

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Selections from *On Loving God*

Bernard of Clairvaux organized this treatise into chapters on why we ought to love God and how we ought to love God. Chapter V summarizes the reasons for loving God and chapters XVI-XV describe how to do so.

Chapter V – Of the Christian's debt of love, how great it is

...“What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits towards me?” (Ps. 116.12). Reason and natural justice alike move me to give up myself wholly to loving Him to whom I owe all that I have and am. But faith shows me that I should love Him far more than I love myself, as I come to realize that He hath given me not my own life only, but even Himself. Yet, before the time of full revelation had come, before the Word was made flesh, died on the Cross, came forth from the grave, and returned to His Father; before God had shown us how much He loved us by all this plenitude of grace, the commandment had been uttered, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy might’ (Deut. 6.5), that is, with all thy being, all thy knowledge, all thy powers. And it was not unjust for God to claim this from His own work and gifts. Why should not the creature love his Creator, who gave him the power to love? Why should he not love Him with all his being, since it is by His gift alone that he can do anything that is good? It was God’s creative grace that out of nothingness raised us to the dignity of manhood; and from this appears our duty to love Him, and the justice of His claim to that love. But how infinitely is the benefit increased when we bethink ourselves of His fulfillment of the promise, ‘thou, Lord, shalt save both man and beast: how excellent is Thy mercy, O Lord!’ (Ps. 36.6f.). For we, who ‘turned our glory into the similitude of a calf that eateth hay’ (Ps. 106.20), by our evil deeds debased ourselves so that we might be compared unto the beasts that perish. I owe all that I am to Him who made me: but how can I pay my debt to Him who redeemed me, and in such wondrous wise? Creation was not so vast a work as redemption; for it is written of man and of all things that were made, ‘He spake the word, and they were made’ (Ps. 148.5). But to redeem that creation which sprang into being at His word, how much He spake, what wonders He wrought, what hardships He endured, what shames He

suffered! Therefore what reward shall I give unto the Lord for all the benefits which He hath done unto me? In the first creation He gave me myself; but in His new creation He gave me Himself, and by that gift restored to me the self that I had lost. Created first and then restored, I owe Him myself twice over in return for myself. But what have I to offer Him for the gift of Himself? Could I multiply myself a thousand-fold and then give Him all, what would that be in comparison with God?

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Chapter XIV – Of the law of the love of sons

Now the children have their law, even though it is written, ‘The law is not made for a righteous man’ (I Tim. 1.9). For it must be remembered that there is one law having to do with the spirit of servitude, given to fear, and another with the spirit of liberty, given in tenderness. The children are not constrained by the first, yet they could not exist without the second: even as St. Paul writes, ‘Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father’ (Rom. 8.15). And again to show that that same righteous man was not under the law, he says: ‘To them that are under the law, I became as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ)’ (I Cor. 9.20f). So it is rightly said, not that the righteous do not have a law, but, ‘The law is not made for a righteous man’, that is, it is not imposed on rebels but freely given to those willingly obedient, by Him whose goodness established it. Wherefore the Lord saith meekly: ‘Take My yoke upon you’, which may be paraphrased thus: ‘I do not force it on you, if you are reluctant; but if you will you may bear it. Otherwise it will be weariness, not rest, that you shall find for your souls.’

Love is a good and pleasant law; it is not only easy to bear, but it makes the laws of slaves and hirelings tolerable; not destroying but completing them; as the Lord saith: ‘I am not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill’ (Matt. 5.17). It tempers the fear of the slave, it regulates the desires of the hireling, it mitigates the severity of each. Love is never without fear, but it is godly fear. Love is never without desire, but it is lawful desire. So love perfects the law of service by infusing devotion; it perfects the law of wages by restraining covetousness. Devotion mixed with fear does not destroy it, but

purges it. Then the burden of fear which was intolerable while it was only servile, becomes tolerable; and the fear itself remains ever pure and filial. For though we read: 'Perfect love casteth out fear' (I John 4.18), we understand by that the suffering which is never absent from servile fear, the cause being put for the effect, as often elsewhere. So, too, self-interest is restrained within due bounds when love supervenes; for then it rejects evil things altogether, prefers better things to those merely good, and cares for the good only on account of the better. In like manner, by God's grace, it will come about that man will love his body and all things pertaining to his body, for the sake of his soul. He will love his soul for God's sake; and he will love God for Himself alone.

