



LIFE APPLICATIONS "1 CORINTHIANS"

Chapter 13

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

The second commandment stated by our Lord in Matthew 22 is "love your neighbor as yourself." There are many ways in which we can exhibit such love for all people.

One way is to be concerned with the physical needs of others. Christ tells us that, when we care for the physical needs of others by giving them food and clothing, or visit them in prison, we are in fact caring for Him (Matthew 25:35-40). Those who do not care for the physical needs of others, however, will be cursed because they did not care for Christ (vs. 41).

We should also be willing to forgive those who have committed an offense against us. Christ says, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). St. Maximus the Confessor says regarding this exhortation:

Let us love one another, and we shall be loved by God. Let us be longsuffering toward one another, and He will be longsuffering toward our sins. Let us not render evil for evil, and He will not render to us according to our sins. We shall find remission of our transgressions in forgiving our brethren; for God's mercy toward us is concealed in our mercifulness toward our neighbor. This is also why the Lord said: Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. And if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. After this, our salvation is already in our power.

One of the most significant ways in which we can show love for our neighbors is by sharing with them the good news of Christianity. Only through a relationship with God can the individual find forgiveness of sins and the joy of being adopted into the family of God and becoming a co-heir with Christ (see Romans 8:16-17). We should therefore "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who ask you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:16).

Loving our neighbor becomes even more important when the individual in question is also a Christian. Our Lord states, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

One of the central ways in which Holy Scripture tells us that we can demonstrate love for our fellow Christians is by being not only forgiving of the sins of others, but also repentant for our own transgressions. Our Lord tells us that, if we are approaching the altar and we know that our brother bears a grudge against us, we should first go and seek reconciliation with our brother, and only then bring our gift to the altar (Matthew 5:23-24).

Our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ must be unfailingly humble. Arrogance, and particularly hostility, toward our brothers will result in our condemnation. Christ unequivocally tells us, "I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matthew 5:22). St. John Chrysostom says about this passage:

For there is nothing, nothing in the world more intolerable than insolence; it is what hath very great power to sting a man's soul. But when the word too which is spoken is in itself more wounding than the insolence, the blaze becomes twice as great. Think it not then a light thing to call another "fool." For when of that which separates us from the brutes, and by which especially we are human beings, namely, the mind and the understanding, - when of this thou hast robbed thy brother, thou hast deprived him of all his nobleness.

St. Ephraim the Syrian explains that such arrogance toward another Christian earns condemnation because "of Him Christ commanded, "Thou shalt not call him Raca," who is baptized and has put Him on; for whoso despises the despised, despises with him the Mighty."

Our humility should be such that, not only should we avoid arrogance toward others, but we should not even demand love from them in return for our love. Abba Dorotheus says, "Do not require love from thy neighbor, for he who requires it is troubled if he does not encounter it; but it is better that thou thyself show love toward thy neighbor and in this way bring also thy neighbor to love." Elder Leonid of Optina likewise observes, "we have a commandment of God to love our fellow man with a pure heart, but for us to seek love from them is nowhere mentioned."