

THE FIRST AND GREATEST COMMANDMENT

by

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.¹

What we are concerned with is Divine love upon which love for our neighbour depends, so “our faith is the source of love”. We cannot separate our love from our beliefs. According to St. John, the Beloved Apostle, “our mutual love must be built up by the action of faith in the Lord, Who came to save us, and consequently it is not all right to believe as you want”... Love is integrally connected to Love of God.²

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God.³ If we love one another, God dwelleth in us..⁴ God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him.⁵

Loving our neighbour is a means to achieving love for God. By loving our neighbour, we love Christ in him. Bishop Ignatius (Brianchaninov) (+1867), explains:

Although the commandment of love for God is as far superior to the commandment of love for God's image (man) as God is superior to His image, yet the commandment of love for our neighbour serves as a **foundation** (emphasis supplied) for the commandment of love for God. He who has not laid the foundation labours in vain to construct a building; it cannot possibly stand without the foundation. By love for our neighbour we enter into love for God. A Christian's love for God is love for Christ, and love for our neighbour is love for Christ **in** (emphasis supplied) our neighbour. By loving our neighbour - by loving him in the Lord, that is, as the Lord commands us - we acquire love for Christ, and love for Christ is love for God.⁶

Thus, Love of God is founded on love of one's neighbour.⁷ We receive the love of God if we have prepared ourselves to receive it "by purity of heart, mind and body".⁸ We must prepare for the Holy Spirit's gift of love for God with "purity and humility".⁹ Christ marked clearly the signs of such Divine Love: "If a man love Me, he will keep My word. He that loveth Me not keepeth not My sayings."¹⁰] If we do not humbly prepare ourselves by purity of heart, mind and body for reception of the gift of love of God, we will only receive the gift "according to the degree of (our) preparation: because God, even in his mercy, is just".¹¹

In other words, we must change ourselves from within in order to learn the love of God. This is difficult for modern man. Contemporary men and women alike live in a world of self-delusion. We are bombarded by television ads extolling our virtues, "you're worth it" as an example. We delude ourselves with self-love. This is not the love of Holy Scripture. How can we love our neighbours if we're busy loving ourselves? We can't. Loving God and loving our neighbours are reciprocal. Neither exists without the other. If we love ourselves instead of God, we separate ourselves from our neighbours as well as from God. Neither of these loves exists without the other. Bishop Theophan the Recluse calls self-love the "seed of all moral evil" and states that it lies in the depths of our hearts:

The seed of all moral evil is - self-love. It lies in the very depths of the heart. Man, according to his calling, should forget about himself- his life, his activities; he should live solely for God and for others. In consecrating all that he does by elevating this as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God the Saviour, he should offer his life and all its activity entirely for the benefit of his neighbours, and shower upon them all that he receives from the Bountiful One, i.e., God. One does not exist without the other; it is impossible to love God without loving one's neighbours, just as it is impossible to love one's neighbour unless one loves God. Likewise, in loving God and one's neighbour it is impossible not to sacrifice oneself for the glory of God and the good of one's neighbour. But when a man separates himself from God- in his thoughts, his heart, his desires- and consequently also from his neighbour, then naturally he comes to dwell upon himself alone: his 'I' becomes the focus towards which he directs everything else, to the neglect even of the divine precepts and the good of his neighbour.¹²

We must 'correct' ourselves by changing what is in our hearts. Only then will we be able to be in union with God. How should we begin? The next time we think "I'm Number One," in any context, let's stop, take notice of this sin [for that is what it is], and 'soften our hearts' toward others. That may be just a small beginning, but it will be a start. Christian struggle is a daily event, bit by bit, piece by piece; our puzzle of love can be put together with God's help, but we must actively and humbly participate in our own spiritual transformation. Pray the Holy Spirit help us...

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ St. Mark 12:28-31

² Bishop Theophan the Recluse (+1894), *On Truth and Love in the Writings of St. John the Evangelist*, p.1, and see the full discussion through p.3 at <http://www.stvladimirs.ca/library/theophan-truth-love.html>.

³ St. John 4:7.

⁴ I John 4:12.

⁵ I John 4:16.

⁶ *The Arena*, (translated from the Russian by Archimandrite Lazarus), Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y., 1997, pp.59-60.

⁷ Bishop Ignatius (Brianchaninov) in *Love of God*, p. 2, http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/love_god_ext.htm.

⁸ *id.*

⁹ *id.*, p. 3.

¹⁰ John 14:23-24, quoted by Bishop Ignatius, *id.*, p.1.

¹¹ *id.*, p.2.

¹² Bishop Theophan the Recluse, "Correcting the Heart," (translated from *Pisma o Kristianskoi Zhizni*: Moscow, (1908) on p. 1 at <http://www.roca.org/OA/72/72b.htm>.