

St. John's Gospel shares with us the beautiful words of Jesus at the Last Supper. Among those last words to his Apostles before he would be arrested, Jesus said: "You are my friends if you do what I command you."

"You are my friends if you do what I command you." What were those commands? A few important ones may come to mind for us: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart..." "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Do not be afraid." "Follow me." "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "Ask and you shall receive..." "Seek first the kingdom of God..." "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." These are just a few of the dozens of commands that Jesus gives us in the Gospels. These are the ways that we become friends of Jesus.

But in today's Gospel, we hear another message from Jesus. Today, Jesus uses very strong words to warn us how we must avoid becoming enemies of God. There are two things that he focuses on: scandal and sin.

First, scandal. This is a word that we hear often nowadays, we hear of the scandals of celebrities and politicians and religious leaders. These scandals usually refer to public misdeeds and the ways that prominent people failed to live up to the expectations that others held them to. But there is a deeper meaning and significance to this word "scandal."

The word scandal comes from the Greek word "scandalizo." And this is the word that Jesus uses in the original Greek of today's Gospel. It is translated here for us as "causes to sin."

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.” The literal meaning of this word “scandal” is “a stumbling block.” If we create scandal, we are creating a stumbling block in the path of those around us. And this stumbling block can cause others to trip and fall. Our scandal can cause others to fall into sin. Why? Because our public sins and failings can cause others to think that those sins are ok, especially if we persist in those sins.

Think, for example, of parents who make no effort to attend Mass on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation. Is there any chance that they will be able to teach their children the importance of Sunday Mass? And, for us Christians, our public sins can cause others not only to sin but also to abandon their faith because of our poor witness of the Christian life. We are seeing this now, aren't we? The sins of Church leaders have caused Christians to abandon the faith. Listen again to the strength of Jesus' condemnation of scandal: “...it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.” I thank you that all of you are remaining faithful to the Church, despite the many scandals that have been coming to light in recent days. Let us never stop praying for those whose faith has been harmed by these scandals.

But causing scandal isn't the only way that we can become enemies of God. Jesus also warns us against any kind of sin.

What is sin? Most simply, sin is choosing to turn away from God. The Church teaches us that sin is not just an offense against God's commandments, it is also an offense against the gifts of reason and truth and conscience that God has given us. In other words, God has given us the

gift of freedom and reason so that we can know and choose what is good and what is true.

When we choose what is not good and what is not true, we offend against those gifts from God.

We sin.

The Church also shows us that sin is a failure to love God and our neighbor, and she shows us that this failure is caused by our perverse attachment to certain goods. When we sin, we fail to love God and our neighbor because we are more attached to some created thing.

That's why we sin - because something around us looks to be more appealing than the greater goods of loving God and loving our neighbor. We sin because those created things seem to be more attractive and more pleasurable. If sin wasn't attractive, if sin didn't bring at least some amount of pleasure, none of us would be tempted to sin. And when we give in to sin, that attraction and that pleasure can become addictive. We want more of it. This is why most of us find ourselves committing the same sins over and over again - because they are the most attractive, the most pleasurable to us.

And this is why Jesus insists that we must break these attachments to the worldly things that would lead us to sin. "...If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"

Jesus insists that we must be willing to cut off from our lives, not body parts, but those worldly attachments that lead us to sin. If not, those sinful worldly attachments will lead us away from God and away from the kingdom of God. Ultimately, those sinful worldly attachments will lead us to Gehenna - to hell.

Jesus gives us this warning because He desires our salvation. God created us so that we could live with Him forever in heaven. And because the Lord is merciful, He has given us a remedy for the sinful worldly attachments and addictions that we fall into. The Lord has given us the sacrament of reconciliation. This sacrament of reconciliation has the power to break the chains of sin that bind us. Going to confession frequently will free us from attachments and addictions that would lead us to hell. The Lord is waiting for us to come and receive His mercy. Jesus Christ is waiting to free us from any chain of sin that may be weighing us down. Why would we keep Him waiting?

If we want to be friends of God and not His enemies, the Lord has given us the path. We must work with all our strength to avoid sin and we must strive never to do anything that would lead others to sin. If we want to be holy, if we want to be saints, then we must run to the great mercy of God. May we open our hearts to his loving and forgiving mercy so that the chains of sin may be broken, so that we may always be friends of the Lord.