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Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

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Well, it's Lent again already. Ash Wednesday is March 5 for most Christians, and as we move toward the remembrance of the Resurrection of Jesus in about seven weeks, Lent is our "time in the desert" to reflect on what we have done well ... or not ... in our lives, correcting lapses and seeking to conform ourselves ever more in the image of Jesus.

But distractions have always plagued us. This may be a reason Jesus covered a lot of points in a relatively short time in His talks—making the most of the time He had with audiences. As any preacher knows, dwelling too long on a particular point can lead to people zoning out. Now, Jesus' teaching was anything but boring; in fact, Matthew relates that people were "astonished" at His teaching. Parables, too—in the rabbinic style of the day—also kept His audiences engaged, leaving them with storied moral examples to ponder perhaps the rest of their lives. Finally, because He spoke in many places around Israel and bordering territory, Jesus likely would have repeatedly related the same points—like a professor teaching a seminar multiple times and places.

Not infrequently, people will point out that the Gospels sometimes differ in details. But the Gospels were written decades after the events, utilizing testimony of various witnesses. No one remembers the exact same details of events, especially after many years. Also, the authors likely partially used second-hand accounts, and like the child's game "Telephone" in which a message is whispered from one person to the next in a chain, the final version often greatly distorted from the original, knows that accounts of an event often differ in details. But main points (e.g., the Resurrection, feeding the 5000, etc.) are common to all.

Among this weekend's Catholic Mass readings, we have a small portion of that Sermon on the Plain in Luke (6:19-45)—very similar in many respects to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. These Sermons are prime examples of Jesus using time management to address many critical points of His teaching in a short period.

First, He speaks about teachers and disciples—He himself teaching and making disciples in that very moment. The root of "disciple" is "discipline," so a disciple by definition, follow the *discipline*, or instruction, of his master. Obviously, no one can teach absolutely everything He knows—certainly not Jesus, who in His divinity has infinite divine knowledge that we are quite incapable of absorbing hardly paltry modicum. Yet He teaches what is most important for us to live lives of holiness and goodness.

Other teachers can present their "knowledge" to us, but if their teaching actively diverges from what Jesus taught, it is not worth attention except to perhaps better understand their argument so as to teach the truth to which it is in opposition. For in Jesus, we have the best—indeed, the perfection—of teachers. As He is holiness itself, the more we learn from and emulate Him, the more we grow in holiness.

Secondly, Jesus uses the example of us trying to remove the "splinter in the brother's eye" while being oblivious to the "wooden beam" in our own—trying to correct others while being quite imperfect. For we tend to be quick to criticize, yet to excuse *ourselves* quite readily. Even St. Paul mentioned this problem—hypocrites who would do the very things they taught against: "... in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things." (Romans 2:1) And we also remember Jesus in John 8 with the crowd asking Him whether they should execute an adulteress: "Let him who is without sin be first to cast a stone."

After all, if we are honest with ourselves, we each have faults and imperfections enough to focus on as they are rather than obsessing over those of others. The Bible commentator William Barclay relates the adage: "There is so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us that it ill becomes any of us to find fault with the rest of us." (Barclay, Luke 6)

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This provides a segue into Jesus' next point: that we are judged by what we do in life—something that the Bible stresses repeatedly in both Testaments. As is said, actions speak louder than words, like the saying: "I cannot hear what you say for listening to what you are." (Ibid, Barclay.) For we don't practice charity and kindness, holiness and faith by simply *talking* about those things, but rather by actually doing. As St. James wrote: "...as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so [professed] faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:26) Talk is cheap, in other words; proof of faith is in what we do. Even Jesus stresses that many times in the Gospels, as later in the Sermon on the Plain: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46) And we might also remember the popular challenge: "If you were accused of being a Christian, is there enough evidence to convict you?"

Finally, Jesus speaks of prudence in our speech. We know all too well how words can hurt, especially when spoken in anger or without considering the pain they may cause another—particularly loved ones. As in the book of Sirach: "The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones." (28:17)

Few of us have probably not said something we instantly regretted—out of anger, frustration, or disappointment. But kindness in speech soothes arguments, enhances relationships, and relieves angst. "Does not the dew assuage the scorching heat? So a [kind] word is better than a gift...Both are to be found in a gracious man." (Sirach 18:17) The old adage that if you can't say something good, say nothing at all is still a pretty good one to live by.

Well ... bumping up against word count again. So, as St. Paul urges, let our speech always be gracious, and James again: "... let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger..." (James 1:19) And in all things, charity. In this, we become like Christ. *By this do we advance in holiness.*