

THE FOUR HUNDRED CHAPTERS ON
LOVE

Maximus Confessor

PROLOGUE

Here, Father Elpidius,¹ besides the discourse on the *Ascetic Life*,² I have sent this discourse on love to your Grace, arranged in four centuries³ in equal number to the four Gospels. While it is perhaps not at all worthy of your expectation, it is yet the best I could do. Your Grace should know that these are not the fruit of my own meditation. Instead, I went through the writings of the holy Fathers and selected from them whatever had reference to my subject, summarizing many things in few words so that they can be seen at a glance to be easily memorized. These I have sent to your Grace requesting that you read them with indulgence and look for only what is of profit in them, overlooking a style which lacks charm, and to pray for my modest ability which is bereft of any spiritual profit. I further request that you not be annoyed by anything that is said; I have simply fulfilled an obligation. I say this because there are many of us who give annoyance today by words while those who instruct or receive instruction by deeds are very few.

Rather, please pay careful attention to each chapter. For not all, I believe, are easily understandable by everyone, but the majority will require much scrutiny by many people even though they appear to be very simply expressed. Perhaps it might happen that something useful to the soul will be revealed out of them. This will happen completely from God's grace to the one who reads with an uncomplicated mind, with the fear of God, and with love. But if someone reads this or any other book whatever not for the sake of spiritual profit but to hunt for phrases to reproach the author so that he might then set himself up in his own opinion as wiser than he, such a person will never receive any profit of any kind.

FIRST CENTURY

1. Love⁴ is a good disposition of the soul by which one prefers no being to the knowledge⁵ of God. It is impossible to reach the habit of this love if one has any attachment to earthly things.

2. Love is begotten of detachment,⁶ detachment of hope in God, hope of patient endurance and long-suffering, these of general self-mastery, self-mastery of fear of God, and fear of faith in the Lord.

3. The one who believes the Lord fears punishment; the one who fears punishment becomes master of his passions; the one who becomes master of his passions patiently endures tribulations; the one who patiently endures tribulations will have hope in God; hope in God separates from every earthly attachment; and when the mind is separated from this it will have love for God.⁷

4. The one who loves God prefers knowledge of him to all things made by him and is constantly devoted to it by desire.

5. If all things have been made by God and for his sake, then God is better than what has been made by him. The one who forsakes the better and is engrossed in inferior things shows that he prefers the things made by God to God himself.

6. The one who has his mind fixed on the love of God disdains all visible things and even his own body as alien.⁸

7. If the soul is better than the body and God incomparably better than the world which he created, the one who prefers the body to the soul and the world to the God who created it is no different from idolaters.

8. The one who separates his mind from love and devotedness toward God and keeps it tied to any sensible thing is the one who prefers the body to the soul and things that are made to God their Creator.

9. If the life of the mind is the illumination of knowledge and this is born of love for God, then it is well said that there is nothing greater than love.⁹

10. When in the full ardor of its love¹⁰ for God the mind goes out of itself, then it has no perception at all either of itself or of any creatures. For once illumined by the divine and infinite light, it remains insensible to anything that is made by him, just as the physical eye has no sensation of the stars when the sun has risen.

11. All the virtues assist the mind in the pursuit of divine love, but above all does pure prayer. By it the mind is given wings to go ahead to God and becomes alien to all things.

12. When through love the mind is ravished by divine knowledge and in going outside of creatures has a perception of divine transcendence,¹¹ then, according to the divine Isaiah, it comes in consternation to a realization of its own lowliness and says with conviction the words of the prophet:

*Woe is me for I am stricken at heart; because being a man having unclean lips, I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips and I have seen with my eyes the King, the Lord of hosts.*¹²

13. The one who loves God cannot help but love also every man as himself even though he is displeased by the passions of those who are not yet purified. Thus when he sees their conversion and amendment, he rejoices with an unbounded and unspeakable joy.

14. The passionate soul is impure, filled with thoughts of lust and hatred.

15. The one who sees a trace of hatred in his own heart through any fault at all toward any man whoever he may be makes himself completely foreign to the love for God, because love for God in no way admits of hatred for man.

