that, while informative, this article of the CCC is not overly inspiring. But what I have always found to be inspiring and helpful is this chain of events:
 - Good moral acts begin first with good thoughts, which then bear good words that inspire good decisions to then act for the moral good.
 - Of course, it works the other way too. So be on guard to the nature of all thoughts that cross your mind. Evil is lurking everywhere in the world, to include our interior being. Become disciplined to reflect on all thoughts and be prepared to maintain control over any thoughts not rooted in love.

The Virtues

- The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God
- The Virtues are habitual dispositions to do good (CCC 1803-1845)
- Four cardinal human virtues
 - Prudence: Choosing rightly in the face of doubt
 - Justice: Acting fairly toward God and others
 - Fortitude: Persevering through adversity to do good
 - Temperance: Limiting pleasures to what is honorable
- Three theological virtues
 - Faith: Act through belief in God and all that he has promised
 - Hope: Desire for God and Heaven that inspires mankind's activities
 - Charity: Love of God above all things for his sake and our neighbors'



- The Church also promotes good moral behavior by encouraging the development of virtues. Virtues are firm attitudes, dispositions, and habits that perfect the intellect and will to govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct.
- There are many human virtues, but there are four cardinal virtues that specifically play a pivotal role in living a morally good life. All the other virtues orbit these four. These moral virtues are acquired by human effort through education and deliberate, practiced acts.
 - Prudence: Guides the judgment of conscience to overcome doubts and allow action for the right reason. Allows us to choose good and avoid evil.
 - Justice: A constant firm will to give the good due to God and neighbor. Striving for a harmony that promotes equity among persons and over the common good.
 - Fortitude: Ensures firmness during difficulties and resolve to do good. Helps to conquer fear so we can persevere in action for the good.
 - Temperance: Moderates the attraction of pleasures; provides balance in the use of material things. Keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable.
- The theological virtues are acquired through cooperation with God's grace. They enable what humans cannot do by themselves because of our fallen, sinful nature. These are motivational virtues that inform and give life to all human moral virtues. They strengthen the human virtues.
 - Faith: Belief and trust in God and all that he has promised enables us to act for good.
 - Hope: A desire for eternal life with God that inspires and purifies mankind's activities.
 - Charity: An elevated love for God and neighbor that motivates good acts for the sake of love. It is superior to all the virtues. It upholds and purifies our human ability to love and raises it to supernatural perfection of divine love. All good is rooted in love.

What is Sin?

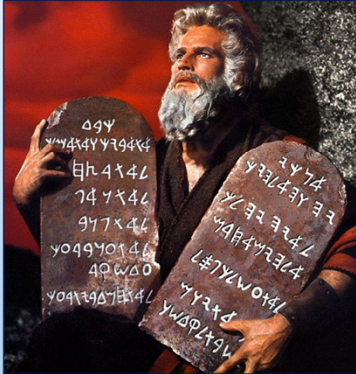
- Sin is making a choice contrary to God's moral law
 - An offense against reason, truth, and right conscience
 - Sin is a personal act causing injury to charity (God's love)
- Sins are rightly evaluated according to gravity
 - Mortal sin – destroys charity in the heart by a grave violation of God's law
 - Venial sin – offends charity, but is humanly repairable with God's grace
- Three conditions for mortal sin
 - 1) Grave matter, 2) full knowledge that it is sin, 3) deliberate consent
 - Necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy (confession & reconciliation)
- Sin creates a proclivity to sin more
 - Address healing of venial sins; accumulation hardens the heart



CCC 1846-1876

- We have talked about sin a lot already in RCIA, but I will cover again some key aspects to remember. Sin is, after all, the cause of mankind's separation from God and the unfreedom that we all struggle against in our hope to return to him.
- There is a very broad spectrum of sins, but all sin is a willful offense against God and all that he loves. Sometimes we very deliberately choose to sin and sometimes it seems to choose us, but this is actually caused by our choice not to curb bad habits and unhealthy appetites for vices.
- We sin in our thoughts, by our words, through our actions and inaction. Sins can be distinguished by their object, the virtues they oppose, and the commandments they violate. They can be committed directly against God, neighbor, or ourselves. Sins can be carnal or spiritual in nature, or both.
- The Church teaches that there are two broad categories of sin we must understand: Mortal & Venial.
- Mortal sin destroys charity (divine love) in the heart of man through a grave violation of moral law, separating us from God. It excommunicates us from the ecclesial body of Christ (Church). The only way to be restored to God and his Church is through the sacrament of reconciliation—going to confession to a priest with a truly contrite heart. Three conditions must be met for sin to be mortal:
 - Must be of a grave matter (i.e. violation of the Ten Commandments)
 - Must have full knowledge that it is a sin
 - Must have deliberately chosen to act anyway
- Venial sins happen much more frequently. They do not destroy charity in the heart but wounds it. Venial sins by themselves do not separate us from God. That is why we can confess them contritely to God outside of the confessional and be forgiven. That is one reason why we need to attend Mass.
- We can go to confession for our venial sins. Over time, the accumulation of unacknowledged and unconfessed venial sins will harden our hearts. We will begin to feel distant and separated from God. The sacrament of reconciliation restores and opens us fully to God's already present grace.

