

A reading from the book of Sirach.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

If you choose, you can keep the commandments,  
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.  
The Lord has placed before you fire and water;  
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.  
Before each person are life and death, good and evil  
and whichever one chooses, that shall be given.  
For great is the wisdom of the Lord;  
he is mighty in power and sees everything;  
his eyes are on those who fear him,  
and he knows every human action.  
He has not commanded anyone to be wicked,  
and he has not given anyone permission to sin.



Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

A reading from the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians.

Pause - and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:

Among the mature we do speak wisdom,  
though it is not a wisdom of this age  
or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.  
But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden,  
which God decreed before the ages for our glory.  
None of the rulers of this age understood this;  
for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.  
But, as it is written,  
"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the human heart conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him."  
These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit;  
for the Spirit searches everything,  
even the depths of God.

Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## GOSPEL READING [LONGER VERSION] – A 06

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

*Glory to you, O Lord*

Jesus his disciples:

“Do not think that I have come  
to abolish the Law or the Prophets;  
I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.  
For truly I tell you,  
until heaven and earth pass away,  
not one letter, not one stroke of a letter,  
will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments,  
and teaches others to do the same,  
will be called least in the kingdom of heaven;  
but whoever does them and teaches them  
will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.  
For I tell you, unless your righteousness  
exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.  
You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,  
‘You shall not murder’;  
and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’  
But I say to you  
that the one who is angry with their brother or sister,  
you will be liable to judgment;  
and whoever insults their brother or sister,  
will be liable to the council;  
and whoever says, ‘You fool,’  
will be liable to the hell of fire.  
So when you are offering your gift at the altar,  
if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,  
leave your gift there before the altar and go;  
first be reconciled to your brother or sister,  
and then come and offer your gift.  
Come to terms quickly with your accuser  
while you are on the way to court with him,  
or your accuser may hand you over to the judge,  
and the judge to the guard,  
and you will be thrown into prison.



Truly I tell you, you will never get out  
until you have paid the last penny.  
You have heard that it was said,  
'You shall not commit adultery.'  
But I say to you  
that everyone who looks at a woman with lust  
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.  
If your right eye causes you to sin,  
tear it out and throw it away;  
it is better for you to lose one of your members  
than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin,  
cut it off and throw it away;  
it is better for you to lose one of your members  
than for your whole body to go into hell.  
It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife,  
let him give her a certificate of divorce.'  
But I say to you  
that anyone who divorces his wife,  
except on the ground of unchastity,  
causes her to commit adultery;  
and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.  
Again, you have heard  
that it was said to those of ancient times,  
'You shall not swear falsely,  
but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'  
But I say to you,  
Do not swear at all,  
either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,  
or by the earth, for it is his footstool,  
or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.  
And do not swear by your head,  
for you cannot make one hair white or black.  
Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No';  
anything more than this comes from the evil one."



## GOSPEL READING [SHORTER VERSION] – A 06

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

*Glory to you, O Lord*

Jesus his disciples:

“Do not think that I have come  
to abolish the Law or the Prophets;  
I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.  
For I tell you, unless your righteousness  
exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.  
You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,  
‘You shall not murder’;  
and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

But I say to you  
that the one who is angry with their brother or sister,  
you will be liable to judgment;  
and whoever insults their brother or sister,  
will be liable to the council;  
and whoever says, ‘You fool,’  
will be liable to the hell of fire.  
So when you are offering your gift at the altar,  
if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,  
leave your gift there before the altar and go;  
first be reconciled to your brother or sister,  
and then come and offer your gift.  
You have heard that it was said,  
‘You shall not commit adultery.’  
But I say to you  
that everyone who looks at a woman with lust  
has already committed adultery with her in his heart.  
Again, you have heard  
that it was said to those of ancient times,  
‘You shall not swear falsely,  
but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’  
But I say to you,  
Do not swear at all.  
Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’;  
anything more than this comes from the evil one.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

### Reading I: Sirach 15:15-20

This is the clearest statement in all of the canonical and deuterocanonical OT writings on the subject of human free will. It is even clearer than Dt 30:15-20 (the RCL alternative), whose teaching it echoes. Taken by itself, this passage would seem to be unadulterated Pelagianism. It does not recognize the bias toward sin that characterizes humanity in its fallen state. The human person appears to be a tabula rasa, having complete freedom to choose either good or evil (“fire and water”), and there is no apparent recognition of the human need for grace.

The author’s main thrust, however, is to exonerate God from all responsibility for the evil in the world—God never told anyone to be godless or gave anyone license to sin. The caption to this reading picks this out as the point of the whole passage. If we want a complete doctrine of human free will and the limitations imposed upon humans by their fallen nature, we must take into consideration not only this passage but also passages such as Rom 7:7-25.

