

Bernard of Clairvaux
Sermon 20 on the Song of Songs



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SC 20

1

Let this talk have as its starting point the words of the Master [Saint Paul]: “Let the person who does not love the Lord Jesus be anathema” (1 Cor 16:22). It is absolutely certain that [the Lord] is to be loved because he is the one through whom I have being, life and wisdom. If I am ungrateful then I am unworthy. That person is worthy of death and already dead who refuses to live in you, Lord Jesus. One who does not find wisdom in you becomes foolish. One whose concern is to be something apart from you is for nothing and is nothing. Ultimately, what are human beings unless you have taken note of them? You have made all things, O God, for your own sake and those who wish to have being for themselves and not for you, begin to be nothing among all [that you have made]. [The sage] says, “Fear God and observe his commandments: this is the whole of the human being” (Qoh 12:13). If [fearing God and keeping his commandments] constitute the whole of the human being then without them there is nothing human. Turn to yourself, O God, the insignificant thing that you were pleased for me to be. And from this wretched life receive, I ask, the remnant of my years. Because of the [years] that I have wasted in living because I lived wastefully, do not despise, O God, a contrite and humble heart. My days have shrunk away like a shadow and have passed fruitlessly. It is impossible for me to call them back. May it please you if I think of them in your presence, in the bitterness of my soul. Now, regarding wisdom – since all my desire and the purpose of my heart is before you – if there is any wisdom in me I would keep it for you. But you, O God, know my lack of wisdom – unless, perhaps, I am wise when I recognise this [lack], and even that is by your gift. It is not that I am ungrateful for this small gift, but I am zealous for what is lacking. So it is that it is for these small things that I am loving you, as much as I am able.

2

There is, however, something that moves me more, motivates me more, and sets me on fire more. More than anything, I say, it is the cup that you drank, the work of our redemption, which makes you lovable to me, O good Jesus. This readily and completely claims the whole of our love for itself. This, I say, more agreeably attracts our devotion, more justly demands it and is more intensely attached to it. Our Saviour laboured much [in the work of our redemption], in a manner more wearying than the Creator’s work in making the whole world. [The Creator] spoke and things came to be; he gave an order and things were created. But [our Saviour] had to bear

with those who contradicted him when he spoke, with those who [malevolently] observed what he did, with those who mocked him when he was in torment and reproached him at his death. See how he loved. Add to this the fact that he did not return love but rather he gave love [where love was none.] For who first gave love to him that it could be returned? As Saint John the Evangelist said, “It is not that we loved him, but that he loved us first” (1 Jn 4:10). Finally, he loved those who did not [yet] exist, and he extended his love to those who resisted – as Saint Paul testified when he said, “While we were still enemies we were reconciled to God by the blood of his Son” (Rom 5:10). If he had not loved enemies he would not have had any friends, just as there would have been no one to love if he had not loved those who did not yet exist.

3

He loves sweetly wisely, strongly. Sweetly because he clothed himself with flesh; prudently because he guarded against fault; strongly because he endured death. Those whom he visited in the flesh he did not love in a fleshly manner but with prudence of spirit. “Christ the Lord is a spirit before our face” (Lam 4:20). He is jealous for us with the jealousy of God – not that of human beings. [The jealousy of God] is certainly more wholesome than that which the first Adam had for his Eve. Those whom [Christ] sought in the flesh, he loved in the spirit and redeemed in strength. To see the Originator of humanity as a human being is a pleasing experience, one that is totally full of sweetness. While by prudence he kept [human] nature separated from fault, by strength he drove death away from [human] nature. In assuming [human] nature he stooped down to me, in removing fault he acted on his own counsel, and in accepting death he made satisfaction to the Father. He is a sweet friend, a prudent counsellor, a strong helper. I safely entrust myself to this one who wishes to save me, who knows how to save me and who is able to save me. Those whom he sought he also called through his grace, and he will never drive away any who come. I need not be afraid that any force or fraud can pluck me out of the hand of the one who in conquering all things also conquered death and who, by a holier art, tricked the serpent who led all astray. He was more prudent [than the serpent] and more powerful [than death]. He assumed the truth of flesh but only the likeness of sin. In [assuming flesh] he showed himself as a sweet consolation for the weak. In [taking on the likeness of sin] he prudently hid a trap to deceive the devil. To reconcile us to the Father he was subject to death and caused it to submit, pouring out his blood as the price of our redemption. Therefore, unless he loved sweetly, such majesty would not have sought me in [my] prison. He joined wisdom to affection so as to deceive the tyrant and he added patience [in endurance] so that he could placate God the Father who had been offended.

These are the [different] ways [of loving] about which I promised [so speak]. First I spoke about them as they are in Christ so that they may seem more desirable to you.

