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ST. THEOPHAN THE RECLUSE: HOW TO LOVE CHRIST

How did St. John the Theologian attain such lofty love for the Lord and become a model of love for all of us? I think that he did this in the same way that people begin to love one another. They see the beauty and goodness of a person and become attracted to them with all their heart. In like manner St. John saw the beauty of the Lord and was attracted to Him. He sensed the Lord's special love for him and likewise was inflamed with love for Him. He saw the great, wondrous, and fruitful works of the Lord and, moved by fervent piety, he became completely devoted to Him. He tasted the sweetness of love for Him and, immersed with his whole heart in this love, took rest in it. Here follows the path of ascent in love for the Lord. Let us enter upon it, and in the end we will acquire it.

First: St. John saw the beauty of the Lord and was attracted to it. In the same manner love among people is born. They see someone's beauty, spiritual or physical, and begin to love one another. Let us lift up our mind to the contemplation of the Lord's beauty, and surely we will not remain cold and indifferent towards Him. The Lord's beauty is the sum total of all His perfection. "Look and observe, what does the Lord lack?" says St. Tikhon of Zadonsk. Anything that you might desire can be found with the Lord in indescribable and unlimited fullness. Do you seek blessedness? He has eternal and true blessedness. Are you seeking beauty? "Comely art Thou in beauty more than the sons of men" (Ps. 44:3). Do you seek nobility? Who is more noble

Opposite: Painting of St. Theophan the Recluse, Holy Dormition Monastery, Vysha, Ryazan, Russia.

than the Son of God? Are you looking for honor? Who has more honor or is more elevated than the King of the heavens? Do you seek wisdom? He is the Person (Hypostasis) of God's Wisdom. Do you want gladness? He is the joy and gladness of blessed spirits and the chosen of God. Do you need comfort? Who can comfort you more than the Lord Jesus? Do you seek rest? Here is the eternal rest of those souls that love Him. Do you want life? He is the fountain of life. Are you afraid of being lost? He is the way. Do you fear deception? He is Truth. Are you in fear of death? He is life as He Himself assures us: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In short, all the perfection, beauty, and goodness that the human soul could love is found in Him. Force your mind to grasp this and, you will not be able to do otherwise than love the Lord. St. Catherine the Great Martyr promised to love the one in whom she would see the same wealth that she possessed, the same beauty, the same wisdom she boasted of, expecting that in the whole world she would not find such a person. But when she came to know the Lord, she saw that compared to His beauty, wisdom, and wealth her own was nothing and contemptible. She then gave herself completely to Him, clinging to Him and offering herself to Him as a sacrifice.

Secondly, St. John the Theologian, sensing the Lord's love for him, was inflamed with love for Him. Sincere and selfless love, when experienced from another, always inspires a corresponding feeling. Let us experience the Lord's love and kindle our love for Him. "What did the Son of God not do for us?" asks St. Tikhon. "What did He not attain for us? What did He not bear and suffer for the sake of our poor and needy souls? What labors and sufferings did He not take upon Himself in order to bring us, who had fallen away, to His Heavenly Father? He came down from Heaven in order to raise us, who had been cast out of Paradise, up to Heaven. For our sake He was born in the flesh in order to bring us unto Himself through spiritual regeneration. He humbled Himself for our sake, in order to lift us up. He became impoverished, in order to enrich us wretched ones. He suffered dishonor and wounds in order to heal and glorify us. He died for us in order to give life to us who were dead. Behold what condescension and humility His perfect love and sympathetic mercy brought Him to." Has not each one of us experienced this movement of God's love? How often have we fled from this love by sinning? Every time, because of one phrase, "I am guilty and will not do it again," have we been reunited through His mercy. How many times have we angered Him by giving into the temptation of the delights of this world? Then when we turned to Him again we were admitted to the Lord's Table, to partake of His Body and drink His

Blood. Is this not the embrace of His merciful love? Christ is among us in our everyday life. Who among us has not experienced His caring nearness to us, in deliverance from misfortune, illness, sorrow, difficult circumstances, in all needs spiritual and physical? Is it possible not to respond to such great love and turn to One who so untiringly loves us? Is it possible because of distraction and inattention to forget about the Lord's love for us? Having known and remembered this love, it is then impossible not to experience a feeling of love for the Lord no matter how calloused one's heart might be. He who continually walks in the presence of God's love will always be kindled with love for Him. Such is the nature of love!

