

Knowledge of God is Achieved through Love for Him (Christoforos Papadopoulos, Theologian)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



It's been said that good is to be identified with God, and that therefore knowledge of it is tantamount to knowledge of God. And because God's a person, not an idea, knowledge of Him is realized through personal communication with Him. The more we love God the more we know Him and this knowledge of God then becomes love again[i]. Just as God loves us completely, so does He want us to love Him. This is expressed in the first commandment: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind'. We're called to love God with all the powers of mind, body and soul, with everything that makes us who we are.



The way for us to prosper in God's love is to observe His commandments. But this progression in God's love is achieved gradually, through harsh trials. This is due to our inability to love truly, because we live in a fallen state in which the passions reign and where we have to threaten and overcome our self-love. Trials, sorrows and temptations test our freedom as to whether we'll remain faithful to our love for God or for ourselves. Christ says that if we want to follow Him we must deny our self. This doesn't mean that we should stop loving our self, but that if we truly want to demonstrate that love we must deny 'the impassioned and mindless love for the body'[ii], in other words self-love, the passions and desires that besiege our self. This is possible only through emptying oneself and offering oneself entirely to God (as Christ did first, on the Cross).

God gave a second command, which is as great as the first: love for others. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' means that there is, indeed, love for the self. On a moral level, this means loving others as we love ourselves, but on an ontological level, on which Christian morality acts, it means we must love them as if they were, indeed, ourselves. There must be no distinction between the other and the self, because the other is the self in Christ. By the same token, love for God is inconceivable without love of your neighbour, just as is the reverse, that you can't love your neighbour without loving God[iii]. These two always go together[iv].



According to George Mantzaridis, there are three kinds of love: selfish, natural and selfless. In the first, you don't love unless you hope that your love will be returned. Fair exchange [i.e. the real meaning of 'retribution' WJL] implies money, praise, pleasure, social recognition or even personal psychological satisfaction. Great and selfless though this love might seem, the motive for it is self-interest, and so it remains imperfect. In the second case, people love because of natural sympathy, as with parents who love their children and so on. This is also imperfect. In the third instance, people love without any particular self-interest and this love is perfect, springing, as it does from God or from virtue.

In the first spiritual stages, when people are activated by selfishness, the fear of God precedes the acquisition of love for Him. Christianity is roundly criticized because fear acts as a coercive factor. For Christian morality, however, which is dynamic by nature, the fear of God is necessary for the transition from selfishness to unselfishness, which is what characterizes moral independence. People under the influence of the passions can't love God with their whole being, since their mind inclines to those passions. Cleansing from the passions and progress in love are made possible through fear. At this stage people are, indeed, under outside control, but are simultaneously being trained to acquire that perfect and unselfish love, which 'drives out fear'[v]. First we observe God's commandments out of fear,

then later from love[vi]. In this way we acquire perfect fear, which is the fruit of the presence of Grace, and, instead of controlling us, this fear liberates us from all worldly fear. The first fear we must be freed from is that of death. As long as this fear exists, people will be selfish and will sin. Only by transcending it can there be unselfishness. With faith in Christ and hope in the resurrection, the prospect of death changes. We no longer fear it, we stand before it and face it with courage and the boldness we have because of Christ's triumph over it. This is why the source of true, perfect and unselfish love is God. True love can't exist apart from God because He alone is immortal, eternal and really completely free.

[i] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, On the Soul and the Resurrection, PG 46, 96C: 'while knowledge becomes love'.

[ii] Maximos the Confessor, Chapters on Love, 3, 8, PG 90, 1020A.

[iii] 'If people say that they love God, yet they hate their neighbour, they are lying' I Jn. 4, 20.

[iv] 'those who love the Lord loved their neighbour first. For the latter is proof of the former', Abba Dorotheos, Instruction 4, 1, PG 88, 1157D.

[v] I Jn. 4, 18.

[vi] Abba Anthony said: 'I no longer fear God but love Him. For love drives out fear'