16. "The one who loves me," says the Lord, "will keep my commandments" and "this is my commandment, that you love one another."¹³ Therefore the one who does not love his neighbor is not keeping the commandment, and the one who does not keep the commandment is not able to love the Lord.

17. Blessed is the man who has learnt to love all men equally.¹⁴

18. Blessed is the man who is not attached to any corruptible or transitory thing.

19. Blessed is the mind which has gone beyond all beings and takes unceasing delight in the divine beauty.

20. The one who makes provision for the desires of the flesh¹⁵ and bears a grudge against his neighbor for transitory things—such a man serves the creature rather than the Creator.¹⁶

21. The one who keeps his body away from pleasure and sickness keeps it as a fellow worker in the service of better things.

22. The one who flees all the world's desires puts himself beyond every worldly grief.

23. The one who loves God surely loves his neighbor as well. Such a person cannot hold on to money but rather gives it out in God's fashion to each one who has need.¹⁷

24. The one who imitates God by giving alms knows no difference between evil and good or just and unjust in regard to the needs of the body, but distributes to all without distinction according to their need even if he prefers the virtuous person over the wicked because of his good intention.¹⁸

25. Just as God who is by nature good and free of passion loves all in an equal way as his creatures but glorifies the virtuous man for having become his friend through his intention and has mercy on the wicked out of his goodness and converts him by chastening him in this life, so also does the one who is good and without passion through his intention love equally all men—the virtuous because of his nature and good will and likewise the wicked because of his nature and compassion by which he pities one who is foolish and makes his way in darkness.

26. The disposition of love is made manifest not only in the sharing of money but much more in sharing the word of God and physical service.

27. The one who has genuinely renounced worldly matters and serves his neighbor without pretense through love soon frees himself of all passion and is rendered a sharer of divine love and knowledge.

28. The one who has acquired divine love in himself does not grow weary of closely following after the Lord his God, as the divine Jeremiah¹⁹ says; rather he endures nobly every reproachful hardship and outrage without thinking any evil of anyone.

29. When you are insulted by someone or offended in any matter, then beware of angry thoughts, lest by distress they sever you from charity and place you in the region of hatred.

30. Whenever you are suffering intensely from insult or disgrace, realize that this can be of great benefit to you, for disgrace is God's way of driving vainglory out of you.

31. As the memory of fire does not warm the body, so faith without love does not bring about the illumination of knowledge in the soul.

32. As the light of the sun attracts the healthy eye, so does the knowledge of God draw the pure mind to itself naturally through love.

33. The mind is pure when it is removed from ignorance and illuminated by divine light.

34. The soul is pure when it has been freed from the passions²⁰ and rejoices unceasingly in divine love.

35. A blameworthy passion is a movement of the soul contrary to nature.²¹

36. Detachment is a peaceful state of the soul in which it becomes resistant to vice.

37. The one who has zealously acquired the fruits of love does not change from it even though he experiences countless ills. And let Stephen, Christ's disciple, and those like him, persuade you, as well as Christ himself who prays for his murderers and asks forgiveness of his Father as for those acting in ignorance.²²

38. If it is a mark of love to be patient and kind,²³ the one who acts contentiously or wickedly clearly makes himself a stranger to love, and the one who is a stranger to love is a stranger to God, since "God is love."²⁴

39. Do not say, as the divine Jeremiah tells us, that you are the Lord's temple.²⁵ And do not say that "mere faith in our Lord Jesus Christ can save me." For this is impossible unless you acquire love for him through works. For in what concerns mere believing, "even the devils believe and tremble."²⁶

40. The work of love is the deliberate doing of good to one's neighbor as well as long-suffering and patience and the use of all things in the proper way.

41. The one who loves God is not sad nor does he grieve anyone because of any passing thing. Only one salutary sadness makes him sad and grieves others, the one which the blessed Paul had and with which he grieved the Corinthians.²⁷

42. The one who loves God leads an angelic life on earth, fasting and being watchful and singing psalms and praying and always thinking good of everyone.²⁸

43. If anyone desires anything, he naturally strives to obtain it. Now the divine is incomparably better and more desirable than all good and desirable things. What great zeal, then, should we show to obtain what is good and desirable by nature!²⁹

44. Do not stain your flesh with indecent actions; do not defile your soul with evil thoughts; and God's peace will come upon you and bring love.