4

O Christian, learn from Christ how you are to love Christ. Learn to love sweetly, to love prudently and to love strongly. Sweetly, so that we are not seduced [by pleasures]; prudently, so that we are not deceived [by errors]; strongly so that we are not turned away from love of the Lord by oppression. So that you are not led astray by the world's glory or by the pleasures of the flesh, let Christ's wisdom be a greater source of sweetness than they are. So that you are not seduced by a spirit of falsehood and error, let Christ's truth become your light. So that you are not wearied by adversities, let Christ the power of God be your strength. Let charity influence your zeal, let knowledge give it direction, and constancy be its strength. Let your zeal be fervent and careful and unconquered. Let it not be lukewarm or lacking in discernment or fearful.

See that whether these three [qualities] are not also handed down to you in the Law when God said, "You must love the Lord your God from your whole heart and from your whole soul and from your whole strength" (Deut 6:5). It seems to me – unless there happens to be a more appropriate meaning to this threefold distinction – that the love of the heart refers to a certain affective intensity [*zelum affectionis*], the love of the soul refers to the operation and judgement of reason, and love with [the whole] strength refers to constancy and vigour of spirit [*animus*]. Therefore, love the Lord your God with total and full affection of the heart [*cordis affectus*]. Love [God] with all the vigilance and caution of reason. Love [God] also with all [your] strength so that you may not be afraid to die for love [of God] for "Love is as strong as death and passion is as harsh as hell" (Song 8:6).

May the Lord Jesus be pleasant and sweet to your affection and, in the face of the evilly sweet allurements of fleshly life, he will conquer sweetness with sweetness in the same way as one nail drives out another.

In addition, let Christ be a light that goes ahead of your understanding and a guide for your reason, not only to guard against the deceitful traps that are heresies and to protect the purity of faith from their clever tricks, but so that you may also avoid excessive and undiscerning intensity in your monastic life [*conversatio*]. Also, let your love be strong and constant, not yielding to fears or losing heart because of labours. Thus, let us love with affection, with caution, and with strength. Recognise that the love of the heart, which we have called "affectionate love" is sweet but liable to go astray if it is without the love of the soul. In the same way, [the love of the

soul] is in accordance with reason, but without the love that comes from strength it is fragile.

5

Let us see that what we are saying is correct by some obvious examples. When the disciples were upset when they heard about the departure of the Master, who was about to ascend, they heard, “If you loved me you would rejoice that I am going to the Father” [Jn 14:28]. What does this mean? Are they unloving because they were sorrowful because of his departure? Rather, they loved him in one manner and [in another] they did not love him. They loved him sweetly but less than prudently. They loved him according to the flesh and not according to reason. They loved him with their whole heart but not with their whole soul. Their love was working against their salvation and so he said to them, “It is right for you that I go” (Jn 16:7), finding fault with their reasoning, not with their affection.

Again, as you remember, when he was speaking of his future death, he rebuffed and rebuked Peter, who loved him tenderly, because he tried to prevent it. What else does [Jesus] find fault with but [Peter’s] lack of prudence? What does this text mean? “You do not have a taste for the things of God” (Mk 8:33). [Surely it means] that you love unwisely, following human affection rather than the divine plan. And so he called him “Satan” because, even though [Peter] was unaware of it, by wishing to prevent the Saviour’s death he was in opposition to the work of salvation.

Once corrected, [Peter] ceased to forbid Jesus to die. When later [Jesus] repeated this sad saying [Peter] promised that he himself would die with him. He did not fulfil [that promise] because he had not yet arrived at the third level at which he would love [Christ] with his whole strength. He had been taught to love with his whole soul but he was still weak. He was well-instructed but had only a little support. He was not ignorant of the mystery but he was fearful of martyrdom. At that time, clearly, love was not as strong as death because it was subdued by death. Later it became so when, following Jesus’ promise, he was clothed with strength from on high. Then, at last, he began to love with so much strength that when he was forbidden by the Sanhedrin to preach, he constantly replied to those making the prohibition, “Obedience must be rendered to God rather than to human beings” [Acts 5:29]. Then, at last, he loved with all his strength when, out of love, he did not spare his own life. Indeed, “no one has greater love than to give up his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). Even if [Peter] did not, at this time, give up his life he, nevertheless, exposed it [to risk]. Therefore, to love with the whole heart, the whole soul, and the whole strength is not to be led astray by pleasures, not to be seduced by falsity and

not to be broken by injuries.

6

Note that the heart's love is, in some way, fleshly. It is directed mostly towards the flesh of Christ. What Christ did and ordained in the flesh touches the human heart. When [the heart] is filled with this love it easily comes to compunction whenever it hears talk of such topics. It hears nothing else more willingly. It reads nothing else more earnestly. It ponders nothing else more frequently. It meditates on nothing else with greater pleasure. And so prayer is enriched by it, as a holocaust is enriched with the fat of a plump calf.