Chapter XV – Of the four degrees of love, and of the blessed state of the heavenly fatherland

Nevertheless, since we are carnal and are born of the lust of the flesh, it must be that our desire and our love shall have its beginning in the flesh. But rightly guided by the grace of God through these degrees, it will have its consummation in the spirit: for that was not first which is spiritual but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual (I Cor. 15.46). And we must bear the image of the earthly first, before we can bear the image of the heavenly. At first, man loves himself for his own sake. That is the flesh, which can appreciate nothing beyond itself. Next, he perceives that he cannot exist by himself, and so begins by faith to seek after God, and to love Him as something necessary to his own welfare. That is the second degree, to love God, not for God's sake, but selfishly. But when he has learned to worship God and to seek Him aright, meditating on God, reading God's Word, praying and obeying His commandments, he comes gradually to know what God is, and finds Him altogether lovely. So, having tasted and seen how gracious the Lord is (Ps. 34.8), he advances to the third degree, when he loves God, not merely as his benefactor but as God. Surely he must remain long in this state; and I know not whether it would be possible to make further progress in this life to that fourth degree and perfect condition wherein man loves himself solely for God's sake. Let any who have attained so far bear record; I confess it seems beyond my powers. Doubtless it will be reached when the good and faithful servant shall have entered into the joy of his Lord (Matt. 25.21), and been satisfied with the plenteousness of God's house (Ps. 36.8). For then in wondrous wise he will forget himself and as if delivered from self, he will grow wholly God's. Joined unto the Lord, he will then be one spirit with Him (I Cor. 6.17). This was what the prophet meant, I think, when he said: 'I will go forth in the strength of the Lord

God: and will make mention of Thy righteousness only' (Ps. 71.16). Surely he knew that when he should go forth in the spiritual strength of the Lord, he would have been freed from the infirmities of the flesh, and would have nothing carnal to think of, but would be wholly filled in his spirit with the righteousness of the Lord.

In that day the members of Christ can say of themselves what St. Paul testified concerning their Head: 'Yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth we know Him no more' (II Cor. 5.16). None shall thereafter know himself after the flesh; for 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God' (I Cor. 15.50). Not that there will be no true substance of the flesh, but all carnal needs will be taken away, and the love of the flesh will be swallowed up in the love of the spirit, so that our weak human affections will be made divinely strong. Then the net of charity which as it is drawn through the great and wide sea doth not cease to gather every kind of fish, will be drawn to the shore; and the bad will be cast away, while only the good will be kept (Matt. 13.48). In this life the net of all-including love gathers every kind of fish into its wide folds, becoming all things to all men, sharing adversity or prosperity, rejoicing with them that do rejoice, and weeping with them that weep (Rom. 12.15). But when the net is drawn to shore, whatever causes pain will be rejected, like the bad fish, while only what is pleasant and joyous will be kept. Do you not recall how St. Paul said: 'Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is offended and I burn not?' And yet weakness and offense were far from him. So too he bewailed many which had sinned already and had not repented, though he was neither the sinner nor the penitent. But there is a city made glad by the rivers of the flood of grace (Ps. 46.4), and whose gates the Lord loveth more than all the dwellings of Jacob (Ps. 87.2). In it is no place for lamentation over those condemned to everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25.41). In these earthly dwellings, though men may rejoice, yet they have still other battles to fight, other mortal perils to undergo. But in the heavenly Fatherland no sorrow nor sadness can enter: as it is written, 'The habitation of all rejoicing ones is in Thee' (Ps. 87. 7, Vulg.); and again, 'Everlasting joy shall be unto them' (Isa. 61.7). Nor could they recall things piteous, for then they will make mention of God's righteousness only. Accordingly, there will be no need for the exercise of compassion, for no misery will be there to inspire pity.