

CLASSIC WISDOM COLLECTION

Intimacy in Prayer

WISDOM FROM

Bernard of Clairvaux

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I

An Invitation to Love

You wish me to tell you why and how God should be loved. My answer is that God himself is the reason why he is to be loved. As for how he is to be loved, there is to be no limit to that love. Is this sufficient answer? Perhaps, but only for a wise man. As I am indebted, however, to the unwise also,¹ it is customary to add something for them after saying enough for the wise. Therefore for the sake of those who are slow to grasp ideas I do not find it burdensome to treat of the same ideas more extensively if not more profoundly. Hence I insist that there are two reasons why God should be loved for his own sake: no one can be loved more righteously and no one can be loved with

greater benefit. Indeed, when it is asked why God should be loved, there are two meanings possible to the question. For it can be questioned which is rather the question: whether for what merit of his or for what advantage to us is God to be loved. My answer to both questions is assuredly the same, for I can see no other reason for loving him than himself.



Faith certainly bids me love him all the more whom I regard as that much greater than I, for he not only gives me myself, he also gives me himself. . . . Why would not an artifact love its artist, if it is able to do so? Why would it not love him all it can, since it can do nothing except by his gift? In addition, the fact that man was made out of nothing, gratuitously and in this dignity, renders the debt of love clearer and proves the divine exaction more just. . . . “What shall I render to the LORD for all that he has given me?”² In his first work he gave me myself; in his second work he gave me himself; when he gave me himself, he gave me back myself. Given, and regiven, I owe myself twice over. What can I give God in return for himself? Even if I could give him myself a thousand times, what am I to God?³



God is not loved without a reward, although he should be loved without regard for one. True charity cannot be worthless, still, as “it does not seek its own advantage,”⁴ it cannot be termed mercenary. Love pertains to the will, it is not a transaction; it cannot acquire or be acquired by a pact. Moving us freely, it makes us spontaneous. True love is content with itself; it has its reward, the object of its love. Whatever you seem to love because of something else, you do not really love; you really love the end pursued and not that by which it is pursued.

— Excerpts from *On Loving God* I:1, V:15; VII:17



II

Enduring Love

O Eugene,* how good it is for us to be here!¹ But how much better it would be, if we could at sometime wholly follow where we have gone before in part. We have gone before in spirit, and not even our whole spirit, but only part, and too small a part. Our affections lie weighted down by this bodily mass, and cling to the mire with desires while only consideration, dry and delicate, flies before. And still with so little granted it as yet, it freely cries out, “LORD I have loved the beauty of your house and the place where your glory dwells.”² What if the soul were totally

* Editor’s note: Bernard is addressing Pope Eugene III.

recollected and with affections recalled from all the places they were held captive by fearing what should not be feared, loving what was unworthy, grieving vainly and more vainly rejoicing, it began to soar with total liberty, to drive on under the impulse of the spirit and to glide along in abundance of grace? And when the soul has begun to move about the illumined mansions and to examine carefully even the bosom of Abraham, and to look again upon the souls of martyrs under the altar³ (whatever that might be^{*)} dressed in their first robes⁴ and patiently awaiting their second, will it not say much more insistently with the Prophet, “One thing I have asked of the LORD, this will I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, that I may see the will of the LORD, and visit his temple”?⁵ Is not the heart of God to be seen there? Is it not shown there what is the good, the acceptable, the perfect will of God⁶: good in itself, pleasing in its effects, acceptable to those enjoying it, perfect to those who are perfect and who seek nothing beyond it? His heart of mercy lies open,⁷ his thoughts of peace lie revealed,⁸ the riches of his salvation,⁹ the mysteries of his good will, the secrets of his kindness, which are hidden from mortals and beyond the comprehension of even the elect. This, indeed, is for the

* Editor’s note: Here Bernard admits that the previous Scripture reference is too obscure for him.

good of their salvation, so they do not cease fearing before they are found suited for loving worthily.



Holy affection makes a saint, and this affection is two-fold: holy fear of the Lord and holy love. The soul affected perfectly by these comprehends as with two arms, and embraces, binds and holds, and says, “I held him and I will not let him go.”¹⁰ Indeed, fear corresponds to height and depth; love to width and length.¹¹ What is so to be feared as power which you cannot resist, as wisdom from which you cannot hide? God could be feared less if he were lacking either of these. As it is, it is perfectly fitting that you fear him for he is not without an eye which sees all, nor a hand which is all-powerful. What, moreover, is so loveable as love itself, by which you love and by which you are loved? Still, it is made more loveable by its union with eternity for it dispels suspicion since it does not die. Therefore, love with perseverance and patience and you have length; widen your love to include your enemies and you possess width; also, be God-fearing and observant in everything you do and you have obtained height and depth.

— Excerpts from *Five Books on Consideration*, Book Five: 9; 30



III

The Kiss of the Lord

Today the text we are to study is the book of our own experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. I am attempting to discover if any of you has been privileged to say from his heart: “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.”¹ Those to whom it is given to utter these words sincerely are comparatively few, but any one who has received this mystical kiss from the mouth of Christ at least once, seeks again that intimate experience, and eagerly looks for its frequent renewal. I think that nobody can grasp what it is except the one who receives it. For it is

“a hidden manna,”² and only he who eats it still hungers for more.³ It is “a sealed fountain”⁴ to which no stranger has access; only he who drinks still thirsts for more. Listen to one who has had the experience, how urgently he demands: “Be my savior again, renew my joy.” But a soul like mine, burdened with sins, still subject to carnal passions,⁵ devoid of any knowledge of spiritual delights, may not presume to make such a request, almost totally unacquainted as it is with the joys of the supernatural life.



You have seen the way that we must follow, the order of procedure: first, we cast ourselves at his feet, we weep before the Lord who made us,⁶ deploring the evil we have done. Then we reach out for the hand that will lift us up, that will steady our trembling knees.⁷ And finally, when we shall have obtained these favors through many prayers and tears, we humbly dare to raise our eyes to his mouth, so divinely beautiful, not merely to gaze upon it, but—I say it with fear and trembling—to receive its kiss. “Christ the Lord is a Spirit before our face,”⁸ and he who is joined to him in a holy kiss⁹ becomes through his good pleasure, one spirit with him.¹⁰

To you, Lord Jesus, how truly my heart has said: “My face looks to you. LORD, I do seek your face.”¹¹ In the dawn

you brought me proof of your love, in my first approach to kiss your revered feet you forgave my evil ways as I lay in the dust. With the advancement of the day you gave your servant reason to rejoice¹² when, in the kiss of the hand, you imparted the grace to live rightly. And now what remains, O good Jesus, except that suffused as I am with the fullness of your light, and while my spirit is fervent, you would graciously bestow on me the kiss of your mouth, and give me unbounded joy in your presence.¹³

— Excerpts from *On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 3:1; 5