At prayer there is a sacred image of the Man-God, being born, being nursed, teaching, dying, rising or ascending. It whatever form it takes, its purpose is to bind the soul to the love of the virtues, drive away the vices of the flesh, flee from enticements, and sedate desires. It is my judgement that the main cause for the unseen God being willing to be seen is the flesh and living with fellow-human beings was that he might first draw back to the saving love of his own flesh the affections of fleshly people who were able to love only in a fleshly way. So he could lead them gradually to a more spiritual love. Were they not still at this [fleshly] level who said, "Behold we have left everything and have followed you" (Mt 19:27)? It was only through the love of his bodily presence that they left everything. Hence they were not able to bear with equanimity even to hear of his future saving passion and death, nor could they later look at the glory of the one ascending without the burden of grief. As he said to them: "Because I say these things to you sadness fills your hearts" (Jn 16:6). In the meantime, it was only the grace of his fleshly presence that kept them above the love of everything fleshly.

7

Afterwards he showed them a higher level of love when he said: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no use at all" (Jn 6:64). I think that [Saint Paul] had already risen to that level when he said, "If we knew Christ according to the flesh, we know him thus no longer" (2 Cor 5:16). We may join to him the one who said, "Christ our Lord is a spirit before our face" (Lam 4:20). The addition, "Under his shadow we live among the nations" seems to have been made for beginners so that they may rest under the shadow, since they feel that they are unable to bear the heat of the sun. They are nourished by the sweetness of flesh while they are, as yet, unable to receive the things that belong to God's Spirit. I believe that Christ's shadow is his flesh. It was by this that Mary was overshadowed, so that by its being in place the heat and brightness of the Sa la would be moderated for her.

In the meantime, in fleshly devotion there is consolation for the person who does not yet have the life-giving Spirit in the manner in which they do who say, “Christ Jesus is a spirit before our face,” and “If we knew Christ according to the flesh, we know him thus no longer”. Even to love Christ in a fleshly manner is impossible without the Holy Spirit, but such love is not complete.

The measure of this devotion is that this pleasant experience occupies the whole heart and claims everything for itself at the expense of the love for all flesh and fleshly enticement. This is to love from the whole heart. Otherwise, if I happen to give more weight to fleshly kinship or fleshly pleasure than to the flesh of my Lord, so that it happens that I put into practice less of what he taught me by word and example¹, is it not clearly true that in no way do I love from my whole heart? My heart is divided; I give part of it to his flesh and direct the other part of it to my own. Finally he said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:37). Therefore, to summarise, to love from the whole heart is to give less priority to everything pleasurable in one’s own flesh or in another’s than to the love of that sacred flesh. I include in this the world’s glory, since the world’s glory is the flesh’s glory and, beyond doubt, those who delight in it are themselves fleshly.

8

Although this kind of devotion is a gift, a great gift of the Spirit, nevertheless I would say that this love is fleshly relative to that love that finds savour, not so much in the Word as flesh, but in the Word as wisdom, the Word as righteousness, the Word as truth, the Word as holiness, goodness, virtue and any other such quality of which we may speak. All these are Christ “who has become for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). [Consider] the person who feels compassion for the suffering Christ, who experiences compunction and is easily moved by the memory of what [Christ] endured, who is nourished by the sweetness of this devotion and is strengthened [to perform] actions that are wholesome, right and loving. Surely that person is not touched in the same way and to the same extent as another who is always afire with zeal for righteousness, who in every situation is zealous for the truth, who is fervent in his pursuit of wisdom, who is a friend of holiness of life, who is disciplined in conduct, whose character blushes to be boastful, who abhors detraction, knows nothing of envy and does not only flee from human glory but has no taste for it and despises it, who very intensely hates and rejects all impurity of flesh and heart and, finally, who rejects every evil and embraces what is good as it were naturally.² Is it

¹ verbo et exemplo Note 1st person singular

² Tamquam naturaliter: RB 7.

not clear that if you compare the affection of both, the first [relative to the second] is somewhat fleshly.

9

This fleshly love is, nevertheless, good, since through it the fleshly life is excluded and the world is despised and conquered. An advance is made when it becomes reasonable as well; it is brought to completion when it becomes spiritual also. It is reasonable when in everything that should be believed about Christ the rule of faith is so firmly held that in all things [this love] does not deviate from the purity of what the Church believes by any [false] likeness of what is true, or by any heretical or diabolical deceit. Also, in his personal way of life, that caution is maintained by which the limits imposed by discretion are not exceeded through superstition or lack of seriousness, or by the apparent intensity of a more fervent spirit. This is to love the Lord from the whole soul, as we have said above.

If, with the Spirit's aid, there is present so great a vigour that no force of labours or torments, nor even the fear of death, can cause him to abandon righteousness, then this is to love also from the whole strength; it is a spiritual love. I think the name "spiritual" is especially appropriate for this love because it excels [the others] by having the fullness of the Spirit as its prerogative.

This suffices for [the text] in which the bride says, "For this reason young girls have loved you much" (Song 1:2). In what follows may Christ Jesus our Lord, their guardian, be pleased to open the treasures of his mercy, for he lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for all ages of ages. Amen.