

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 23, 2025

Why is it so hard to be like Jesus?

It's really hard, isn't it? I know it is for me. I mess up, and mess up, and mess up again. I'm not kind enough. I don't give enough. I don't reach out enough. I don't forgive enough. I don't love enough. And then I say I'll be better, but soon fall into the same pattern as before, making the same mistakes, committing the same sins. I really wish I could be a lot more like Jesus. That's what I really want.

Do I? Let's be honest here. Do I REALLY?

The pattern I just described is a very common one. We all fall far short when it comes to imitating Jesus. We all do things he would never do, and fail to do things he would do without question. We act selfishly, and stupidly, and heartlessly at times. And not just "once in a blue moon". No, many of us sin with quite a bit of regularity, repeating the same mistakes, making the same bad choices over and over again.

And we feel bad about it. We truly do. And we want God to forgive us, to wipe the slate clean, to give us a second chance and a third and a fourth and a fifth. And he does. Thank God, he does. We all desperately need his mercy, and his gentleness, and his understanding, and his forgiveness. We would be lost and broken and hopeless without those things, would be in trouble if we had to do it all on our own.

But is that the complete picture, the full reality? Is that truly the way it is in every case? Is that always what's happening when our lives don't look very similar to the life of Jesus? Or is something else going on?

As you know, it's not always easy to know exactly what God wants from us. Life can be complicated. Situations can be complicated. People can be complicated. And of course, on top of that, we don't have an absolute

complete picture of Jesus, his every move, his every word, his every action, or his every expectation.

Some of the stories about him are puzzling. Some of the stories he told are strange and confusing at times. And as a result, sometimes we simply don't have a clear-cut answer to every moral question, and we truly have to wrestle with and agonize over what choice to make in a given situation. Well, today is NOT one of those days.

The Gospel passage we just heard has some of the most direct, plain-spoken words in all of Scripture (from the mouth of Jesus, no less!). And even the most skeptical Scripture scholars would probably have a good deal of confidence asserting that these statements came from Jesus himself. There is a kind of unique and cohesive quality that emanates from these "words of wisdom", a kind of authenticity that has the ability to speak to the believer and non-believer alike.

Did Jesus actually make these statements? Did he say these exact words? Well, if not to the precise letter, then pretty darn close. And we can be reasonably confident that the Gospel writer St. Luke (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) didn't just take some lukewarm (pun intended) statements from Jesus and exaggerate them for effect or emphasis. No, Jesus almost certainly made most or all of these statements (or very similar ones) at one time or another (maybe not all in one speech, but that is certainly possible).

I bring all of that up for a reason, not to "let us off the hook", not to give us an "out", not to provide an easy opportunity for us to ignore them or dismiss them or water them down, because I'm pretty sure we would all like to. That's how tough these statements are. Let's listen again (some of the following are paraphrased) . . .

Love your enemies . . . do good to those who hate you . . . bless those who curse you . . . pray for those who mistreat you . . . turn the other cheek . . . give your cloak AND tunic . . . from the one who takes what is

yours do not demand it back . . . do unto others as you would have them do to you . . . lend without expecting repayment . . . do good to your enemies . . . be merciful . . . stop judging . . . stop condemning . . . forgive . . . give.

Can I REALLY say that I want to BE just like Jesus? Can I really say that it's my myriad weaknesses that keep on making me fail in my attempt to be like him? Can I say in all honesty that imitating Jesus is truly my goal, the thing I want above all else?

Or is something else going on? I think you know. I'm convinced that my greatest sins have little to do with trying to be like Jesus and simply failing in the process. Those types of sins do exist for me, that much is true, but are probably smaller in number than I would like to admit. And the reason I don't like to admit that is because of what it says about me. You see, my greatest sin might just be my stubborn unwillingness to even TRY to be like Jesus, my unwillingness to even WANT to be like him, my unwillingness to sincerely DESIRE to love as he loved and continues to love. If the blueprint for being faithful contains all those things I mentioned above, all those things that came from the mouth of Jesus, then I'm not so sure I'm ready to sign-on to all of that. I like the watered-down version a whole lot better, the "just be nice" version. THAT one I can handle.

Is that enough? Seriously. Is it?

My dear People of God, every once in a while the requirements of the commitment we say we have made hit us right in the face, shake us up, challenge us in ways we simply don't want to be challenged. Today is one of those days.

How are we doing? Are we even close?

Or do we want to continue being people who need to get even, need to hurt those who have hurt us, need to hold on to grudges, need to cling tightly to our possessions, need to withhold our forgiveness, need to

punish, need to judge, need to condemn, need to keep working tirelessly to secure the biggest piece of the pie?

Which is it? Who are we at this very moment? And who do we want to be tomorrow?