

February 2006

Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that [Jesus] had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments *is*: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And 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. And the second, like *it*, *is* this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." So the scribe said to Him, "Well *said*, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him. (*St. Mark 12:28-34*)

As I prepared the calendar for February I was struck by the events that are associated or speak of love. The most obvious is Valentine's Day when we celebrate and declare our love for those whom we love and hold near and dear in our lives. But there are some less obvious connections with love, some that are more easily discerned in view of the Scripture passage above. February is also the month in which the birthdays of two of our greatest Presidents occur – Lincoln on the 12th and Washington on the 22nd. But wait, there is more, for though it is not exactly in February, you will see the cross with Christ signifying the beginning of Lent on March 1st. All these are connected with love – God's love for us and our love for Him as we shall see.

In the Scripture passage Jesus is questioned during Holy Week, the week that culminates in His sufferings and death on Good Friday and His entombment for three days. This is a time of heightened hostility towards Him on the part of the religious leaders. But there is one who does not appear to be seeking Jesus' life as much as he is seeking the truth. He asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment and Jesus responds with the Shema, the Jewish confession of the one God and the worshiper's responsibility to love Him with one's whole being and to love one's fellow man as oneself.

Notice the order of Jesus' answer. He first confesses God and then proceeds to speak of man's love toward God. In this we see an order that underlies the whole of the Christian life. We love, the Apostle John writes, because God first loved us. That love of God has been revealed to us in His Son Jesus Christ our Savior "for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Without this love of God we would not be able to love Him or our fellow man or woman since we would not know love.

God's love for us is shown not just in His Son and the salvation and forgiveness that is ours through faith in His name. God's love is also revealed to us in giving us loved one, in giving us those who govern and lead our nation, in giving us all that we need for this body and this life. In other words, in all that God does toward us in our spiritual and physical lives, we see His love manifested toward us for the sake of Jesus Christ His beloved Son.

We may not always think about it this way, however. How many of us when we think of the President or the government think of it as a matter of God's love for us? How many of us when sitting in the classroom think of the teacher, as he or she is piling on the homework, as a matter

of God loving us? How many of us when being disciplined by our parents or corrected by Pastor think of it as a matter of God loving us? How many of us when enduring afflictions and difficult times think of it as God loving us? Not many of us I would suspect because we don't understand love in this way normally. We usually see love as only involving the kind, the nice, and the accommodating.

But consider this – wherein do we see and learn of God's love the most? Do not the Scriptures reveal that God's love is revealed in its fullness in the Christ of the cross, in His Son who hangs on that accursed tree beaten, bloodied, and battered for our salvation? On the surface there is nothing kind, nice, and accommodating about that until we look a little deeper and see that behind the horrific picture of the crucified is the heart of God beating, suffering, and dying for us and our eternal salvation. There in Jesus, the Only-begotten of the Father, the Son of God made flesh who dwelled among us, is God's love for all to see and rejoice in through faith.

For in Jesus who suffered and died on the cross, giving His entire being for our salvation, we have forgiveness for our sins, even for the times we have been unloving. For we know that none of us has loved God with all our heart, mind, and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. We know how much we struggle and lose to love others and love God first in our lives. We know this and, in fact, are probably reminded of this on Valentine's Day. But remarkably, is any of that ever brought up on Valentine's Day? Have you ever received a card spelling out all the ways that you have failed to love your wife, husband, loved one? Not likely for love covers sins does it not, just as the love of God for us in Jesus has covered ours through faith in His name.

With such love we as the children of God, as those who have been loved with an everlasting love, love. We show our love for God as we thank Him for all the blessings He daily pours out on us from health to weather, from leaders to workers, from family to friends. Loving God is shown in keeping the commandments, whether the 4th which deals with authorities like Presidents, teachers, parents, and pastors or the 6th which deals with marriage, husbands, and wives or any of the others. We strive to do this by the Spirit's grace not just on Valentine's Day, not just on days designated to honor past Presidents, but everyday because God's love for us is daily and forever.

God grant that we live in that love rejoicing in the forgiveness and salvation that is ours through faith in Jesus who loved us so much that He suffered and died on the cross and rose the third day to bring us to heaven to live with Him there.

Kindest Regards in Christ, our Loving Lord and Savior,

Pastor Cullen
Hebrews 13.20-21