45. Afflict your flesh with fasting and vigils. Devote yourself diligently to psalmody and prayer, and holiness in chastity will come upon you and bring love.

46. The one who is deemed worthy of divine knowledge and who through love has attained its illumination will never be blown about by the spirit of vainglory. But the one who is not yet deemed worthy of di-

vine knowledge is easily carried to and fro by it. If such a one, then, should look to God in everything that he does, as doing everything for his sake, he will easily escape it with God.

47. The one who has not yet obtained divine knowledge activated by love makes a lot of the religious works he performs. But the one who has been deemed worthy to obtain this says with conviction the words which the patriarch Abraham spoke when he was graced with the divine appearance, "I am but earth and ashes."³⁰

48. The one who fears the Lord always has humility as his companion and through its promptings is led to divine love and thanksgiving. For he recalls his former worldly life and different transgressions and the temptations bedeviling him from his youth, and how the Lord delivered him from all these things and made him pass from this life of passion to a divine life. And so with fear he receives love as well, ever thankful with deep humility to the benefactor and pilot of our life.

49. Do not soil your mind by holding on to thoughts of concupiscence and anger, lest by falling from pure prayer you fall in with the spirit of discouragement.³¹

50. The mind falls from familiarity³² with God whenever it consorts with wicked and foul thoughts.

51. When the senseless man who is driven by his passions is moved by anger and becomes troubled, he will be eager to flee foolishly from the brethren. But when again he is aroused by concupiscence, he regrets this and runs back to them. The sensible man does the opposite in both situations. In time of anger he cuts off the causes of disorder and frees himself from grief toward the brethren; in time of concupiscence he controls any irrational impulse and relationship.³³

52. In a period of temptations do not abandon your monastery but bear courageously the waves of thoughts, especially those of sadness and discouragement. Being thus tested with tribulations by divine dispensation, you will have a firm hope in God. But if you leave you will be accounted reprobate, unmanly, and unstable.

53. If you desire not to fall away from divine love, do not let your brother go to bed with anger against you, nor should you go to bed angry against him. Rather, "go, be reconciled with your brother, and come offer" to Christ with a clear conscience the gift of love in fervent prayer.³⁴

54. If one has all the gifts of the Spirit, but not love, it profits him nothing, as the divine Apostle says.³⁵ How great a zeal should we show to acquire it!

55. If "love works no evil to one's neighbor,"³⁶ the one who envies his brother and is unhappy over his good name and smears his reputation with scoffing or in any way maliciously contrives against him, how does he not render himself a stranger to love and liable to eternal judgment?

56. If "love is the fullness of the law,"³⁷ how can the one who keeps a grudge against his brother and sets a trap for him and curses him and rejoices over his misfortune be anything but a transgressor and liable to eternal punishment?

57. If "the one who slanders his brother and judges his brother slanders and judges the law,"³⁸ and the law of Christ is love, how does the slanderer do anything but fall away from the love of Christ and become the cause of his own eternal punishment?

58. Do not lend your ear to the slanderer's tongue nor your tongue to the fault-finder's ear by readily speaking or listening to anything against your neighbor. Otherwise you will fall away from divine love and be found excluded from eternal life.

59. Do not allow any abuse of your father or encourage anyone who dishonors him, lest the Lord become angry at your deeds and destroy you utterly from the land of the living.

60. Silence the one who is slandering in your hearing lest you commit a double sin with him: by accustoming yourself to this deadly vice and by not restraining him from foolish talk against his neighbor.

61. "But I say to you," the Lord says, "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you."³⁹ Why did he command these things? So that he might free you from hate, sadness, anger, and grudges, and might grant you the greatest possession of all, perfect love, which is impossible to possess except by the one who loves all men equally in imitation of God, who loves all men equally and "wills that they be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth."⁴⁰

62. "But I tell you to resist evil, but should anyone strike you on the right cheek turn the other to him as well. And if anyone wants to go to court with you and take your tunic, offer him your coat as well; and if one forces you to go one mile, go two with him."⁴¹ Why is this? To keep you free from anger and sadness and to instruct him through your forbearance and to bring you both in his goodness, under the yoke of his love.

