

**Bernard of Clairvaux**  
**(1090-1153)**

Bernard was one of the great leaders in the history of the Church. He was an eloquent speaker and considered by many to be one of the holiest individuals who ever lived. He grew up in Dijon, France, and at the age of twenty-two entered as a novice in the monastery of Cîteaux. Three years later he was appointed to supervise a group of his fellow monks in the newly founded monastery at Clairvaux. Though he was offered high positions in the church, Bernard remained at Clairvaux until his death.

Thanks to careful preservation over the centuries, many of Bernard's writings have survived today. His works had a profound influence on both Martin Luther and John Calvin. The following reading is taken from his well-known work, his treatise *On the Love of God*. In it Bernard incisively outlines his famous "four degrees of love."

## ON THE LOVE OF GOD

### *Why God Should Be Loved*

You ask me, "Why should God be loved?" I answer: the reason for loving God is God himself. And why should God be loved for his own sake? Simply because no one could be more justly loved than God, no one deserves our love more. Some may question if God deserves our love or if they might have something to gain by loving him. The answer to both questions is yes, but I find no other worthy reason for loving him except himself.

God is entitled to our love. Why? Because he gave himself for us despite the fact that we are so undeserving. What better could he have given? If we ask why God is entitled to our love, we should answer, "Because he first loved us." God is clearly deserving of our love especially if we consider who he is that loves us, who we are that he loves, and how much he loves us.

And who is God? Is he not the one to whom every spirit bears witness: "Thou art my God"? God has no need of our worldly possessions. True love is precisely this: that it does not seek its own interests. And how much does he love us? He so loved the world that he gave his only Son; he laid down his life for us.

### *The First Degree of Love: Love of Self for Self's Sake*

Love is a natural human affection. It comes from God. Hence the first and greatest commandment is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." But human nature is weak and therefore compelled to love itself and serve itself first. In the human realm people love themselves for their own sake. This is planted within us for who ever hated his own self?

But if this love of ourselves becomes too lavish, it will overflow its natural boundaries through excessive love of pleasure. People can easily become slaves to the soul's enemy: lust. This love of self is held in check by the command to love our neighbor. If we cannot love our neighbor because of our love of self, then we must restrain our lusts and give to our neighbor's needs. Your love will then be temperate when you take from yourself and give to your neighbor.

But what will you do if your own needs are not met? Will you look to God to meet your needs? God promises that those who seek first the kingdom and his righteousness will have all things added unto them. God promises that to those who restrict themselves and give to their neighbor, he will give whatever is necessary. Seeking first the kingdom means to prefer to bear the yoke of modesty and restraint rather than allow sin to reign in your mortal body.

In order to love our neighbor we must see that God is the cause of our love. How can we have a pure love for our neighbor if we do not love him in God? And you cannot love your neighbor unless you love God. God must be loved first in order that we may love our neighbor in God.

*The Second Degree of Love: Love of God for Self's Sake*

God, therefore, who makes everything that is good, makes himself to be loved. He does it as follows: first, God blesses us with his protection. When we live free from trouble we are happy, but in our pride we may conclude that we are responsible for our security. Then, when we suffer some calamity, some storm in our lives, we turn to God and ask his help, calling upon him in times of trouble. This is how we who only love ourselves first begin to love God. We will begin to love God even if it is for our own sake. We love God because we have learned that we can do all things through him, and without him we can do nothing.

*The Third Degree of Love: Love of God for God's Sake*

In the first degree of love we love ourselves for our own sake. In the second degree of love we love God for our own sake, chiefly because he has provided for us and rescued us. But if trials and tribulations continue to come upon us, every time God brings us through, even if our hearts were made of stone, we will begin to be softened because of the grace of the Rescuer. Thus, we begin to love God not merely for our own sakes, but for himself.

In order to arrive at this we must continually go to God with our needs and pray. In those prayers the grace of God is tasted, and by frequent tasting it is proved to us how sweet the Lord is. Thus it happens that once God's sweetness has been tasted, it draws us to the pure love of God more than our needs compel us to love him. Thus we begin to say, "We now love God, not for our necessity, for we ourselves have tasted and know how sweet the Lord is."

When we begin to feel this, it will not be hard to fulfill the second commandment: to love our neighbor. For those who truly love God in this way also love the things of God. Also, it becomes easier to be obedient in all of the commands of God. We begin to love God's commands and embrace them.

This love is pure because it is disinterested (i.e., not offered in order to obtain something). It is pure because it is not merely in our words that we begin to serve, but in our actions. We love because we are loved. We care for others because Jesus cares for us.

We have obtained this degree when we can say, "Give praise to the Lord for he is good, not because he is good to me, but because he is good." Thus we truly love God for

God's sake and not for our own. The third degree of love is the love by which God is now loved for his very self.

