

The Hebrews saw the Temple in Jerusalem as the center of the universe. The place where God dwelt on in the midst of his people, the place where the people of God offered sacrifice and it was located where they believed the world above and the world below came into conjunction with the world of history allowing the worlds to communicate. It was a sacred place because of where it was located and what took place in it.

Yet, the keepers of the Temple, the most sacred place in their culture, perverted it by using the worship practices of their faith to enrich the chief priest of the Temple and his minions. How did they do that? They cheated the people. Offerings had to be made in temple currency and it couldn't be spent outside the temple. They set up exchange rates that worked in favor of the money changers, effectively reducing the value of the people's currency and pocketed the difference. Then they had to use the temple coin to purchase an animal to sacrifice. They could bring their own animal, but priests would always find a blemish, but that was OK, the merchants would buy it from them, at a reduced rate of course, and put the credit toward an approved animal that the merchant happened to have on hand. Then the merchant would sell the previously blemished animal as an approved animal the next day. At the end of the day, the priests would take their cut from the temple merchants.

No wonder Jesus went in to kick tail and take a few names! They had placed the false god of profit before his Father. They had blasphemed by using the Hebrew practices for worshiping God as a reason to steal. They had stolen from the people they were there to protect, and I'm sure the list goes on.

The Hebrews had an impressive set of laws and a well developed legal system, but they had lost their focus, the 'why' they had the law, starting with the 10 Commandments. They were, and are God's chosen people. We are children of God. We all have an inherent human dignity based on our relationship with God that cannot be violated without severe consequences.

We have many great, extensive lists of sins, offenses against God; that serve their purpose for examining our conscience. Then again, how many of us pull those lists out when we are making a decision at home or at work? They are great for examining our conscience, but not so great for helping us to avoid the occasion of sin during the normal course of our day. The second of the 2 great commandments is for us to "Love our neighbor as our selves". (Mt 22:39) Or to state the corollary, any offense against the inherent human dignity of an individual as a child of God, including our selves, is a sin.

Think about this for a moment. We all need something that we can reach out and touch as our moral and ethical touch stone. That quick, easy to remember, easy to understand, easy to apply starting point for our decision making process. Any offense against the inherent human dignity of an individual as a child of God, including our selves, is a sin, and this truth makes a great touch stone.

If we get drunk, abuse drugs, deliberately harm ourselves, physically, mentally or spiritually, we are violating our inherent dignity as children of God because our bodies are the temple of our soul, the way we receive salvation, and assist in the salvation of others.

If we harm someone else, either through our thoughts, words or actions, or by deliberately failing to act when we knew we should before something bad happened, we have violated their inherent human dignity as a child of God. What about victimless crimes like pornography? Really? In those cases you get a two-fer. You violate your own dignity by using it, and you violate the dignity of the individual you are exploiting by using them as an object for your own purposes vice respecting them as children of God.

Let's apply this thought of respecting the dignity of the individual as a child of God to the 10 Commandments. The last 7, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex 20:12, Deut 5:16) "You shall not kill" (Ex 20:13, Deut 5:17) "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14, Deut 5:18) "You shall not steal" (Ex 20:15, Deut 5:19) "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex 20:16, Deut 5:20) "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Ex 20:17, Deut 5:21) "You shall not covet your neighbor's goods" (Ex 20:17, Deut 5:21), all deal with interpersonal relationships so the application is obvious.

What about the first of the great commandments, "Thou shall love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind, and with thy whole strength"? (Mt 22:37) How does respecting the dignity of the individual as a child of God apply to our relationship with God?

The First Commandment is "I am the Lord your God you shall not have strange Gods before me" (Ex 20:2-6, Deut 5:6-10). We are children of God. That very concept opens possibilities too numerous to mention and too wonderful for our imagination to grasp. When we place other gods, for example financial success or political power, or riding our motorcycle above God, we are acting like the Jews and Greeks that Saint Paul was speaking about to us today. They were trying to put God in a box so they could understand him. We are trying to put God in a box so we can control him as someone less than, therefore we make ourselves less than our false god.

The Second Commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Ex 20:7-8, Deut 5:11-12) is one that always makes me cringe. I can't understand why we go sideways over a made up word that begins with 'F', and casually blaspheme in the same sentence. The Hebrews believed that a person's name contained something of the person. We have devotions to the Holy Name of Jesus: we call God Our Father, yet we act as if insulting Our Father, our Brother by using their names to curse, to vilify, or as an exclamation point doesn't diminish our own dignity as a child of God.

The Third Commandment, "Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day" (Ex 20:8-11, Deut 5:12-15) is a gift from God. A day of rest, a day for reflection, a day to enjoy our families and most importantly, a day to say thank you to God for all of the magnificent gifts he has given to us. When someone does us a kindness, even when it is their job, our normal response should always be to say thank you. Those 2 simple words mean so much and cost so little. We remind our children to say thank you, do we ever remind our adult friends to make time for Mass on Sunday so they can do the same?

When we fail to thank people, we put them beneath us. Our lack of response is also a response, one that says the person isn't worthy of our notice. When we put people beneath us, we violate their dignity. When we put God beneath us, ...I don't even want to go there.

When Jesus confronted the people who were violating his Father's house in the Temple in Jerusalem he named himself the Temple, in doing so he also announced the truth that he is the center of the universe. As we continue our Lenten journey let us make him the center of our universe. Let's also resolve to stop treating the temples of our selves and other people like the thieves in the Temple in Jerusalem and focus on respecting theirs' and our dignity and as children of God.