Interpreting and Applying the Commandments

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The ancient Hebrews did not express an elaborate philosophy concerning human freedom and responsibility for decisions. They were taught that freedom is an aspect of being created in God's image and likeness. Decisions have enormous consequences so they must be weighed carefully. This truth is found in the teaching of "the two ways" which lies at the basis of the biblical version of the moral life. "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live..." (Dt 30:19). The good way is found by obeying the commandments of Moses, repeated by prophets, priests and sages, who offer guidance so that the choice will bring a fuller, richer life to the community of Israel and its members. This point is made by Jesus ben Sira, a sage in Jerusalem two hundred years before Jesus of Nazareth.

Like the great teachers of Israel before him, Jesus emphasized the continuing importance of God's moral law; the duty to follow it and to teach it is crucial to each person's destiny. There is a hierarchy of importance among the commandments, as the rabbis also taught, but all must be obeyed. "The person who keeps the commandments and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:19).

The written text of the commandments had to be proclaimed and taught to each generation. At the time of Jesus there were several groups of Jews who tried to do this. The Sadducees claimed that this was a prerogative of the priests in the Temple and their representatives throughout the land. The Pharisees were educated laymen who believed that God gave Moses an oral Law to complement the written text of the commandments. Moses passed this law to Joshua and the other prophets who followed him. The Pharisees saw themselves to be heirs of that long tradition. The group that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls followed the principles taught by their "Teacher of Righteousness" for interpreting the Torah (instruction or Law), the Prophets and the Writings that constitute the Hebrew Bible.

Like the Pharisees, Jesus stressed that transgression of the Law brought eternal death (as well as capital punishment in some cases), so a fence needed to be erected around each of the commandments. To avoid murder (and the death penalty), one must control anger and harsh words that might lead to physical harm. Jesus placed a similar hedge of self-control around the prohibition of adultery.

Although Sadducees and Pharisees permitted divorce and remarriage (see Dt 24:1-4), Jesus returned to the original plan of the Creator (Mt 19:1-12) and overcame potential inequities of a commandment that allowed divorce as a prerogative of the husband.
No one should pledge to do something by a vow or take an oath lightly. Jesus reacted against the cheap use of God's Name by prohibiting all oaths.

These passages of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount should be studied in relation to the rest of the Gospel so that the Church's position on each can be evaluated accurately. As we do this we should renew our appreciation for the need of God's grace and light so that our daily lives reflect the standards of Jesus' teaching.