

There's a sense in which going to Synod this past June has become rather upsetting for me and, at the same time, inspiring. Here's why? Synod laid down, what some people say, is an unfairly heavy burden on gay people. I appreciate how people come to believe that. However, I think what synod did—and this inspires me—is to raise the bar for each one of us to take seriously what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. The synodical decision about sexuality only had one part about gay sex. But it called everyone, regardless of our gender and/or marital status, to live the holy lives that Jesus calls us and equips us to live.

Synod's decisions on sexuality were focused, of course, on the 7th commandment. So to help us see how the commandments call us ALL to a greater life of faithfulness and joy through Christ, I thought we'd do well to study all ten commandments once again. Whether it's the 7th commandment or any other one, the goal is greater discipleship. That's why I entitled this message "Each one all in for Jesus." We are each called to be 100% devoted to Jesus, regardless of where our struggles in life lie, regardless of how that challenges us. The 10 commandments help us—in part—to see how we are doing: what we are doing well, what part of our lifestyle is perhaps hindering our walk with Jesus. And more importantly, each commandment draws us closer to Jesus as we seek to obey it with an "all-in" attitude and heart.

Today's sermon is an introduction, so we won't focus on any single commandment. But let's read God's word from Matthew 22 and Galatians 5 and then get into it.

First pray with me.

Matthew 22:34-40 ³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Galatians 5—the bulletin says we'll read from v.16 but I'll start at v.13.

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that **you are not to do** whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish

ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters and boys and girls loved by Jesus,

In the coming weeks, you young girls and boys and teenagers as well as many young adults will be going back to school. You'll face questions about whether to cheat or not on a report or test. You'll be put in social situations where you can speak negatively about a classmate or positively? Or maybe you'll be posting words on your social media accounts or texting messages. Will your words be upbuilding or defaming? And when you hear how some people are being negatively portrayed, you can either keep your mouth shut or speak up to defend someone. Those are just some of the challenges of school life.

When we go to work, there are issues we face. Should I be using my personal phone to do personal business while I'm being paid to work for the boss? Should I push my customer for a sale even though I can tell that my product is not what this client really needs—but it'll be good for me? When I'm building the walls of someone's house, is it critical that I get everything square and level? Will it really matter if I cut a few corners when I'm working for someone so that I get the job done faster and make more money?

I think we probably all know the answers to the above questions. It's "love your neighbour as yourself." "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." But why is it so hard to do the right thing? Why is it so hard to keep the Lord's commandments?

The Flesh

Paul tells us in Galatians 5 that it's the flesh. The flesh is another name for our sinful desires. Our old nature. It's the pull of sin in our hearts that doesn't automatically disappear when we believe in Jesus. From the moment we put our faith in Jesus, we begin a battle between listening to the Holy Spirit or listening to the flesh.

You've probably all seen a picture at one time or another of a little devil speaking into a person's one ear while an angel speaks into the other. Each one is trying to get the listener to do what they are saying. That's not an entirely accurate picture of our battle but it's somewhat helpful. That's our experience at times as Christians. You hear friends at school talking trash about a classmate and you immediately feel torn inside: The Holy Spirit is convicting you to stand up to the gossip and mean-spirited talk. But you also know that if you say something, there's a good chance that you'll be the next one in the line of fire from the gossiping lips. My flesh wants to protect myself rather than defend someone else.

Any kind of temptation to sin—to feed our sinful desires, the flesh—is going to harm us in some way. For example, Paul says in v.15,

Gal 5:15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

That's true not only when we are the badmouthing another but also when we participate by just standing by. We are destroying community and the good gifts the Lord has in mind for us when we live in harmony. We are participating in a culture that will happily bite and devour us at some other time.

But it's not just the sins we participate in by biting and devouring or by saying or doing nothing about it that Paul refers to. He gives a whole list of things that are examples of ways that we live by the flesh and thereby resist the work of the Holy Spirit who is trying to help us become better disciples of Jesus. Starting in v.19, Paul writes,

Gal 5:19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

It's obvious, he says, that these sorts of things are acts of the flesh. Obvious, at least, if you have the Spirit of God in your heart. It's only because the Holy Spirit works in us that we even begin to see sin for what it is. This isn't an exhaustive list. It's just a sampling of how the flesh attracts us and destroys our lives.

In fact, if we are slaves to sin—whether sins from this list or elsewhere—Paul says we won't inherit the kingdom of God. He's not suggesting that salvation is by works. He's simply saying that if you are saved by God's grace in Christ, then it'll show in your life. You'll also be transformed by God's grace. This is like Jesus saying, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." Love and the desire to honor our God of love and grace moves our heart to seek to do what he commands.

Paul is not saying you can't fall into acts of flesh as a Christian. Christians aren't perfect. But this is not where we want to be. We know such acts of the flesh are not just dishonouring to God but are also going to hurt us. Only the Holy Spirit helps us see that.

That's the thing about acts of the flesh. That's the thing about living by our sinful desires. It's never good for us. And because God loves us, he's not only saved us by the grace earned for us through Christ, he has also given us the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit's work is to help us steer clear of the flesh and all the misery that sin brings.

