THE GOSPEL READING
Matthew 22:35-46
[The Greatest Commandment]

At that time, a lawyer came up to Jesus and asked him a question, to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put your enemies under your feet’? If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

THE SERMON

Toward the end of His earthly ministry, as Jesus was making His final journey to Jerusalem, He was teaching His disciples and the multitudes about how we ought to live our lives as Christians. Meanwhile, some of the members from the religious establishment of the time, wary of His popularity, began testing Him over His interpretation of the Law of
Moses. He, in response, was teaching them that the true meaning of the Scriptures was not meant as a legalistic rule book, but as a guide as to how to live and love.

As such, a scholar who was an expert in the Law of Moses (here, called a lawyer) asked him, which is the greatest commandment in the law? To answer him, the Lord quotes the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. In that book, the Law given by God to Moses is repeated and summarized, as it emphasizes the most important commandments.

One of the most famous passages of all Scripture for the Jewish people of old, and of today, is found in Deuteronomy (6:4-5), and it is what is called the Shema, or “Hear O Israel.” It is God’s direct calling to His people to hear the heart of God’s will. It says, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God from your whole heart, from your whole soul, and from your whole power.”

God commanded the Israelites to teach this principle to their children daily and in all life circumstances. This commandment appears three times in Deuteronomy, which shows its importance. It also demonstrates that the Old Testament is not disconnected from the New Testament. While the former is a preparation for the latter, the emphasis on the love of God is the foundation of both. In this way, Jesus brings a much deeper understanding of what the love of the Father toward us means, and what it means to love one another.

What does it mean to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind? Jesus Christ is the image of God the Father and the Bestower of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of His Person. As such, it is by the Lord’s example that we learn how to love God with our whole being. It is in Him also that we find the power of God’s grace to fulfill that commandment.

Jesus came to save and heal all of us because of His love for us. He humbled Himself, concealing His glory as He took on human nature to destroy death. The Son of God who holds the entire universe in His hand, became an infant, held in the hands of the Theotokos and dependent upon her for care and nourishment. Though without sin, He suffered the limitations of human nature, experiencing hunger, pain, and exhaustion, all to serve us in His love. He suffered and was buried for us. He rose on the third day for us. He ascended to heaven, and He will come again for us, because He loves us.

Christ came to serve and not to be served. He did so because of His love for the Father who sent Him, and His love for us, whom He brings back to the Father. In Jesus, therefore, we have the example of what it means to love God with our whole being. We love Him in total dependence upon Him. We love Him as a child who relies on their parents, with love and reverence. We love God with our thoughts, our words, and our actions.

Christ, as the Son, loves God the Father with all His thoughts. He is the Word of God, and so He embodies the fullness of the truth. To imitate Him means devoting our minds to understanding truth, goodness, and beauty in all our thoughts and curiosity.
Christ loves God with all His heart. He does not have any hatred towards anyone. He loves God with all His will. All He desires to do is to honor the Father with sacrificial love. He does not desire anything sinful, selfish, or damaging to Himself or others. He loves God with all His strength.

Christ’s life, His efforts, His suffering, His sole purpose, is to love God and His people, to sacrifice all for the ultimate benefit of others, even of his enemies. Therefore, it is in the Lord Jesus that we learn what it means to love God with our whole selves and to love our fellow human beings (the meaning of “neighbor”) as we love ourselves. Notice also that to truly love our neighbor, we need to first properly love ourselves. Without selfishness and pride, without considering ourselves better than others, without putting our desires before the good of others. That is not the Christian way of self-love. To love ourselves means to care for our health — physically, mentally, and spiritually. If we love ourselves in a healthy way, we are able to love others in concrete ways, to serve them selflessly as the Lord does. As we do so, we also begin to love God with everything we are.

When we are open and accepting to the love of God, we in turn, love ourselves. As we open our hearts to God in prayer, in the Holy Sacraments, in the Scriptures, and in the life of the Church, we begin to be transformed and helped by the Holy Spirit. This allows us to see ourselves in the light of God’s love and others in the same light. In the words of Saint Augustine of Hippo, “...if a man loves his neighbor, it follows that he loves God also.”

Our neighbor is every human being we encounter. To love God is to love everyone. To imitate Christ is to show kindness and care for those in need, whoever they may be. He shows mercy to us because of His goodness, while we show mercy to one another because of God’s goodness given to us. This is how we inherit eternal life.