

## 9 Sunday.08

1. In our first reading today from the Book of Deuteronomy God says to his people: “Take these words of mine into your heart and soul. Bind them at your wrist as a sign, and let them be a pendant on your forehead.” Later on in Jewish history some people took these words literally. They wore pendant on their foreheads and wrists, little boxes which contained a parchment on which was written the text of the first and greatest commandment, the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” These boxes were called phylacteries, and in Matthew 23, v 5, Jesus criticizes those who make their boxes or phylacteries bigger so that their piety can be better observed. But the original intention was good. These people, later called Pharisees, did not want to forget God’s first and greatest commandment and used these phylacteries as a memory aid.

2. Because of our own Scriptures, the NT, we often cast the Pharisees in a bad light. We see them as people who cleaned the outside of the cup but not the inside. That is what the word Pharisee means to most of us: a person who is all show and no

substance, who does not really live what he or she preaches. But that is an unfair judgment when it is applied to all the Pharisees. Originally they were simply people who wanted to live by the commandments which God had given them.

3. But this heavy emphasis on the law and the failure of many to live up to it brought Paul, the former Pharisee, to a different opinion. He discovered that left to ourselves we really can't keep God's commandments, that we need grace or God's help to do so. That is Paul's basic theme. We are all sinners, he tells us, and without Jesus, without his sacrifice of his life for us, we cannot move beyond our sins. We have to recognize our sinfulness and then believe in the power of Jesus' sacrifice of himself for us. Then we are saved by faith not by our own works, not by our keeping of the law.

4. For Paul this belief had come out of his personal experience. Jesus had knocked him off his horse and turned his life around. St. Augustine had the same experience. For the longest time—fifteen or so years—he could not free himself from an addiction to sex. Then, in one moment, one instant, he was free. God had healed his will. He had not been able to be pure. Now, all of a sudden, he could.

5. There is always this interplay between God's and our own actions. Paul, Augustine and later Luther stress very much that it is God's who initiates this interplay. Our role is to respond. But our response is necessary. Without it God's initiation falls on deaf ears. That is the message of today's Gospel. It is not enough to say Lord, Lord, Jesus tells us. No, we must act. We must do the will of the Father in our lives. If we do so, our life will be like a house built on rock; but if we simply talk a good game, our life will be like a house built on sand.

6. God can put up with mistakes, but He will not endure our outright refusal to try to find and do his will. You know how a teacher will praise the student who has gotten some of the answers wrong but has clearly studied, has clearly made the effort. So too with God. Sometimes we look back at our lives and we can plainly see that we made wrong choices and did wrong things. Yet if we can say that we were trying to find and do God's will, God will forgive us our straying. But oftentimes our pride gets in our way. We don't want to admit that we were wrong. We are ashamed and therefore continue on the same course, thereby cementing ourselves in a false direction. It is of course even worse when we admit to ourselves that we recognized a situation as evil and chose

it as such. We will not be forgiven such an action unless we repent of it.

7. When the sun shines on our windows, we see that they are much dirtier than we thought. It is the same with us. We don't see ourselves very clearly. But once in awhile God shines his light on us and we see that there is more trouble there than we had imagined. That is a divine initiative. We ought to respond to it. In fact, we should ask the Lord to shine his light our way—not too strongly, however, lest we lose heart. But so often we wonder if we are doing all that we should be doing. “Is this the best I can do with my life?” we ask ourselves, and often there does not seem to be any answer to our question. We proceed as we have always proceeded, not knowing what else to do. And that is all we can do at the moment. But let us keep our eyes and our ears open. God may yet speak a word to us that will call us to a change of life, at least in some ways.