

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time-A

Today we come to the end of the 22nd chapter of Matthew's Gospel. This chapter has been an extended disagreement between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees. The argument is about religion, what is the right and true religion. Jesus keeps distinguishing his own approach from that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

This chapter closes on the high point as *a scholar of the law tests him by asking, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* This in itself is interesting, back in Jesus time this was a kind of favorite debating ploy or technique. Can you sum up the law in one or two lines? In fact, among the Rabbis, there was a funny practice: they'd say can you sum up the entire law while standing on one foot? This was a challenge to be succinct. There were 613 laws governing everyday life in Jesus time. These types of questions were a measure of your ability to see to the very heart of the matter.

We know well Jesus' answer: *He said to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with your entire mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."*

Keep in mind that this is not just another Rabbi speaking, this is not one opinion among many, this rather is the very Logos of God speaking, God's own Son; telling us what is at the very heart of the matter. Here at the end of the 22nd chapter of Matthew, we are on very holy ground. I recommend you take time to read this at home. Jesus himself telling us what is at the heart of the law.

So, we must love the Lord our God with everything in us: every power, every capacity, every skill, and every bit of energy within us. These should be directed toward the love of God holding nothing back—accepting no competition. God must be the all-embracing power of our lives.

We've heard this in different ways in the gospel, but let's give it more precision as we stand on this very holy ground.

There is a line from St. Bernard, I have always found helpful; He said in light of this gospel: The goal of the spiritual life is this—to love God alone for the sake of God alone. What does Bernard mean here? He means that God is not only the center of our lives, setting aside the usual competitions of money, sex, power and pleasure, but more importantly that I love God for his own sake. To illustrate what he is trying to say, Bernard distinguishes between three types of relationships: The relationship between a slave and his master, the relationship of a student to his teacher, and finally the relationship of spouse to spouse, of wife and husband.

What characterizes the first relationship—servant or slave to master? Someone looking on from a distance could say: that servant really loves his master because he does whatever the master wants. He goes along with him. Both are in total agreement, the servant loves his master. Bernard says this is not real—if you look more closely you see that the slave fears his master. He is afraid of him. A slave could be exiled, punished, sold off or even killed. So the slave does what his master says, not because he loves him but because he fears him.

The second type of relationship is that of student to teacher. Here we are at a more humane level than master-slave, the student is someone who respects his/her teacher; looks up to him and admires him. Someone looking on from a distance might say that the student really loves his/her teacher because the student obeys completely and imitates the teacher, following all instructions. This is true but why? It's out of respect, admiration, and a desire to learn. The student wants wisdom and direction—and, of course, a good grade and approval.

Now we come to the third kind of relationship: that of husband and wife, spouse to spouse, we have moved beyond fear and mere respect to the highest level of love. The husband says to his wife: my life is about you; you are the center of my life, I love you, not because I am afraid of you, not because I simply respect you, but because you are worthy of love. I let go of myself for your sake. The wife looks back at her husband and says the same thing. It is at this level, we are talking about loving someone for his or her sake alone.

St. Bernard's question is: Can these three forms of relationship be applied to the spiritual life? A lot of people claim to love God with their whole heart, soul and mind, who do not, in fact, love God at all. Rather, they are at the level of a slave or the level of a student.

Some people are very religious and someone looking on from the outside would say that person really loves God. He does whatever God wants; he follows all God's commands. And why? Perhaps because he is afraid of God; afraid of what God might do; afraid of what God might take away from him, afraid of God's punishment. That person is obeying God **but** the way a slave would obey his master—not out of love but primarily out of fear.

There are moments when a childlike awe and respect for God are indeed most appropriate. But this cannot be the ultimate basis for our relationship with Him. God wants us to come up higher.

The second level of student-teacher can be appropriate to a certain extent because we want to learn something, grow in the spiritual life, we want to gain wisdom and get to heaven. This level still contains a bit of self-interest. We will get something if we obey and respect God. But is this enough? No says St. Bernard. We still do not love God for his own sake.

What does God want? You see it so clearly in the New Testament. In John's Gospel, at the end of his life, Jesus says to his disciples: *I no longer call you servants but friends*. There it is! Anticipating Bernard's distinction, Jesus tells us that he does not want to relate to us as a master whom we fear. Rather, he calls us friends. A friend is someone who loves his friend for his own sake. My dear brothers and sisters, this is the heart of our faith: Almighty God, despite the infinite difference between us and Him, nevertheless wants to be our friend.

This final stage of the spiritual life comes when we, in the fullest sense, fall in love with God; it is when we accept the gift of authentic divine friendship.

And of course, I cannot end without referring to the second great commandment. Why must we love our neighbor as we love ourselves? It is because God loves them. He loves our neighbors and all of His creation. In becoming a friend of God, we automatically become the friends of all whom God loves. You cannot love God and despise your neighbor as St. John tells us

Write these commandments on your hearts for they are the source of an authentic spiritual life.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella