

Bible Study 2-17-2016 -- Mark 12:28-37

²⁸ 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? ²⁹ And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: ³⁰ 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. ³¹ And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. ³² And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: ³³ And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. ³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question. ³⁵ And Jesus answered and said, while he taught in the temple, How say the scribes that Christ is the son of David? ³⁶ For David himself said by the Holy Ghost, The LORD said to my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool. ³⁷ David therefore himself calleth him Lord; and whence is he then his son? And the common people heard him gladly.

This Gospel passage is found in Matt. 22:34-46 and Luke 20:40-44 in addition to this section from Mark 12:28-37.

From the Orthodox Study Bible:

“The Pharisees had found 613 commandments in the Scriptures and debated about which was central. Jesus sets forth the first and the second, which constitute the grand summary of the Law. Though the lawyer has come with malice to test the Lord (in St. Matthew’s account), we know from St. Mark’s account that this man is converted by Christ’s answer.

This second commandment must be understood as written: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ or more clearly, “as being yourself.” It is often misinterpreted, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself,” which destroys the force of the statement. How much we love ourselves is not the standard by which Christ is calling us to love others. Rather, we are called to love our neighbor as being of the same nature as we ourselves are, as being created in God’s image and likeness just as we are. As the Fathers teach, we find our true self in loving our neighbor.

[concerning Christ’s question to the Pharisees] Christ asks this question to lead the Pharisees to the only logical conclusion: that He is God Incarnate. They supposed the Messiah to be a mere man, and therefore reply that the Messiah would be a Son of David. David, as king of Israel, could not and would not address anyone as “Lord” except God. Yet in Ps. 109:1, David refers to the Messiah as “Lord.” Therefore, the Messiah must be God. The only possible conclusion is that the Messiah is a descendant of David only according to the flesh, yet is also truly divine, sharing His Lordship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees do not answer because they realize the implications and are afraid to confess Jesus to be the Son of God.”

From St. Theophylact's Explanation of the Holy Gospel according to St. Mark

St. Theophylact says that the way in which these two commandments are alike is that they are held together by each other. He who loves God, also loves God's creation; and that part of His creation which is the most akin to God is man. Therefore he who loves God will also love all mankind. And shall not he who loves his neighbor love God all the more? For if He loves men, who so often cause offence and bear hatred, how much more will he love God Who is always his Benefactor? Listen to what the Lord says also: "He who loves Me will keep My commandments." See that it is out of love for God that we keep His commandments, and that the substance of His commandments is that we love one another. And again, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another." Do you see again that for us to love Christ, and to be His disciples and friends, comes from loving each other? Consider how all the faculties of our life are enumerated here. There is that faculty which is called [by the philosophers] 'animal-like,' and this power is suggested by the words, "with all thy soul," For the Lord wants us to direct all our fervor and desire to the love of God. There is another power, named 'plant-like,' meaning the power to nourish and to cause growth. This too should be given entirely to God. And there is also the rational power, which the law calls 'the mind.' Therefore we should offer up in love all of our faculties to God."

From Archbishop Averky's The Four Gospels

"If the Messiah-Christ were a mere descendant of David, then how could He already exist when David writes about Him, but if He did exist when David lived, and David called Him his Lord, then, consequently, He is not a mere man. The Pharisees, blinded by the letter of the law and having lost the key to the correct understanding of the law, could not answer the Lord. In this way, the Lord revealed their ignorance of the law and simultaneously gave another proof of His divinity and pre-eternal existence. Having been so decisively defeated, the Pharisees no longer approached the Lord to ask Him any questions, and the majority of the people heard Him with joy."

From St. Maximos the Confessor's Fourth Century on Love, Texts 19,20,21,148

"Do not neglect the commandment of love; for through it you will become a son of God, but transgressing it you will become a son of gehenna. Love between friends is destroyed if you envy or are the object of envy; if you cause or suffer loss; if you revile or suffer revilement; and finally if you feed and keep suspicious thoughts against your brother...Do not be conquered by hatred but conquer it by love...Pray God sincerely about him, accept his excuses or cure yourself by excusing him, regard yourself as the cause of the trial and resolve to endure until the cloud has passed. Pay heed to yourself lest it be in you and not in your brother that lurks the evil that cuts you off from him; and hasten to make your peace with him, lest you forsake the commandment of love. Fear keeps the old commandments, but that love keeps the life-giving commandments of Christ."