The Ten Commandments



Exodus 20:1-17
Deuteronomy 5:6-21



- We have now talked about the backdrop of why morality is a concern for humanity, as well as some of the basic church teachings on morality, virtues and sin. Now I will shift focus to God's efforts to educate humanity on morality as he desires for and of us.
- Foundational to God's efforts to teach mankind to love unconditionally are the Ten Commandments. As you will recall from our lessons on salvation history, God called Moses to bring his teachings to the Jewish people after their enslavement in Egypt.
- Up to this point in salvation history, God addressed his very specific desires for mankind to selected, righteous people through personal revelation to them. Recall the stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. These men then professed God's specific desires to their growing families and tribes through the example of their own righteous living.
- When God called Moses to service, it was for the specific purpose of being God's intermediary to address the entire nation of Israel. God made his next covenant with an entire nation, not just a single man as he did before. This is when God chose to convey to the nation of Israel his moral desires for all people through his revealed law.
- God gave Israel the Ten Commandments as the foundational laws of righteous conduct. He also gave them over 600 other cultural laws that served as the first civil-like and ecclesiastical-like laws for society.
- The story of God revealing the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people can be read in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21.

What are the Ten Commandments?



- God's revelation of Himself and His holy will for us
 - God wants us to know and choose His love **(CCC 2059, 1730)**
- Gave these laws to Moses as a new covenant with Israel
 - They must be understood in the context of the Exodus **(CCC 2057)**
 - Otherwise, they are only understood as a limiting set of rules
- They point out the conditions of a life freed from slavery of sin
 - The Ten Commandments are a path of life **(CCC 2057)**
 - "If you love the Lord your God by walking in his ways and keeping his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply." **(Dt 30:16)**

- Most of us, regardless of our knowledge level of religion, have some basic understanding of what the Ten Commandments are. The most common understanding is that they are orders from God about serious things we should or should not do. They are that, but that is just the beginning. There is more depth to understand.
- The tablets of the Ten Commandments given to Moses for the Jewish people are essentially a love letter from God telling them who he is and what he desires for humanity. God is love itself in the most pure and powerful form. He is revealing himself to humanity and at the same time telling them how they have to live and love to be able to accept him.
- God had already written his natural law of love in the hearts of men and women when he created us. But this natural law was too readily neglected or rejected outright due to the sinfulness of humanity.
- In the time of Moses and the millennia before him, living in this world could be a very difficult and dangerous prospect. Life, death, freedom and slavery often came down to survival of the strongest. The most ruthless people ruled the world. There was little understanding of the dignity of the human person as God intended there to be.
- God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel in written form to remind mankind of the natural law of love within each person. He gave this to the Jews as they were freed from slavery in Egypt.
- The Exodus from Egypt was a new start for them, so God also used it as a new start for humanity. The Ten Commandments are a path to a new life of freedom. Mankind no longer needs to be slaves to fear and the evilness of inhumanity.
- The Ten Commandments, then, are much more than a list of do's and don'ts from God. They are an invitation to live for love and to live in love...love of God, love of neighbor, love of self.

Need for Ten Commandments



- After 400 years of slavery, Israel had no culture of its own
 - Israel's view of morality skewed by Egyptian cultural values
 - Polytheistic culture shaped by fear of many gods, not love of one true God
- God promised to give Israel the land of the Canaanites
 - More polytheistic cultures, shaped by fear of false gods
 - Immoral pagan beliefs and practices; unhealthy living environment
- New covenant with commandments prepared Israel for new life
 - Ten Commandments protect the sanctity of life and freedom to live
 - God instructed Moses on many additional cultural commandments to provide instruction for good living
- If followed, commandments would enable newfound freedom

