

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus teaches us that the first and greatest commandment is to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”* (Matt. 22:37). We might assert, therefore, that idolatry is the greatest sin. Holding up something or someone as more important than God, looking to something or someone other than God for all your good, placing your trust in something or someone other than God, loving it more than God—this is idolatry. Indeed, that is the sin that ultimately condemns. Jesus taught, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned”* (Mark 16:16). Again Jesus said, *“whoever does not believe [in Him] is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God”* (John 3:18).

That’s not to say that our other sins are not serious. They certainly are. They are sins against our neighbor, violations of the 2nd greatest commandment to *“love your neighbor as yourself”* (Matt. 22:39). These are certainly worthy of condemnation, for death is the just punishment for breaking God’s laws. But He **doesn’t** punish us because of Jesus, because of His life and death, because of His cross and passion, because of His resurrection and life, because He has washed us and made us His own, because we look to Him and believe in Him. Therefore, we have life and resurrection rather than everlasting death and torment.

That sounds all good and wonderful to us — at least, I hope it does. And that message of peace and reconciliation is the message that Jesus had sent His apostles’ out with, the peace that comes with the kingdom of heaven. *“Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

But not every message of peace is a message from God, and not every peace is from Him. Thus, Jeremiah warned Israel about the false prophet Hananiah who prophesied peace and prosperity for Israel. And Jesus says in our Gospel, *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* Thus the Prince of Peace, proclaimed by the angel host to be the one to bring peace on earth, reminds us that His peace not a peace on earth with each other, but peace with God. It’s a specific peace that is found in Jesus Himself and was established by the blood of His cross (Col. 1:20). It’s a peace that comes in a specific way, by a preaching of the good news of peace that leads to faith in Him (Eph. 2:17).

But on earth Jesus also comes to bring a sword, not a sword to wield with hands, but a sharp, two-edged sword that protrudes from His mouth. That’s the word of God, and that sword is a living and active thing that can divide.

In fact, it divides us where our own idolatries do not want us to go. For what, probably for most of us, is our greatest idol? You know the answer. Our own

families. The sharp sword from Jesus' mouth slashes at this idol in today's Gospel: "*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*"

Now don't misunderstand Jesus here. He is not belittling the good gift of family. He, who Himself honored His earthly father and mother and submitted to them, and later loved and cared for His mother even in the throes of death, no doubt confessed with the Scriptures that families are truly a gift of God, that God instituted marriage and Himself joins husbands and wives together into one flesh by marriage, that God Himself builds the house—a family, giving children as a heritage—a blessing.

Yet families can also be a danger, when we value them, or love them more Jesus Himself, when we value the temporal blessings we have with them more than the eternal blessings that await us. Remember, that is idolatry—loving something or someone more than God. Luther explains the First Commandment saying, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things," and that means our family, too.

Certainly Jesus here does not seek to turn us against our spouse or parents or children. But our jealous God does want to make sure, for our own good, that we do not fall into idolatry, and so be condemned, unworthy to attain eternal life.

For when the family — whether children or parents — becomes more important than Jesus and His words, division often occurs, as Jesus said, "*I have come to set a man against his father, ... a daughter against her mother, ... a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.*" Certainly, "*do not provoke your children to anger.*" Rather "*bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*" (Eph. 6:4). But if they depart from that, the wise parent does not follow them along the wide and easy path that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13). Similarly, children: "*honor your father and your mother ... that it may go well with you*" (Eph. 6:3). But if your parents depart from the faith, that person has become an enemy in your own household. Do not follow them into "false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice" (Luther).

Consider the issue of sexuality in our modern world — it's providing us with an example of this in our time. This past Monday we passed the two-year anniversary of Obergefell v. Hodges, which redefined marriage in America to include same-sex couples. At the time of this decision that overturned many state constitutional amendments, a majority of Americans were still following a Biblical morality, natural law, and the weight of history that rejected same-sex marriage. But polls show now that a majority favor same-sex marriage, and that's even so among the 55-70 year-old Baby Boomers. Even among the so-called "Silent" generation,

although it's not a majority yet, support has risen from 24% in 2007 to 43% in 2017.

“Why this change?” we might wonder. The polls don't answer that question, but let me offer a suggestion: the influence of sons and daughters, who support same-sex marriage, on their parents and grandparents have sparked the change. Couple that family influence with the all-pervasive pop culture's support for same-sex marriage along with an aversion to being called names like “homophobic” and we have this major shift. But what is missing is: “What does God say about it?” What is missing is reason using natural law as a basis. What is missing is taking up our crosses and following Jesus. What is missing is losing one's life for the sake of Jesus. Yes, it seems to me that loving family more than Jesus is a large part of this shift in popular opinion.

And please don't think it's all about homosexuality. We went down that wide and easy path toward destruction long before 2015 when we gave tacit approval to unscriptural divorce and cohabitation before marriage.

And even though all these sexual sins are wrong, please understand, it's not so much those sins committed against neighbor that I'm talking about today, but our own more dire sin of idolatry — of loving father or mother, son or daughter, family more than Jesus. Repent!

And remember that you can condemn a sinner's condition and sin and still love him. If that were not so, we would all stand condemned eternally. But that's exactly what Jesus did—He loved us sinners. “*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Rom. 5:8). We poor sinners have been justified by His blood, reconciled by His death, saved by His life (Rom. 5:9-10), God's kindness showered upon us, received by faith.

Not only that, but having been baptized into His death and resurrection, we are called to a new way of life: dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let us, therefore, cast off the works of darkness; let us cast aside our friendship with the world, for St. James reminds us that friendship with the world only makes one an enemy of God. So God grant us not friendship with the world, but with Him who laid down His life for us. Grant us to walk as children of light. Having been released from the condemnation of the law, grant that we may live truly as Jesus' disciples, in the truth of His word, serving “*in the new way of the Spirit.*” To be sure, what Jesus asks is hard. Of course, it is, for “*the way is hard that leads to life*” (Matt. 7:14). Therefore, Lord grant us steadfastness in Your word and ways.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.