The text for the sermon this morning is written in the eighth verse of the first chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians: "Who shall also confirm you unto the end."

Earlier in the Mass this morning, just as we do on the first Sunday of each month, we heard the full Decalogue – or the Ten Commandments. – And after each of the first nine commandments we answered: "Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law." – Then, after the final commandment, we prayed: "Lord, have mercy upon us, and write all these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee."

There is something important about those responses. We do not hear the commandments and say, "Very well, Lord – we know what is expected. We can take it from here."

No, we hear them and we immediately ask for help. – Incline our hearts. – Write thy laws within us. – Because knowing what God commands – and actually remaining faithful to those commandments over a lifetime – are not quite the same thing.

And that is really where St. Paul meets us in the Epistle this morning. – He begins by giving thanks for the Christians at Corinth – "I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ."

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They had received a great deal. – St. Paul says they had been enriched by Christ "in all utterance, and in all knowledge." He says they "come behind in no gift." – These were people who had heard the Gospel, received grace, and been richly blessed with spiritual gifts. – And yet anyone who has read the rest of First Corinthians knows that this was not a perfect church.

Far from it. – There were divisions. – There was pride. – There were arguments about spiritual gifts. – There were moral problems. – There was disorder even surrounding the Holy Communion. – They had received much – but they still had a great deal of growing to do.

And perhaps there is the first lesson for us – spiritual gifts are not the same thing as spiritual maturity. – We can know a great deal about the Faith and still need to grow. We can read our Bibles, know what they say–even quote chapter and verse–and still fail to let those words correct us. – It is possible to know Scripture well enough to quote it and still not let Scripture read us. We can have been Christians for many years and still need correction. We can pray regularly, receive the Sacraments, serve the Church, and still discover areas of our lives that have not yet fully surrendered ourselves to Christ.

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Receiving grace is the beginning of the Christian life – it is not the end of it.

St. John Chrysostom notices something interesting in Paul's opening words to the Corinthians. Paul praises them for the gifts they possess, but continually directs their attention away from themselves and back toward Christ. – It was "the grace of God" that had been given to them. They had been enriched "by Him." Their gifts had come from Christ. – And when St. Paul looks toward their future, once again their confidence rests not in themselves – but in the Lord who "shall also confirm you unto the end."

That word confirm means to strengthen – to establish – to make firm. – And I think that is an important word for the Christian life. – We need more than a good beginning. We need to be made firm enough to continue.

There is often great enthusiasm at the beginning of something. – A person returns to church. – Someone begins praying regularly. – Perhaps there has been a conversion, a retreat, a difficult experience, or some moment when God suddenly seems very near. – And those moments can be tremendous gifts.

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But eventually Monday morning comes. – The excitement fades. – The ordinary routine returns. – And prayer eventually becomes difficult. – Temptations we thought we had left behind reappear. – Someone disappoints us. – We become tired. – And the question becomes not simply: Did I begin? But: Will I continue?

That is why this morning's Collect is so realistic – in it we prayed, "Lord, we beseech thee, grant thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil." – This collect – dating back to 8th century and revised in the 17th – does not pretend that once we have begun following Christ there will be nothing pulling us in other directions. It names three things – The World, the pressures around us that continually try to shape our priorities according to something *other* than God. – The Flesh, those disordered desires within us that make selfishness, pride, anger, lust, envy, or simply taking the easier road so attractive. – And the Devil, the very real spiritual enemy who is perfectly content to exploit them both.

We pray for grace to withstand them. – Not once, but again, and again. – Because perseverance is not one decision made years ago. It is a lifetime of decisions made under grace.

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And that brings us back to the Decalogue. – The commandments tell us where the road runs. – But simply seeing the road does not mean we will remain upon it. – And that is why we pray "Incline our hearts." – Change what we want. – Strengthen what is weak. – Make us desire the life Thou hast commanded.

And then the Gospel gathers all those commandments together for us. – In it the lawyer asks Jesus, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" – And our Lord answers, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." And then. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." – Those two commandments do not replace the Decalogue as though the Ten Commandments no longer matter. – They tell us what lies at the heart of them.

Love God. And love your neighbor.

That is the life toward which the commandments are directing us. – And perhaps that makes perseverance look a little different. – Perseverance is not simply gritting our teeth and managing somehow not to quit Christianity. – It is continuing to love.

Continuing to love God when prayer feels dry. – Continuing to worship when we do not feel particularly inspired. – Continuing

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to forgive when resentment would be easier. – Continuing to love our neighbor when our neighbor becomes difficult to love. – Continuing to follow Christ when the world offers us easier alternatives.

That is why the Collect does not merely ask for grace to resist temptation. It continues, "and with pure hearts and minds to follow thee, the only God." – Not merely avoid something. – Follow Someone.

The goal of the Christian life is not simply to spend our years successfully avoiding a list of sins. – It is to follow God with an increasingly undivided heart.

And St. Paul gives us reason for hope that this is possible. – Not because the Corinthians were naturally strong. – Clearly they were not. – Not because they had reached spiritual perfection. – Clearly they had not.

But because the same Christ who had given them grace at the beginning would continue His work – "Who shall also confirm you unto the end."

Now, that does not mean that our response no longer matters. St. John Chrysostom is careful about that too. He tells us

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that God is faithful and willing to establish His people – but Christians must not continually resist the grace they have been given.

Grace does not make obedience unnecessary. – Grace makes perseverance possible.

And that brings us back to those words we said after every commandment, "Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law." – That is not the prayer of someone who has given up. It is the prayer of someone who knows where strength comes from.

Lord, I want to follow Thee – but keep me.

Lord, I know what Thou hast commanded – but incline my heart.

Lord, I have begun – but confirm me unto the end.

There will be days when faith feels strong. – There will be days when it does not. – There will be times when obedience seems easy. – There will be times when doing what is right costs us dearly. – There will be times when love comes almost naturally. – And there will be people whom we will have to ask God to help us love at all. – But our confidence is not finally in the strength of

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our grip upon Christ. – Our confidence is in the grace of the Christ who called us – who feeds us – who forgives us – who strengthens us – and who does not cease working within us.

And that is one reason we come again and again to this altar. – Not because we have already arrived. – Not because we no longer struggle. – But because we need Christ. – We need His mercy. – We need His strength. – We need to be fed for the road that still lies ahead.

The Christian life is not merely about beginning well. – It is about remaining with Christ – loving God, loving our neighbor, resisting what would draw us away, and trusting the grace that strengthens us along the way.

And so perhaps St. Paul's words can become our prayer this morning – Lord, Thou hast called me. – Thou hast given me grace. – Now strengthen what is weak. – Correct what has wandered. – Incline my heart toward Thy commandments. – And confirm me – unto the end.

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