

## JESUS TESTED BY A JEWISH LAWYER

Matthew 22:35-46

**“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**

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In today's Gospel a Jewish lawyer approaches our Savior with the evil intention to try to discredit Him. The lawyer begins by asking our Savior to identify the greatest commandment. Our Savior answers rightly according to Jewish Law by reciting the Shema<sup>1</sup>. The Shema Yisrael is a Jewish prayer (known as **the Shema**) that serves as a centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services. The text is found in Deuteronomy 6:4 and consists of the following: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The Lord then adds a second great commandment, which is that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Our Savior states that “on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” Now it is our Savior's turn to ask a question. The Lord quotes Psalm 109:1 (Septuagint) which says, “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, til I make your enemies your footstool.’” The Christian understanding of this verse is that it is a messianic reference to Jesus Himself.<sup>2</sup> Jesus, the Son of God, sits at the right hand of the Father. David, who is the author of the psalms, uses the words “The Lord said to my Lord,” and this results in great confusion and consternation among the Pharisees, the legal experts of Jesus' time, and they are unable to offer any interpretation. The Gospel reading ends by saying that from that day no one dared to ask Him any more questions.

Why is the Shema the great prayer of Israel? Why does the prayer call on us to have love for God in our hearts? The heart is the spiritual center of a man. The heart is the source of a person's holiest feelings, as well as the source of inclinations towards sin. Therefore, the disposition of the heart is tantamount to spiritual well being. How many problems and difficulties can be conquered, internal and external, if the love of God reigns supreme in the heart? What does it mean to love someone? Doesn't it mean to think often about that person? Doesn't it mean that the greatest joy is to be with that person? If letters exist from one's beloved, aren't they often read and re-read? Isn't it the same if we truly love God? Won't we often think about God? Won't we go to church as often as we can so that we can be in His presence? Won't we find solace and joy by reading His holy words in the Holy Scriptures? Forgive me if I suggest that perhaps all of us, myself included, could do a better job trying to cultivate love for God in our hearts. We can begin by looking at His Precious and Life-giving Cross which is before us today. How can we not be moved by so great a love, that the Divine Son of God willing suffered and offered up His life for our sake? Even the Roman centurion and those who were with him were filled by awe when they beheld Jesus dying on the Cross, saying “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54).

In response to the lawyer, Jesus adds the commandment to love our neighbor as oneself. What does it mean to love oneself? Does it mean to buy things for ourselves, or to be egotistical and think that we are better than others, or to put ourselves first before others, or to indulge our passions and desires? I'm quite certain that this is not what Jesus had in mind. If we truly love ourselves, it means that we will attend to our spiritual lives and make it our priority to make things right between us and God. In other words, it means exactly what it says in the Shema, that we should love God with all our heart, and soul, and might. If we do not first learn to love God, then we cannot truly love our neighbor.

Love of God is not an abstract feeling. Love of God is always expressed by the fact that we have complete faith and trust in Him. It means that we therefore turn to Him in prayer, hoping to receive an answer to our requests, but demanding nothing. In our relationship with God the most important thing is that God's will is more important than our will, that God knows best what we need. God loves us, and if we trust Him and have faith in Him, then He will help guide us towards what is best for us, even though it may not always be what we desire in our limited and clouded perceptions. If we order our lives with this mindset, then we will not have to worry about what is the greatest or the least commandment in the law of God. As Blessed Augustine said, “Love God and do what you want.” This means that if a person truly loves God, then everything else will follow, he will keep all the other commandments in one way or another.

Let us test ourselves every day: do we love God and our neighbor and how do we love God and our neighbor? Let us ask ourselves how we pray, how often we go to Confession and approach the Holy Mysteries of Christ, how often we visit the temple of God, read the Holy Scriptures, and how the Gospel

commandments are embodied in our lives. Let us ask ourselves who our neighbors are, and how we love and help them. Do we know how to sympathize with them, rejoice with them when they rejoice, grieve with them when they grieve, come to the rescue when they need help, regardless of whether they ask for this help or not? Every day and every hour we must ask ourselves how we fulfill those two most important commandments, on which everything else depends: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Amen.

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1. Shema, in the simplest terms, means “to hear.” The Hebrew word pronunciation sounds more like “sh'-mah”. But it also means to obey and take action. So, to hear God is to obey God—and to obey God is to hear God.
  2. On this psalm the Oxford Jewish Study Bible says the following: “A royal psalm...It is quite difficult because v. 3 is totally obscure, and the psalm changes speakers often. In Christian interpretation, it is understood as a reference to Jesus, as a messianic and sometimes eschatological psalm; Radak polemicizes against this view”, “The Jewish Study Bible,” Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors, Oxford University Press, 2014, page 1394.