63. We carry along with us the voluptuous images of the things we once experienced. Now the one who overcomes these voluptuous images completely disdains the realities of which they are images. In fact,

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the battle against memories⁴² is more difficult than the battle against deeds, as sinning in thought is easier than sinning in deed.

64. Some of the passions are of the body, some of the soul. Those of the body take their origin in the body; those of the soul from exterior things. Love and self-control cut away both of them, the former those of the soul, the latter those of the body.⁴³

65. Some of the passions belong to the irascible, some to the concupiscible part of the soul. Both are moved by means of the senses; and they are moved whenever the soul is found outside of love and self-control.

66. It happens that the passions of the irascible part of the soul are harder to combat than those of the concupiscible. Thus it is that a better remedy for it was given by the Lord: the commandment of love.⁴⁴

67. All the other passions lay hold of either the irascible or the concupiscible part of the soul only, or even of the rational part, as forgetfulness or ignorance. But sloth, by grasping onto all the soul's powers, excites nearly all of them together. In this way it is the most troublesome of all the passions. Well, then, did the Lord tell us in giving the remedy against it, "In your patience possess your souls."⁴⁵

68. Never strike any of the brothers, especially not without reason, lest sometime he not endure the trial and go away. For then you will never escape the reproof of your conscience, always bringing you sadness in the time of prayer and excluding your mind from familiarity with God.

69. Do not tolerate suspicions or people that would be occasions of scandal for you against anyone. For those who take scandal in any way from things which happen, intentionally or unintentionally, do not know the way of peace, which through love brings those who long for it to the knowledge of God.

70. The one who is still affected by human judgments does not yet have perfect love, as for example when he loves one and hates another for one reason or another; or even when he loves and then hates the same person for the same reasons.

71. Perfect love does not split up the one nature of men on the basis of their various dispositions but ever looking steadfastly at it, it loves all men equally, those who are zealous as friends, those who are negligent as enemies. It is good to them and forbearing and puts up with what they do. It does not think evil at all but rather suffers for them, if occasion requires, in order that it may even make them friends if possible. If not, it does not fall away from its own intentions as it ever manifests

the fruits of love equally for all men. In this way also our Lord and God Jesus Christ, manifesting his love for us, suffered for all mankind and granted to all equally the hope of resurrection, though each one renders himself worthy either of glory or of punishment.

72. The one who does not disdain glory and dishonor, riches and poverty, pleasure and pain, does not yet possess perfect love. For perfect love disdains not only these things but also this very transitory life and death.

73. Listen to what those who have been rendered worthy of divine love have to say: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword? As it is written, 'for your sake are we put to death the whole day long.' We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. But in all these things we more than overcome through the one who has loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁴⁶ All who say and do this concerning the love of God are saints.

74. And concerning love of neighbor, listen again to what they say: "I speak the truth in Christ; I do not lie, and my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit. I have great sadness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I would wish to be anathema myself from Christ for my brethren who are my kinsmen according to the flesh and Israelites."⁴⁷ And similarly Moses⁴⁸ and other saints.

75. The one who does not disdain glory and pleasure and greed which increases them and which is in turn produced by them cannot cut away the occasions of anger. And the one who does not cut them away cannot attain perfect love.

76. Humility and distress free man from every sin, the former by cutting out the passions of the soul, the latter those of the body. The blessed David shows that he did this in one of his prayers to God, "Look upon my humility and my trouble and forgive all my sins."⁴⁹

77. By means of the commandments the Lord renders detached those who carry them out; by means of the divine doctrines he bestows on them the enlightenment of knowledge.⁵⁰

78. All doctrines are concerned either with God or with visible and invisible things or with Providence and judgment about them.⁵¹

79. Almsgiving heals the irascible part of the soul; fasting extinguishes the concupiscible part,⁵² and prayer purifies the mind and pre-