#### *The Fourth Degree of Love: Love of Self for God's Sake*

Blessed are we who experience the fourth degree of love wherein we love ourselves for God's sake. Such experiences are rare and come only for a moment. In a manner of speaking, we lose ourselves as though we did not exist, utterly unconscious of ourselves and emptied of ourselves.

If for even a moment we experience this kind of love, we will then know the pain of having to return to this world and its obligations as we are recalled from the state of contemplation. In turning back to ourselves we will feel as if we are suffering as we return into the mortal state in which we were called to live.

But during those moments we will be of one mind with God, and our wills in one accord with God. The prayer, "Thy will be done," will be our prayer and our delight. Just as a little drop of water mixed with a lot of wine seems to entirely lose its own identity as it takes on the taste and color of the wine; just as iron, heated and glowing, looks very much like fire, having lost its original appearance; just as air flooded with the light of the sun is transformed into the same splendor of the light so that it appears to be light itself, so it is like for those who melt away from themselves and are entirely transfused into the will of God.

This perfect love of God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength will not happen until we are no longer compelled to think about ourselves and attend to the body's immediate needs. Only then can the soul attend to God completely. This is why in the present body we inhabit this is difficult to maintain. But it is within God's power to give such an experience to whom he wills, and it is not attained by our own efforts.

#### *Entering into the First, Second, and Third Degrees of Love*

What are the four degrees of love? First, we love ourselves for our own sake; since we are unspiritual and of the flesh we cannot have an interest in anything that does not relate to ourselves. When we begin to see that we cannot subsist by ourselves, we begin to seek God for our own sakes. This is the second degree of love; we love God, but only for our own interests. But if we begin to worship and come to God again and again by meditating, by reading, by prayer, and by obedience, little by little God becomes known to us through experience. We enter into a sweet familiarity with God, and by tasting how sweet the Lord is

we pass into the third degree of love so that now we love God, not for our own sake, but for himself. It should be noted that in this third degree we will stand still for a very long time.

*Can We Attain the Fourth Degree of Love?*

I am not certain that the fourth degree of love in which we love ourselves only for the sake of God may be perfectly attained in this life. But, when it does happen, we will experience the joy of the Lord and be forgetful of ourselves in a wonderful way. We are, for those moments, one mind and one spirit with God.

I am of the opinion that this is what the prophet meant when he said: "I will enter into the power of the Lord: O Lord I will be mindful of Thy justice alone." He felt, certainly, that when he entered into the spiritual powers of the Lord he would have laid aside self and his whole being would, in the spirit, be mindful of the justice of the Lord alone.

When we attain the fourth degree of love, then the net of charity which now, drawn through this great and vast sea, does not cease to gather together fish of every kind, when brought at last to the shore casting forth the bad, will retain only the good. Still, I do not know if we can attain this degree in this life. We live in a world of sorrow and tears and we experience the mercy and comfort of God only in that context. How can we be mindful of mercy when the justice of God alone will be remembered? Where there is no place for misery or occasion for pity, surely there can be no feeling of compassion.

## BIBLE SELECTION

1 John 4:7-21 (NRSV)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

## BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "I LOVE YOU ..."

(Exhale) "... Jesus, I love you."

Try it this way: Imagine God telling you He loves you. Breathe in His love, receiving and feeling it in your body... Breathe out your love in response to Him.

## JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. In your spiritual journey, which of the four stages of love have you encountered? Describe your experience.
2. How does the love that God has for you empower your ability to love God, yourself, and others, considering the proclamation in 1 John that we love because God first loved us?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: The second stage of love is a love of God for self's sake, appreciating God for all that He does rather than for who He is. Bernard suggests that, after enduring trials over the years, one can transition to loving God for God's sake. Rather than waiting for tribulation, create a list of instances when God has brought you through trials. Utilize this list to facilitate your progression into the third degree of love.

## REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

*If anyone deserves to stand beside St. John as an "apostle of love," it has to be Bernard. He wrote some eighty-six sermons on the Song of Solomon as an allegory of divine /human love. His beautiful hymn, "Jesus the Very Thought of Thee," reverberates with the language of divine love.*

*O hope of every contrite heart, O joy of all the meek;  
To those who fall, how kind thou art! How good to those who seek!  
But what to those who find? Ah, this No tongue nor pen can show;  
The love of Jesus, what it is None but His loved ones know.*

*How very appropriate of Bernard to remind us of the centrality of love. We so easily elevate other things to the place of first importance: our big budgets and impressive buildings, our dedicated service to the world, our doctrinal eccentricities. But Bernard cuts through all our ego-strutting activity and calls us again to love God in purity of heart, in sincerity of soul, in holiness of life.*

Excerpts taken from *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, Editors. HarperCollins, 1993.)