

LOVING THE LORD

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When the Lord was asked which is the first of all the commandments, He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30). Nothing could be plainer or more emphatic than this assertion. The Lord said of this commandment and its corollary, that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, “There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40). The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church informs us that this last statement means that “the Word in the internal sense treats of nothing else than love to the Lord and love toward the neighbor” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3427:2, 3445 *et alia*). They state emphatically: “In itself the Word is nothing but the doctrine of love to the Lord and of charity toward the neighbor” (*Arcana Coelestia* 7262). We may say then that the whole Word, in essence, teaches one thing: love to the Lord. This is the first, foremost, and inmost teaching of the whole Word—the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Heavenly Doctrine.

It is important to note that in each of the places where this commandment occurs it is stated that we must love the Lord with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. We are not to just love the Lord, but love Him with all our being. We are to love Him above and beyond anyone and anything. And this is where the problem arises.

We learn this commandment when we are little children, and we teach it to our little children, and rightly so. And because little children are then in the sphere of celestial angels (who are in love to the Lord above all else) they respond affirmatively to this commandment. As little children, we want to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. But, as the years begin to pass, every time we hear or repeat this commandment we feel more and more guilty. We know that we don't love the Lord more than anything or anyone. In states of reflection we realize that we love our parents more than we love the Lord, and perhaps our close friends. There are many times when we ask ourselves, “Do we really love the Lord at all? How can we love Him more than anyone?” We don't even see the Lord. We see our parents. We feel the warmth of their embrace; we see their love for us in their eyes; we see their hurt when we do wrong; we see their compassion when we are hurt; we experience their forgiveness; we are thrilled by their courage and strength; we are awed by their goodness. These are things we see and feel; they have depth and meaning to us. But we only read and hear about the Lord.

As little children the mere thought of losing our parents brings on almost unbearable feelings of desolation and emptiness. We must honestly admit, when we reflect, that we do not feel that way about the Lord. We would like to, but we don't. We would like to because He tells us that we are to love Him above all else, but no matter how we try, we cannot. So our feelings of guilt grow, or else we reluctantly come to the conclusion that the Lord is asking us to do something that is impossible. This commandment—the first of all the commandments, the one on which all else depends—becomes unreal to us.

Does the Lord ask the impossible of us? Obviously He cannot, for that would be neither loving, nor merciful, nor wise. The difficulty involved in this problem is our understanding. This commandment is a problem to us because we do not properly understand its meaning. We do not completely understand what love is and what is meant by loving the Lord. Nor do we completely understand who the Lord is.

One of the first things we must realize is that the Lord is infinite, and we are finite. We can, therefore, never know the Lord as He is in Himself. We can only know Him as He reveals Himself to us. We begin life with no knowledge whatsoever, but with the capacity to grow in knowledge to eternity. Thus our knowledge concerning the Lord grows progressively. And, since a person can only love what he knows, it follows that our love to the Lord can and should develop progressively. It is, therefore, impossible for a child, a youth, or a young adult to obey this commandment in its full sense.

In the *Apocalypse Explained* we read, “All who are in love to the Lord from the Lord are in the third or inmost heaven; and they are such as have truths written in the life” (op. cit. 827). And again, “They who are in goods of life from celestial affection are in love to the Lord” (*Apocalypse Explained* 445:2). It is clear from these two teachings that only celestial angels are in full compliance with the first commandment. How many people on earth are in goods of life from celestial affection and have truths written in the life?

Since only those who are in advanced stages of regeneration or spiritual rebirth can be in a life according to this commandment, we may wonder why it is stated in the way it is. Yet it could not be stated otherwise. This commandment is a statement of the ultimate goal of human life—the end to which we should be looking and striving throughout our lives. In other words, the Lord is telling people in this commandment that the purpose of life is fulfilled when we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We can be in the intention and effort to live according to this commandment. And it should be comforting to know that the Lord accepts the intention for the fact.

But does this mean that we cannot love the Lord until we reach an advanced state of regeneration? While it is true that we cannot love Him in fullness until we reach the celestial state, we can, nevertheless, love the Lord at all times in our lives, in a less full and complete manner. The Heavenly Doctrine defines love to the Lord in many different ways, and as we examine these definitions we will see that we can love the Lord as a child, in our youth and as adults. We read, “By ‘loving the Lord’ is meant to love to do His commandments” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 556). Again, “To love the Lord is to live according to His commandments” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10829). “He who believes he loves the Lord, and does not live according to His commandments, is very much mistaken, for to live according to the Lord’s commandments is to love Him. These commandments are truths which are from the Lord, thus in which the Lord is; and therefore in so far as they are loved, that is, in so far as men live according to them from love, so far the Lord is loved” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10578:3). The Lord Himself taught this clearly and powerfully when He was in the world, saying, “If you love Me, keep My commandments. He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. He who does not love Me does not keep My words” (John 14:14:15, 21, 24).

