

15. June 2023

The Subtlety of Jesus' Teaching

Mt 5:20-26

'For I tell you, if your uprightness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven. 'You have heard how it was said to our ancestors, You shall not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court. But I say this to you, anyone who is angry with a brother will answer for it before the court; anyone who calls a brother "Fool" will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and anyone who calls him "Traitor" will answer for it in hell fire. So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering. Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. In truth I tell you, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny.

We can be very grateful to God for giving us to understand more and more finely the wisdom of His commandments, for thus His primary foundation, which is love, is more and more revealed to us.

Indeed, it is very true that even unjust anger against a person is capable of killing him in a certain way. "God's saving justice is never served by human anger" (Jas 1:20), and can deeply offend the other person, humiliate him and act very unjustly towards him. It can go very far and "kill" his soul, so to speak.

It is important to distinguish carefully, for this is not about anger because of an injustice, and certainly not about the so-called "holy anger" at seeing that God is being offended. Jesus is referring here to anger against a person, against a brother...

How can we handle anger, irritation and similar attitudes, so that they do not come out or even escalate, hurting and offending other people?

Each of us will have experienced a situation where we became very angry or upset, and then discovered that the situation was actually different from how we had perceived it for ourselves. Indeed, the degree of our anger and rage often does not correspond to the reality of what happened.

There is an essential difference between the objective act and the intention with which the person did it. Since we are usually unaware of this intention, we must try to restrain negative or even destructive feelings.

It is not a matter of repressing feelings; it is a matter of handling them wisely. I have learned - and am still learning - to bring negative feelings against a person before God in prayer. This sometimes takes some effort, because feelings can very easily carry us away, and the passion of anger often gives us the impression that one has a just reason and a right to be angry.

Restraining emotions and passions, then, does not mean pretending that they do not exist. With such an attitude, one would be repressing the force of feelings into the subconscious, and later, in other situations, they would reappear. Rather, it is a matter of letting the feelings be touched by God, so that they do not dominate us. We must therefore be careful not to fall into an attitude that offends and degrades our brother (even if he has indeed acted wrongly), or would even like to sully his relationship with God.

Of course we can point out injustice and not close our eyes to it. What we should not do is, so to speak, “stone” the other person (cf. Jn 8:7). It would be an attack on truth and true love if we failed to call injustice by its name. But we ourselves would be being unjust if we become “accusers of our brothers” (cf. Rev 12:10) and if, because of our anger and not knowing how to restrain ourselves, we no longer distinguish between the act and the person who commits it. In the end, this attitude can be even more serious than the injustice that our brother actually or supposedly committed.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, we must learn to restrain ourselves.