

IT IS NATURAL FOR MAN TO LOVE GOD

—by St. Nikolai Velimirovich—

Jesus said unto him: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Mt. 22:37).

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” This is the first and greatest commandment. Does love exist by command? No! But there must, sadly, be commandments about love, because man’s darkened heart has forgotten the natural love of man for Him who loves man. A mother does not remind a child to love her unless her child so forgets that it despises and saddens its mother, and starts down the slippery slope of earthly love. Love for one’s mother then becomes a commandment, not so much for the mother as for the child. God gives the angels no commandment about love, as they are close to God and naturally love Him. It is a matter of profound shame for the human race that it has called forth this commandment about love; for a commandment about loving God is as much a reprimand to the human race as it is a commandment. Everyone who has any idea of what God does for him and what he owes to God must truly feel the deepest shame that stubborn man has given cause for such a commandment. For a man to love God is more natural than for a child to love its mother, and therefore man’s love for God should, without any commandment, be more evident than a child’s love for its mother. Why does a child love its mother? Because it senses its mother’s love for it. And why does man not sense God’s love for him? Because his heart has become hardened, and his spiritual sight darkened by sin. Christ also came into the world to make men’s hearts ready for a refined sense of love for God, and to open man’s darkened spiritual sight.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk says: God is the greatest Good, from Whom come all good and all blessings. To live with God is happiness in misfortune, riches in poverty, and comfort in want. Love Him, therefore, as your greatest good and blessing. Love Him more than any creature, more than father and mother, wife and children, and more than yourself.

Christ the Lord came, as the strongest expression of God's unchanging love for mankind, to rekindle the extinguished fire of love in the hearts of God's children, and to make natural once more that which had, at one time, been completely normal to men, as to the angels, and had in time become unnatural. Were a mother not to love her child, could that child love its mother? Were God not to love man, could man love God? But God, from the beginning—and from before the beginning—loves man, and it is therefore natural for man to love God.

In His divine prayer before His Passion, the Lord Jesus prayed to His heavenly Father: “ ... **that the world may know that Thou has sent Me, and hast love them as Thou hast loved Me**” (Jn. 17:23). What sublime and comforting words! God has a fatherly love for us sinful and impure men, a love such as He has for His only-begotten Son. They who are able to know and feel the depth and inextinguishable flame of this divine love have no need of any commandment about love. On the contrary, they would feel ashamed were they to be commanded to love God, to return love for love.

The Apostle John, who rested his head on the breast of his Lord and God, and who had the fullest sense of the depth and sweetness of divine love at its very source, its inexhaustible spring, writes: “**Herein is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us**” (1Jn. 4:10), and “**We love Him, because He first loved us**” (1Jn. 4:19). See how he writes! These are not the skillfully-chosen words of a sage learned in secular study, but the murmurings and tremblings of the heart of one who had drunk of love at the very Source and who, with joyful delight, makes use of the simple words to express God's inexpressible love.

Hear how another apostle, who first hated and persecuted Christ, writes about love: “**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulations, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?**” And he adds: “**I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to**

separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35-39). I do not believe that, since the world and time began, any man has expressed his love more strongly. This is not love according to, or because of, commandments, but a love that is naturally called forth by love. Commandments are given to them who have long deserved punishment for their insensitivity towards love, for their violation of love and an ingratitude to God that cries to heaven. Neither Christ nor the apostles, nor all the hosts of them who love God in heaven and on earth, have been able to give better expression to the commandment on love for God, nor give a stronger stimulus to the fulfilling of this commandment, than the simple reminder that **He first loved us.**

Entire books could be written—and have been written—containing proofs of God’s love for us and reasons for us to love God. The whole created world, visible and invisible, is a proof of God’s love for us. The whole of nature and its disposition: the sun and the stars, the seasons, the span of man’s life under the eye of Divine Providence, God’s long-suffering toward sinners, the unseen but mighty upholding of the righteous, and so much more that cannot be counted or named, are all proofs of God’s love for us. But why enumerate and name all this when it is enough just to say that God loves us, that **He first loved us?** The Son of God’s coming down among men, His works and His suffering for the human race, surpass in their greatness and radiance all other proofs of God’s love. His lips have told us that God the Father love us as He does Him. His teaching reveals this; His works testify to this; His sufferings set the seal on this. His commandments about love should therefore become in our hearts an utterly natural feeling, similar to that of a child for its mother—similar but far stronger.