



a Kendall Hunt Company

## Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



### Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13

Psalms 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading that appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

## Word in Liturgy



Despite being one of the shortest books in the Bible (only 53 verses), Zephaniah is used four times in the Lectionary, and it proclaims a spiritual vision that is central to the people of the covenant. Writing at a time of religious reform the prophet brought to the people of Judah words of both warning and promise. His teaching reflects an awareness, born of Israel's history, that times of moral decadence and covenant infidelity inevitably bring ruin upon the nation. He threatens a "day of the Lord" which will bring down God's wrath upon all evildoers, Gentiles as well as those in Judah.

In today's reading we hear words not of threat but of promise. "Shelter" is promised on the day of the Lord's anger, offered to the *anawim*, the "little ones" who are among the "humble of the earth" and who have "observed [God's] law." In Zephaniah's words of promise, the Lord offers to protect a "remnant" of the people who, by their actions, prove themselves faithful to the covenant. Living the moral life, we are told, is the foundation of one's right relationship with the Lord.

Scholars believe that the gospel of Matthew was written in the first generation after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (70 a.d.) following the formal expulsion of Jewish Christians from the synagogues of Palestine. This setting helps to explain Matthew's deliberate portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses, giving the people the new commandments of the new Covenant from the mountaintop, just as Moses had done to an earlier generation.

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The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five sections of Jesus' teachings in Matthew's gospel, all of which conclude with the same formula (7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1), a technique clearly reminiscent of the five books of Moses in the Jewish scriptures. Here, the first four commandments of the new law refer to the "little ones" or *anawim* referred to in Zephaniah's text, and pronounce them "blessed" in God's kingdom. The next set of four highlights those whose actions help to usher in the kingdom. Matthew clearly intends his readers to understand the importance of this scene for all successive generations. Not surprisingly, this text has long been thought to articulate a foundational Christian ethic, which is one of the reasons why our focus today is on the foundations of Christian morality.

# **Catholic Doctrine**

## ***Foundations of Christian Morality***

The Church contends that Catholic morality arises out of God's law, which is planted within the hearts of human beings. This "natural law" is knowable by all people, not just the Christian faithful. Indeed, the exercise of one's reason opens the human person to the ways of God.

Since the natural law is knowable, the question for theologians is whether there is a specific Christian morality. The answer is that there definitely is a specific Christian morality because its motivation and impetus lies in pleasing and loving God. Created, redeemed, and sanctified by God in Christ, the believer may very well say and do the same things as nonbelievers, but from a different perspective—which makes all the difference.

How is the moral person formed? Morally responsible Christians are formed by baptism and a whole set of experiences, values, and symbols that shape conscience and, indeed, consciousness. It is not reason alone that forms a Christian conscience. The whole human person—a mysterious complex of emotions, understandings, and sensibilities, transformed by Christ—takes part in the moral life. Indeed, Catholicism forms a certain kind of character. The community itself has a vital role to play in this character formation because of the witness it hands on regarding Jesus.

The Church holds that there are objective norms of morality available to us that express the rational order of good and evil. These objective norms are provided by scripture, tradition, the living witness of the community and, above all, the example and preaching of Christ. In articulating these norms, Catholic moral theology holds that for an action to be judged as morally good, three elements must be ascertained as good: the object itself, the intention,



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and the circumstances. A good intention cannot transform an intrinsically bad behavior into something that is good. In Catholic moral theology, therefore, the end does not justify the means.

Every believer bears the responsibility of informing his or her own conscience in order to act rightly and justly in the world. Various elements assist the believer in forming conscience. Good preaching, sound religious education, an understanding of scripture, spiritual direction, the witness and example of other Christians, and the authoritative teaching of the Church help to form one's conscience. This formation is a lifelong process wherein the believer sifts through experience and with the grace of the Holy Spirit pursues the path of right (CCC 1785). Staying on the path of right, one avoids the way of sin.

Precisely because we are free to choose either good or evil, we are moral subjects. We are, in freedom, the authors of our actions. We can choose to follow Jesus' teaching and live the way of the blessed, the Beatitudes, or we can choose a way which is contrary to Jesus' law of love.