RCL’s alternative reading from Deuteronomy is the well-known passage about the two ways, reminiscent in classical literature of the choice of Hercules. The one way, loving God and keeping his commandments, leads to life and prosperity in the Promised Land, while the other, the way of disobedience, leads to death.

### Responsorial Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34

Psalm 119, the longest in the psalter, is a skillfully constructed acrostic poem in praise of the Torah. Every verse in the twenty-two sections of eight verses begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order throughout the alphabet.

Today’s responsorial psalm is constructed from the first (aleph), third (gimel), and fifth (he) letters of the alphabet. The psalm often sounds highly legalistic in its understanding of piety, but we have to remember that Torah meant all that we mean by God’s revelation of himself to humankind.

We may therefore say that this psalm represents the Torah as an epiphany of God to human beings, and a passage from it is therefore appropriate for use during this season.

### Reading II: 1 Corinthians 2:6-10

In last week’s passage, 1 Cor 2:1-5, Paul repudiated wisdom and claimed that he preached only Christ crucified. Now he appears to take back much of what he had said. He does not entirely repudiate wisdom after all. There is a legitimate sense in which it can be used in Christian theology. In making this point, the Apostle picks up the “Gnostic” language that the Corinthians (wrongly) used about themselves: “wisdom,” “mature,” “mystery” (the word that the NRSV translates as the adjective “secret”), “depths of God.”

He even quotes an apocryphal verse that would have especially appealed to the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:9).

But there is a profound difference between Paul's use of these words and the Corinthians' use of them. The Corinthians were talking about a spiritual revelation into which they claimed to have been initiated when they became Christians. They thought that their very reception of it made them "mature." Paul, on the other hand, is talking about the meaning of the Cross in salvation history (1 Cor 2:8). The "mystery" is that the crucified One, precisely as the crucified, is the Lord of glory, or, to put it in our modern theological jargon, the Cross is the eschatological act of God.

The Corinthians thought otherwise. For them, the Cross was an unfortunate episode of past history; the less said about it, the better. All that mattered now was that Christ was risen. He was now spirit and, as such, had conveyed to them the esoteric gnosis or wisdom by means of which they were "in." They thought they were mature, but in fact, by displaying their ignorance of the Cross, they were showing their immaturity.

One further point calls for comment. Paul says that it was "the rulers of this age" who "crucified the Lord of glory." Who were these rulers? Pontius Pilate and Herod, or the demonic powers? Perhaps, as so often, it is not a question of either / or, for the political rulers who executed Jesus may well, in Paul's thought, have been acting as the earthly agents of the powers of evil. These powers would then have blinded the rulers and prevented them from realizing that they were crucifying the Lord of glory. They, of course, thought that he was a mere messianic pretender. Perhaps this is also a sly dig at the Corinthians. By refusing to recognize the Lord of glory in the crucified (as opposed to the risen) One, they were aligning themselves with Pontius Pilate and Herod, and so acting as agents of the powers of evil.

### **Gospel: Matthew 5:17-37**

The shorter form helps us to see more clearly the structure of the longer form. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus enunciates the new law of the kingdom of God, or, better, the new interpretation of the old Law that is to prevail in the kingdom.

This new interpretation is illustrated by a series of antitheses, as they are commonly called. These antitheses follow a common pattern. First comes the formula "You have heard that it was said [that is, that God said] to those of ancient times."

This formula introduces a verbatim quotation of one of the commandments of the old Law. Then comes Jesus' reinterpretation, introduced by the formula "But I say to you."

Both the short and the long form reproduce the first three antitheses. The prohibition of murder is enlarged to embrace anger, the prohibition of adultery to cover lustful glances, and the prohibition of false oaths to include any kind of swearing, since a simple yes or no should be just as binding. The longer version includes further illustrative material and adds to the prohibition of adultery the prohibition of divorce. (Since the latter is attested elsewhere in the gospel tradition, it has clearly been added to the antithesis at some point

in the transmission of the tradition.) The continuation of chapter 5, not included here, gives two more antitheses, one on revenge and the other on love of the enemy.

The better righteousness that the kingdom of God requires covers not only overt behavior but also inner motive. God's demand for obedience is absolute and total claiming the whole person in the entirety of his or her relations.

It has been said that the Sermon on the Mount by itself is bad news, a sharpening of the demands of the Law to the point of the impossible. Thus enunciated, it throws a person back on the need for grace (and so advertises the Pelagian suggestions of the first reading, taken by itself). But in the kingdom, grace is given to enable one to advance toward the goal of absolute obedience.

Reginald H. Fuller