From St. Herman of Alaska Love of God (Little Russian Philokalia v. 3, p. 48-9)

“Can there be anything better, higher above everything, more surpassing everything and in general more worthy of love, than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, Who created us, adorned with such perfections, gave life to all, supports all, nourishes and loves all, Who Himself is love and more excellent than all men? Should one not therefore high above all love God, and more than all desire and seek Him...If we love someone, we always think of him, strive to please him, day and night our heart is occupied with this subject...Do you often turn to Him, do you always think of Him, do you always pray to Him and fulfill His holy commandments?...For our good, for our happiness, at least let us make a promise to ourselves, that from this day, from this hour, from this minute we shall strive to love God above all and fulfill His holy will!”

Many Christians today do not love God as Christ commanded, with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength; nor do many love their neighbor as fellow human beings created in God’s image just as we are. We see the fulfillment of Christ’s prophetic words that ‘the love of many will wax cold in the last days.’ In fact, we see a great deal of self-love today rather than love for God and neighbor.

At least part of the reason seems to be due to how people view the very idea of loving God, loving their neighbor and how they actually believe in Christ. As Hieromonk Ambrose Young stated, ‘most Christians today, whether they know it or not, are in fact, functional deists.’ That is, they believe in an abstract version of God, sort of a rational and philosophical concept of God, Who, while ‘real’ in some vague sense, is really very far away from our everyday lives and is in fact separate from us. Oh sure, He created the heavens and earth and all that (including us), but we’re now left to just live out our lives all by ourselves as best we can. Of course, we go to church because we feel that it is our duty to do this. After all, our parents told us we should go to church, so we go because it feels right to go. However, many are uncertain about what to expect in the way of their experience in church. Then, the focus shifts from worshipping God, to finding some fulfillment or meaning in more external things. One can begin to focus on the personality of the priest and whether or not the things he says in his sermon are pleasing to us. The location and building of the church, the physical resources available, how comfortable everything is to us, even the quality of the coffee or the food following the Sunday services can take on great significance. In other words, the church can become more about us personally with our various tastes, likes and dislikes and whether we like the way things are done there or not. Taken to the extreme, this kind of thinking can lead us in the direction of self-love rather than the love of God. We can see this trend in today’s ‘mega-churches’ where the emphasis is on achieving material success, or personal happiness and where the focus tends to be on entertainment, rather than salvation and the Christian doctrine of faith has been so watered-down, that people more or less believe whatever they want.

How can we love a God that is an abstraction to us? There was once a teenaged girl who told about her ‘relationship’ with her ‘boyfriend’ whom she had met on Facebook. He lived halfway around the world and her only contact with him had been over the internet, through exchanging emails or text messages. Then she found out that he was also in contact with other young ladies

and so she felt she should 'break up' with him. The amazing thing in all this, was that *she had never met this young man in person!* How then, could they have a meaningful or real relationship under those conditions? By the same token, if one has a similar relationship with God, that it is 'long distance' and we've never actually 'met' God, then how can we love Him?

In the First Epistle of St. John 4:20 the Apostle John says, "If someone says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen." Again in Matthew 25:37-40 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take you in or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

Again, when the Pharisees missed the point that the Messiah was not to be merely some earthly descendant of King David, but rather the Lord, it is really because they did not love God and their brother in a real way. For them, the Scriptures were abstract and as long as they observed the outward customs, keeping the Sabbath and not doing any work or walking only so many steps; observing the practice of circumcision; or those external things, they considered themselves to be righteous and above all other men. Today, many Christians resemble those Pharisees very closely. They miss the point of Christ's Divinity and emphasize His humanity. We can see this in our popular culture and even many artistic depictions of Jesus are very humanistic—often making Him look more like a movie star than the Creator of the Universe.

Our Orthodox Faith provides us with the opportunity to encounter Christ at every Divine Liturgy and to experience the Grace of the Holy Spirit in every Divine Service. The Holy Apostles, Holy Fathers and our Church have given us everything we need to build a strong relationship with God. Only we must choose to practice our faith. To integrate these things. To desire to draw closer to Christ and to improve our lives as His disciples. Let us take St. Herman's advice and renew our commitment to make the effort to love God and our brother from this moment forward, that we may grow stronger in our Christian faith and be counted worthy to enter Christ's heavenly kingdom when we depart this life.