- The Jews, newly freed from slavery in Egypt, probably did not have this depth of insight about the Ten Commandments that we have now. They were more focused on basic survival needs during their escape into the desert.
- And there were other things they needed after having been enslaved for 400 years. They had no cultural identity of their own any longer. Israel's view of morality had been skewed by Egyptian cultural values. Their polytheistic culture shaped morality through fear of many gods, not the love of the one true God.
- God gave Israel the Ten Commandments and all the other Jewish cultural laws so that they would live their lives free from the pagan culture of the Egyptians that had been forced on them. They would be set aside as God's people and he would be their only God.
- God also promised to Israel the land of the Canaanites, which also contained multiple polytheistic cultures with immoral values. The Ten Commandments were intended to protect the Jewish people from the evils of pagan sacrifice and idol worship in the land that they would move to.
- The Ten Commandments claimed an opportunity for a free and sanctified life for the Jewish people if they were disciplined enough to claim it. This is true for all people even today.

The Ten Commandments

1. No other god before the one God
 2. Don't use God's name in vain
 3. Keep holy the Sabbath Day
 4. Honor your mother and father
 5. Do not kill
 6. Do not commit adultery
 7. Do not steal
 8. Do not bear false witness
 9. Do not covet your neighbor's spouse
 10. Do not covet your neighbor's possessions
- } Love for God
- Prescribes love toward God and justice toward neighbor ...so that man would be neither unjust, nor unworthy of God (CCC 2063)*
- } Love for neighbor
- CCC – Life in Christ
Section Two
2052-2557

- Here is an abbreviated list of the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments from God tell us that we should love God first and foremost. We do this by worshipping him alone, not any other false god or higher priority in life. We are to respect God always and show him the dignity he deserves, which is the same dignity that he has shared with all of humanity. We rest on the day that he gives to us for rest which allows us to have at least one day per week where we are intimately connected with God to be renewed.
- The next seven commandments instruct us that we should love our neighbor by, again, respecting the dignity of all other people and preserving the ability of others to live their lives free of fear from oppression and harm.
- These commandments to love God and neighbor reflect the love that God has for each person in this world. This is what God expects from each of us. In CCC 2063 it states that the “you” addressed in each commandment is the singular form of “you”, which indicates that God is addressing these commandments to each person in this world individually. This is not the collective “you” of the nation of Israel or the world population in which we think we can easily hide from God. God has made this very personal for each one of us, so we need to know and live his commandments in a very personal way.
- This seems like a simple list of ten rules that should be easy to comply with. I encourage you all to read about the Ten Commandments in the CCC 2052-2557. There has been so much spiritual reflection on the Ten Commandments since they were given to us by God. Our early Church Fathers and the Doctors of the Church have all pulled forth so much of what God intends for us in our daily living. The Church’s instructions go far beyond what any of us probably have as a surface understanding of them. Read this section of the CCC so that God’s love can better inform your lives.

Sermon on the Mount



Mt 5:13 – Mt 7:29

- Jesus reveals intended standards for living God's laws
 - To show anger at someone is like killing them
 - Lustful thoughts are like committing adultery
 - Divorcing your wife is to enable adultery
 - Swearing oaths by God doesn't honor God; it speaks to evil
 - Do not hate your enemies, but love and pray for them
- Jesus fulfills the real purpose of the Ten Commandments (CCC 1716)
 - Reveals Jesus' nature and his example for us (CCC 1717)
 - Turn away from what society values and embrace God's values
- Taught disciples the "Beatitudes" (Mt 5:1-12)
 - God desires us to be humble, loving and merciful

- As you know, the Jewish people did not comply with God's commandments and covenant. They got caught up in immoral living through pagan customs and idolatry. This ultimately caused their downfall as a kingdom and they were dominated by a long succession of foreign powers.
- At the time of Jesus' ministry, the Jewish people were ruled by Rome, the false Jewish king Herod, and demanding, ineffective religious leaders that imposed strict religious laws and temple taxes. The Jewish people became so compliance-focused on the laws, but had no sense of the spirit of the laws. This was especially troubling regarding cultural religious laws because their laws often worked against God's desire for love and compassion for the down trodden and marginalized of society.
- Early in his ministry Jesus held a long public sermon in Galilee known as the Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 5-7). During this sermon he preached about moral values explaining how the people were falling short of the spirit of the commandments.
- Jesus explained that God actually expected more of the people than complying with the minimum requirement of the commandments and laws. To love as God desires them to love requires them to elevate their cultural standards. **[read sub-bullets above]**
- What is important to God is that the people show their love to God and one another by being kind, compassionate, non-violent and generous. God does not want their compliance with laws; he wants their love.
- Jesus instructed the people to turn away from what society values and turn toward what God values. At the beginning of his sermon, he conveyed eight statements to them that encouraged them to be humble, kind, compassionate, merciful, and pure of heart. By living this way, they will be the loving people God desires. These statements are known as the Beatitudes. They are the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments as God had intended them to be.