That's the struggle. It seems crazy. But by nature, our flesh desires things that ultimately hurt us. We might think that it feels good in the moment. We might be satisfied that protecting ourselves instead of defending someone else is better. That's what sin does. It drives us to serve ourselves. But that doesn't serve us well. All those things Paul lists—whether *sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy, envy, drunkenness* or anything else—it's all hurtful and destructive. It'll hurt you in this life **and**—apart from faith in Jesus and his saving work—it'll hurt you eternally.

The great theologian John Stott wrote: "Since God's kingdom is a kingdom of godliness, righteousness and self-control, those who indulge (that means they live purposely and willingly in that state of sin; those who indulge) in the works of the flesh will be excluded from it. For such works give evidence that they are not in Christ." (BST commentary, 148).

The Holy Spirit

Thanks be to God, we don't need to live by the flesh. Thank God we don't want to indulge in sin. Thank God, we have the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit living and working in us. We have the Spirit that Jesus sent to help us live holy lives. We are not slaves to sin. We are free from sin's death grip all because of Jesus! "He's has broken every chain, there's salvation in his name," as one of our songs puts it. And part of that salvation is learning to be led by the Spirit, as Paul says in v.18:

Gal 5:18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

And as he adds in v.25:

Gal 5:25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

My friends, to start with, remember and tell yourself every day, we have been delivered from sin by Jesus. We are not slaves to sin. He has conquered it. We are victors through faith in Jesus. So remember that the actual, decisive war against sin is done. Jesus won on Calvary. It is finished. That's what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper today! Jesus has defeated sin once and for all through his work on the cross and by his resurrection!

But we still have personal, daily battles to fight against the sinful nature that still tries to rear its ugly face and exert its power in us. So we must take action through the power that Jesus has earned and given to us over sin. We can now say no to sin and the flesh. Paul tells us in v.24,

Gal 5:24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

He's not talking about justification. That's Jesus' finished work on the cross for us which makes us right with God—forever. He's talking about sanctification—our partnering with the Holy Spirit to fight against the pull of sin that lives on in us after we're saved.

This is more along the lines of Jesus saying, "If you want to be my disciples, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." How do we deny our flesh?

Well, we start with prayerful self-examination. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us see ourselves as he does? We ask for eyes to see our sin. We ask for passion to hate it, to truly no longer want it to have any place in us. We ask for strength to fight that sin. And we take action to put that sin to death, to crucify it, if you will. Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

Mt 5:29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

He's not speaking literally of physical abuse to your body. He's saying, however, take drastic action to get rid of that sin.

For some of us, that will mean putting safety features in place on our computers and phones so we can't access certain websites. It can mean giving up certain media platforms because we find ourselves constantly drawn to sin when we have open access to them. It could mean staying away from certain people who have a negative effect on you and lead you into sin. Maybe it's staying away from certain places where temptation is strongest. It's perhaps saying to your boss that you can't do certain things that are expected of you because that compromises your faith.

Sometimes taking strong action will involve confessing your struggle with sin to someone you trust and asking that person to help you—whether to literally walk with you through the struggle or to hold you accountable at a weekly coffee get together, as well as praying for one another.

In addition to all those sorts of things, you need to keep coming here. The pandemic has changed a lot of things for us and perhaps made us feel less connected to our church. Well, you must realize that Jesus calls to be connected to the body. You need to worship with the body because you need to feed the Spirit and not the flesh. You need to worship and reconnect with God and also stay connected to other Christians who God places in your life to walk with you. You need to get new strength from the Holy Spirit's work in you as you worship and listen to the Bible and sermons and also as he feeds you in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. These means of grace, as we call them, are the Spirit's means of helping us put sin to death as we seek to follow Jesus more faithfully.

Imagine your young and healthy and you go to the doctor because you've had a little pain in your chest. He runs some tests and says, "You have cancer. I can see a big lump next to your heart. I can take it out and you'll be fine. Or I can leave it there and we can just let it grow and possibly spread to your organs until it kills you." What would you like the doctor to do?

I suspect that almost everyone of us—if not everyone—would choose the first option without much further thought. Get the cancer out there. Take the drastic step of cutting me open but get that tumour out of me as fast as possible.

This is what the Spirit's work in us is all about. And this is where the law comes in as well. Fighting the flesh is not only about saying no to certain things and taking action to fight against them. It's about knowing what is right and what is wrong. What to say no to and what to say yes to. The law of God helps us walk in step with the Spirit because the Spirit has inspired the Bible. The law, as the catechism has it, is about living a life of gratitude to God for all of his grace to us in Christ.

Friends, as summer winds down and we return to our classrooms and places of work, remember that the commandments help us be better disciples. The flesh calls us to live in sin. But the Holy Spirit calls each of us through things like the ten commandments to be all in for Jesus. To live as fully as we can for him because in him alone we find the best life possible, the life of the Spirit.

And all God's people say, Amen.