Here is a very practical, down to earth way in which we can love the Lord from day to day, beginning in childhood and continuing throughout life. But to the natural mind it is not very appealing. Our natural person would like to experience a warm personal relationship rather than a life of obedience to commandments. But, we are told, “Loving the Lord as a person, and not loving uses, is loving the Lord from oneself, which is not loving” (*Love* xiii). “An evil man as well as a good man can love the Lord as a person, and the neighbor likewise can be loved as to the person...” (*Wisdom* xi). “In heaven by loving the Lord is not meant loving Him in respect of His person, but loving the good which is from Him, and loving good is willing good and doing it from love” (*Heaven and Hell* 15). The love of the Lord as a person does not conjoin a person with heaven (*Apocalypse Explained* 1099:3).

These teachings show us that the feelings of guilt and inadequacy, which we may have in relation to loving the Lord, arise from a mistaken and false idea of what loving the Lord is. Indeed, we see from these teachings that the love which we would like to feel is in fact not really love to the Lord—not the kind of love that the Lord desires from us for our own sakes. What we are thinking of is more an external emotion than a spiritual love. Evil people as well as good people are capable of feeling the former, but not the latter.

Another well known teaching is that the Lord is the Word, as stated in the opening verses of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). To love the Lord, therefore, is to love the Word. So keeping the first commandment involves teaching children the stories of the Word in a sphere of affection. It also involves treating the books of the Word with reverence and respect. In addition, for youths and adults, it involves regularly reading and meditating on the Word of God. Think about the statement made earlier—that we can only love what we know. If we are going to love the Word we must know it. We can know it somewhat by hearing it read in services of worship and in classes. But if we are really going to know the Word, we must read it for ourselves, regularly. We should also note that it is called the “Word of God” or the “Word of the Lord” because it contains the Lord’s words. It is the Lord speaking to people. By giving us a written Word, the Lord has provided us with a means of being in daily communication with Him. As we read the Word in this spirit, the Lord can communicate His wisdom and His love to us.

In the Heavenly Doctrine we are told, “To believe in the Lord is to imbue one’s understanding with the truths of faith; and...to love the Lord is to imbue one’s will with the goods of love; and...this cannot be done except by learning truths from the Word, by willing them, and by doing them” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10645:2). “To live according to Divine truths from the Word is to love the Lord” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10551:2). “People should know that the good going forth from the Lord is a likeness of Himself because He is in it, and that those who make good and truth the principles of their life by intention and action become likenesses of Him and are conjoined to Him” (*Heaven and Hell* 16). Again we read: “In [the third] heaven love to the Lord is willing and doing Divine truth, for Divine truth is the Lord in heaven” (*Heaven and Hell* 271).

The truth that loving the Lord is loving the truths of the Word and living them is further emphasized in this teaching from *Divine Providence*,

To love the Lord above all things consists solely in doing no evil to the Word for the reason that the Lord is the Word, or to the holy things of the church for the reason that the Lord is in the holy things of the church, or to the soul of any one for the reason that every one's soul is in the Lord's hand. Those who shun these evils as monstrous sins love the Lord above all things (94).

These teachings make loving the Lord a practical matter of life. Regularly reading the Word and reflecting on the truths we learn from it with a view to applying them to our daily lives—these are things we are able to do.

Yet many people do not do these things on a regular daily basis. To the extent that this is the case the first and great commandment—the one upon which all else depends—is not being observed. There are probably many causes—but probably one principal cause. Numerous passages in the Heavenly Doctrine make it very plain that innocence is a prerequisite to loving the Lord and to all spiritual development. We read, “The good of innocence is the only thing that receives the Lord, because without the good of innocence, love to the Lord is not possible, nor charity toward the neighbor, nor faith that has life in it, nor in general any good in which is the Divine” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10131). To be in innocence is to acknowledge, not with the mouth but with the heart, that all good is from the Lord, that all truth, all intelligence and wisdom are from Him alone, and that people of themselves, that is, apart from the Lord, incline toward nothing but evil. “When a person is in this confession and belief from the heart, the Lord flows in with good and truth and insinuates...a heavenly proprium [will]” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3994). “The ascription of all things to the Lord opens the interiors of a person toward heaven...from which comes conjunction with the Divine, influx thence, and enlightenment” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10227:2).

