

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time  
September 19-20, 2020

*“Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel”*

Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20-24, 27; Matt. 20:1-16

There is a saying that intrigued me from the first time I ever heard it. It is attributable to legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, himself a devout Catholic. “The true test of a man’s character is what he does when no one is watching.” Similar quotations surely exist from other people, but the point is valid. How do we behave when we do not believe we are being observed?

To conduct oneself in a way worthy of Gospel is a most virtuous goal. But what exactly does it mean? Saint Paul is writing from prison, pondering the meaning of life. He is torn, not in the sense that he is contemplating taking his life, but in the sense that ultimately, our true home is heaven. While he longs to be with the people, there is a yearning for God that at times feels much stronger. In the meantime, whether he is present or absent, he urges the faithful to conduct themselves in a way worthy of the Gospel.

In the seminary, we took personality inventories so as to better understand ourselves. I rolled my eyes then. One survey asked us to agree or disagree about this statement: “I exhibit better table manners when eating at a restaurant than at home.” Immediately, I disagreed. But upon further reflection, I realized that I do in fact utilize better manners in a more formal setting. We are quite aware when others may be watching.

In today’s Gospel, the workers were most certainly watching. They felt cheated—their sense of justice was offended. They grumbled and we may well agree with them. But they neglected to see that the vineyard owner’s generosity did them no harm, for they received a just wage. Their jealousy was a character flaw and today, we are invited to reflect on the importance of character in our daily lives.

Its value extends far beyond table manners. In Baptism, all sin is forgiven. If we are baptized as infants, that is limited to original sin. Though not a personal sin, original sin has consequences that extend long after our baptismal photo or video has been taken and the water dries on our forehead.

The effects of this sin remain, and we must work diligently to minimize the degree to which they shape our daily behaviors. Yes, little things add up- they have a cumulative effect, which is precisely why we take them seriously. Don't litter; watch your language; sneaking into the express checkout line with 10+ items? Really? Little things matter. As our Catechism explains:

Yet certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as **weaknesses of character**, and so on, as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls *concupiscence*, or metaphorically, "the tinder for sin" (*fomes peccati*); since concupiscence 'is left for us to wrestle with, it cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ.'<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added)

If in your frustration, you say things you would not say in the presence of others, then challenge yourself. Movies have warnings about Adult language and content, but is this implying that the language is suitable for adults, or merely unsuitable for children?

A huge challenge with character formation is that in order to be effective, it is a life-long endeavor that starts very early. Our faith teaches us that virtue comes through **education**, by **deliberate acts** and by **perseverance**. These "repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 1264, cf. The Council of Trent (1546) DS 1515.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, paragraph # 1810.

Forging a strong character through perseverance and deliberate acts is hard work, but the return on that investment is impossible to quantify. Far from worrying about who is watching, strong character gives ultimate meaning to our lives and helps us behave each day in a manner worthy of our call as Christians, worthy of the Gospel.