Beatific Vision



- Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence
 - To share in God's divine nature and eternal life

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the clean in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<https://www.totustuus.com/essays#Bible>

- It is not possible to tell you in any specific detail exactly what any of the Beatitudes should mean to you. But I can tell you in general what they are and what they are not.
- They are not another set of actionable commandments that tell you what you should or should not do. They are better described as descriptive indicators of where you are, rather than directions for where you want to go.
- They all start with the word "blessed" which gives an indication of where you should want to go — eternity in heaven with God. But as we consider these in our earthly state, "blessed" may be better understood as "happy". However, this is not the kind of temporary happiness of being showered with love and attention on your birthday, or getting a hard earned A+ on a homework assignment or test. This happiness is knowing the eternal joy that lives within you all the time despite the drudgery or the occasional negative circumstances of life.
- This type of joy/happiness/blessedness will be realized through a purposeful spiritual journey to heaven. We take this life long journey with Jesus Christ as our traveling companion and guide. As we become more spiritually focused and more intimate with Jesus, we will begin to change.
- We will realize the spiritual gifts we are given along the way. We will see the fruits of the spirit at work in our lives. We will eventually realize that we are changing. We are becoming more Christ like. Heaven is our ultimate goal, which brings us to an ultimate state of sharing in God's divine life. This is the Beatific Vision.
- The Beatitudes are the indicators to us of where we are on this journey. How we are progressing in this change. Spiritual scholars tell us that we will begin progressing through a clearer understanding of each of these Beatitudes as we transform on our spiritual journey.
- Let me refer you to one of the better reflections I've read that describes the Beatitudes this way. It is written by Jim Seghers who started *Totus Tuus Ministries* in Covington, LA. I've provided a link to their

website where you can find the essay titled "Reflection on the Beatitudes."

Striving for a Christian Moral Life

- Christian moral life is our response to God's love
 - Cooperation with God's plan for salvation
- We strive to be imitators of God as His beloved children
 - Conform our thoughts, words and action to God's commands
- True freedom is power to act or not to act to further goodness
 - Reveals conscience as the law inscribed by God on the human heart
- Education of our conscience is a life-long task guided by:
 - Light of the Word of God
 - Prayer
 - Teachings of the Church
 - Witness and advice of others
 - Gifts of the Holy Spirit



Galatians 5: 13-14 sums it up well....

- As I told you at the start, we were created in the image of God and God is pure love. Adam & Eve's first sin changed our very nature and we are no longer pure in our love. This is incompatible with heaven, so mankind was sent to this world.
- God's plan of salvation is about showing us what pure love looks like. He encourages us to desire the change that he can help us make within ourselves. This is striving for a Christian moral life.
- God has revealed himself to us and his desire for us throughout the ages. He fulfilled the completion of that revelation by becoming one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is our teacher. He is the Way, the Truth, the Life. He is the way back to the Father, so we are called to imitate Jesus' way of life and his way of loving.
- Until we understand this and begin to pursue the necessary change in our nature, we will be imprisoned in this world; we will be slaves to sin. The way to true freedom is to listen and act on what God puts in our hearts. He has put his natural law in our hearts...the law of pure love. Our responsibility for refining our hearts/our conscience is to open ourselves up completely to God.
- This is difficult because God's opponent want so keep us here in this world just to spite God. He tempts us with inconspicuous ways to give up on changing our hearts. But there are many angels, saints, and earthly mentors that offer their help.
- We can pursue that help in many different ways. Some very important ways are: studying scripture, praying both in community and personally to God, reading the CCC to understand church teachings, listen to others through spiritual reading, attending classes, going to conferences and retreats. Ask God to show you the Gifts of the Spirit he has infused in you. Ask for the Fruits of the Spirit.
- The bottom line is to strive for a holy, moral life. I think St. Paul summed it up well in his letter to the Galatians. [Read Gal 5:13-14].

Comments...Questions?

Closing Prayer

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in
Heaven
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our
trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
Amen



I hope my presentation tonight has given you a better understanding of what the nature of your journey through this world should look and feel like.
Whether it has or not, our next action, which should be repeated as often as possible in this life, is to ask God for his help on this journey.
Let's close by praying the Our Father together.