To the extent that someone attributes all things to himself and to the natural world or natural causes, the love of self becomes the center and soul of his life. On the other hand, to the extent that someone attributes all things to the Lord, love to the Lord becomes the center and soul of his life (see *Divine Providence* 199e). These passages make it very clear that the development and preservation of innocence should be one of our primary concerns. We must do all in our power to see that the children entrusted to our care are protected against the loss of innocence, and we should develop it in ourselves. For if we ascribe all that is good to the Lord and desire to be led by Him, then we will go to the Word so that He may teach and lead us. And ascribing all things to the Lord is loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

The Heavenly Doctrine also defines loving the Lord in terms of loving uses. We read, “Heavenly love is loving uses for the sake of uses, or goods for the sake of goods, which are done by a person for the church, his country, human society, and a fellow citizen; for this is loving God and the neighbor since all uses and all goods are from God and are the neighbor who is to be loved” (*Heaven and Hell* 557). Therefore, “to love the Lord and the neighbor means in general to perform uses” (*Heaven and Hell* 112). These passages emphasize that uses must be loved and done for *their own sake*. When they are done for the sake of self or reward they actually destroy the delight of good which flows in from the Lord (*Arcana Coelestia* 3816). Is there any way in which we can know whether the uses we perform are for their own sake or for the sake of self and reward? The Heavenly Doctrine says,

Let [a person] know that he is performing uses for the sake of uses in the measure in which he flees from evils; for so far as he flees from evils he performs uses not for himself, but from the Lord.... This has been said to show that although a person does not sensibly perceive whether the uses which he performs are for the sake of use or for the sake of self...still he can know it by this, whether or not he considers evils to be sins. If he regards them as sins, and for that reason abstains from doing them, the uses which he does are spiritual (Divine Love and Wisdom 426).

The passage goes on to explain that when a person persists he eventually has an aversion for evil and a perception of delight in the uses themselves. And we are told in a passage which beautifully ties the two great commandments into one that “Loving the Lord is performing uses from Him, and loving the neighbor is performing uses to him”(Love xiii). Here, again, we have a very practical definition of love to the Lord—one that we can apply to our lives. We can all shun evils as sins and perform uses to the neighbor with the acknowledgment that our ability to do good is from the Lord.

In another passage, love to the Lord is defined in this way,

Heavenly love consists in loving what is good, honest and just, because it is good, honest and just, and doing them from love; and those who have this love have a life of goodness, honesty and justice, which is heavenly life. Those who love these things for their own sake, and who do them or live them, love the Lord above all things, because they are from Him (Heaven and Hell 481).

Later, the passage emphasizes that these virtues must be loved for their own sake. They can be acquired and lived for the sake of honor, reputation and gain, in which case they are perverted interiorly, though externally they may appear the same.

There are then, many ways in which we can love the Lord. Or rather, there are many ways in which love to the Lord expresses itself. We can learn His commandments and obey them. We can learn truths from His Word daily, reflect upon their meaning and application to life, and then apply them. From the Word we can learn what evil is and flee from it in intention, thought and deed. We can learn from the Lord in His Word who our neighbor is and how he is to be loved, and then we can perform uses to the neighbor with prudence and discretion, at the same time shunning all thought of merit or reward. We can strive to love and cherish honesty, virtue and justice for their own sakes. We can cherish the holy things of the church and protect them from abuse and profanation in our lives. We can promote the eternal well being of our fellow people. All of these express love to the Lord.

Certainly, there is a difference between this concept of love to the Lord and the kind of love that we feel for people with whom we enjoy a deep personal relationship. Perhaps, in our natural states, it seems that this love to the Lord is not as great or satisfying. We may still feel somewhat frustrated by the thought that loving the Lord in this manner is supposed to be loving Him with all our being. But we must realize that our relationship with the Lord is one of a finite being with an Infinite Being, of a person with God. It cannot be like that of one person with another. I will

conclude with a passage which I think puts this whole matter in perspective and offers us encouragement to keep on striving to fulfill this Divine commandment:

A person who is in the love of self and of the world perceives while he lives in the body a sense of delight from these loves and also in the particular pleasures derived from these loves. But a person who is in love to God and in love toward the neighbor does not perceive, while he lives in the body, any distinct sense of delight from these loves or from the good affections derived from them, but only a blessedness that is hardly perceptible, because it is hidden away in his interiors and veiled by the exteriors pertaining to the body and dulled by the cares of the world. But after death these states are entirely changed.... The obscure delight and almost imperceptible blessedness of those who had been, while in the world, in love to God and in love to the neighbor are then turned into the delight of heaven, and become in every way perceived and felt, for the blessedness that lay hidden and unrecognized in their interiors while they lived in the world is then revealed and brought forth into evident sensation (Heaven and Hell 401).

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