Thirdly: St. John tasted the sweetness of love for the Lord and with perfect peace rested on his breast. Love is in itself a gift which can be compared with no other. It brings a blessing which is higher than anything in heaven or on earth. The Lord says, "He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him, and If a man love Me, he will keep My words: and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him" (John 14:21,23). How comforting are these words! What great and exalted promises the Son of God offers to those who love Him—that the true lover of Christ will share in friendship with the Father and His Son! The human mind cannot fathom God's goodness. God Who is great, endless, and unattainable, desires to have friendship with man whom He created and who is His slave. He desires to have friendship as long as man does not reject it ..."fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ", writes St. John (I John 13). Where the Son and the Father are, there also the Holy Spirit is not excluded. Behold what the love of Christ attains! He who loves is worthy to be the dwelling and home of of the Most Holy Trinity. The Tri-Hypostatic God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - is well disposed to dwell in man by Grace. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him (I John 4:16). Blessed indeed is such a heart! Even here on the earth it feels joy which is abundantly poured forth into the hearts of the chosen unto eternal life. The heart tastes the very essence of "how good the Lord is" and possesses that which is meant by the words, The Kingdom of God is within you.

For there where God is, is also all that belongs to Him. If God is within you because of your love, then you will have His justification for your sins, deliverance from your captivity, peace instead of your evil conscience, joy

instead of your misery, comfort instead of your sorrow, justification at God's judgment, assistance against your enemies, wisdom and intelligence instead of confusion and ignorance, strength in your weakness. If the Lord dwells in you for the sake of your love, then who can be against you, what harm can befall you? If He is your peace, then who can disturb you? If He is your joy and comfort, then who or what can cause you sorrow? If He is your strength, then who can overcome you? If He is your King, then who can subjugate you? "If God is with us then who can be against us," boldly exclaims St. Paul together with all those who love the Lord (Rom. 8:31). Such is love, and behold what it brings with it! Those who enter into the love of the Lord feel that they are more and more filled and perfected. For love is the bond of perfectness (Col. 3:14).

If you desire to love the Lord then strive to contemplate with your mind His beauty, or the fullness of His perfection, sense the warmth of His love and taste the sweetness of love itself with your heart. One cannot learn love, it takes place in the hidden places of the heart. It is sown in secret and ripens unobserved, like seed cast on the ground which sprouts without the knowledge of the sower, bringing forth a stem, an ear of grain and seed in the ear. Love is sown mysteriously, always, however, from the effect on the heart, the object of love. Turn your mind in your heart to the radiant, visage of the Lord, full of love and worthy of love, and from His eyes a spark will descend into your heart and kindle it with love for Him. He who stands by a fire is warmed by it, and he who turns to the Lord with his mind and heart is warmed by the fervor of His love, and himself begins to return a warm disposition towards Him. ...The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts... (Rom. 5:5), the Apostle Paul teaches. Love is a gift, but a gift prepared for everyone who seeks it: only desire it and seek, and immediately you will receive it. Just as the Lord embraces everyone, so it is impossible not to love Him. However, since not everyone turns to Him and seeks Him, so not everyone loves Him. For indeed He loved us first, and therefore we should love Him.

Let us dwell on these things brethren, and force ourselves to love the Lord with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our strength. Even better, let us arouse the love for Him sleeping in us and bring it out into action to be seen by us and everyone. Amen.

May 8, 1864

The feast of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist. Translated from the Russian original, "Bogougodnaya zhizn voobshche", *Sermons of Bishop Theophan the Recluse*. ✦