

Homily for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

In today's readings, we're reminded that beyond the laws our faith proposes is the love with which we observe them and to which we're called. Even if we begin simply observing them for other motives, they pave the way for us to go beyond them and achieve what the Lord truly wants from us. In today's First Reading Moses promises the Israelites that if they are observant, the Lord will bless them with a prosperous life. A running theme throughout the Old Testament is that Israel is blessed to the degree that it is faithful to the covenant they made with the Lord. Moses exhorts them today to see this as the secret to their success. Yet at the same time, he takes it a step further: he exhorts them to love the Lord with everything they've got: unconditionally. The Law that comes from the covenant has the potential to pave the way to a deeper relationship with the Lord and with each other if they have the right attitude in observing it. In today's Second Reading, the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that without Our Lord we are weak in maintaining a good relationship with God. The greatest representatives of Israel before God, the high priests, were limited by their mortality and their frailty, both consequences of sin. Our Lord brought a new representation and mediation with God unflawed by humanity's past mistakes. He brought a redeemed humanity into the equation. As high priest he triumphed over human mortality and frailty by conquering sin and death, continuing in his priestly office forever. That mediation and strength pave the way for us to go beyond the law and achieve what the Lord wants from us, the God who has it all: our unconditional love. Today's Gospel reading brings us to the end of a series of debates in Mark's Gospel with the chief priests, scribes, and elders, and it ends on an encouraging note. After various attempts to exploit discussion on God's word to score political points or discredit Our Lord, we find a refreshing change of pace: a scribe who is actually interested in seeking the truth and who acknowledges when someone has helped him find it. The scribes at the time were debating about what the hierarchy of all the precepts were within Mosaic Law. They had already determined 613 precepts of the Law: 248 commands and 365 prohibitions. Which were the most important? This debate was an inheritance of the expectations in today's First Reading: faithful observance of the covenant with the Lord was the secret to success and prosperity. Yet they didn't consider the fine print: Moses was describing a process, not just a fact: the Law was meant to take them somewhere and to help them achieve something: love for God and others. Our Lord responds to the scribe today with the fundamentals not only for the Jews but

us. When he tells the scribe that the Lord must be loved above all else, he is repeating the first words of the Jews' profession of faith, the Shema, taken from the book of Deuteronomy (part of which is today's First Reading) and prayed by them every day. Their faith and our faith revolves entirely around the love of God. But Jesus connects this to another teaching from Leviticus (Leviticus 19:18): to love your neighbor as yourself. Connecting the two may have been a novelty for the Jews, but as Christians, we know the two are closely linked: you can't love God and not love your neighbor, or vice versa (cf. 1 John 4:20–21). Unconditional love for God and neighbor put every other precept into perspective.

A road paves the way to something; the only question is whether it paves the way to something good, something bad, or something to which we're indifferent. It's as much about what lies at the end of the road as our intentions in taking it: home to be with those we love, a country far away to leave the pains of home behind, etc. The faith teaches us the road to a deeper love for God and neighbor. If we didn't want to "get there" we wouldn't take the road in the first place. We all need to remind ourselves from time to time of where we're going and how to get there.

It is achieving a deeper understanding of the love God has for us that enables us to love him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor truly. Loving is the greatest appreciation we can show to God for his love for us. The scribe in today's Gospel rightly sees the superiority of love over many other religious practices. In fact, religious practices become exactly that due to the love behind them. When Our Lord encourages the scribe by saying he is not far from the Kingdom of God he is also encouraging us to remember that if we achieve love, often a difficult conquest, we're one step away from every good thing Our Lord wishes for us and the world.