

Module 207: Bernard of Clairvaux

The Four Loves by St Bernard of Clairvaux. From Public Domain material at Christian Classics Ethereal Library at Calvin College - www.ccel.org. Modernized and abridged by Stephen Tompkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“O chaste and holy love!”

Module Introduction

Bernard was another notable thinker of the new age, although he is remembered at least as much for his compelling spiritual writings as his theology.

Born in France in 1090, he became a monk, joining one of the new monastic movements, the rigorous Cistercians. He rose to become a powerful leader in the church, heavily involved in papal politics. He also threw himself into promoting the second crusade (which was an utter fiasco). This shows how easily medieval Christians combined profound spirituality with wars of conquest.

Bernard also launched a metaphorical crusade against Peter Abelard, and succeeded in getting his teaching about the atonement officially condemned.

8. The first degree of love: Loving oneself for self's sake

Love is one of the four natural affections, which it is needless to name since everyone knows them. And because love is natural, it is only right to love the Author of nature first of all. Hence the first and greatest commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God.” [Deut. 6:5; Matt 22:37-39] But nature is so frail and weak that it has to love itself first. This kind of love means loving oneself selfishly. As it is written, “The spiritual does not come first. The natural comes first and is followed by the spiritual.” [1 Corinthians 15:46] This is not what we are commanded, but what nature directs: “No one ever hated his own body.” [Eph. 5:29] But if, as is likely, this self-love becomes excessive and

sensuous, then a command holds it back: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Leviticus 19:18; Matt 22:37-39] And this is right: for he who shares our nature should share our love, which is the fruit of nature. So, if you find it a burden serving to your brother's pleasures, you should mortify those same pleasures in yourself to avoid sin. Cherish yourself as tenderly as you want, so long as you remember to show the same indulgence to your neighbor. This is the curb of temperance imposed on you by the law of life and conscience, to stop you following your own desires to destruction or becoming enslaved by passions which are the enemies of your true welfare. It is far better to share your enjoyments with your neighbor than with these enemies.

If, as the son of Sirach advises, you refrain from indulging your appetites and do not pursue your desires [Sirach 18.30], and if as the apostle commands you are content to have just food and clothes [1 Tim. 6.8], then you will find it easy to abstain from the bodily desires that war against your soul, and to share with your neighbors what you have refused to give to your own desires. A temperate and righteous love practices self-denial in order to give one's brother what he needs. This way our selfish love grows truly social, including our neighbors in its circle.

But what if you are reduced to poverty by such benevolence? Simple. Pray with all confidence to him who gives to all people generously and without finding fault, [James 1.5] who opens his hand and plentifully fills all living things. [Ps. 145.16] He that gives most people more than they need will not fail to give you the necessities of life, as he has promised: "Seek the Kingdom of God, and all those things shall be added." [Luke. 12.31] God freely promises all things necessary to those who deny themselves for love of their neighbors.

But if we are to love our neighbors as we should, we must

not forget God, for it is only in God that we can pay that debt of love properly. You cannot love your neighbor in God unless you love God himself. This means we must love God first, in order to love our neighbors in him. This too, like all good things, is the Lord's doing, for it is he who has given us the ability to love. He who created nature sustains it, and protects it for ever. Without him nature could not have begun; without him it could not continue. To make us realize this, and prevent us attributing the beneficence of our Creator to ourselves, God has decided in his wisdom that we should be suffer troubles. So when human strength fails and God comes to our aid, we should glorify him, as it is written: "Call upon me in the times of trouble: I will hear you, and you will praise me." [Ps. 50.15] This is how we, though animal and carnal by nature and loving only ourselves, begin to love God through our own love for ourselves, when we have learnt that in God we can accomplish anything and without God we can do nothing.

9. The second and third degrees of love: Loving God for self's sake, and loving God for God's sake.

So, we start by loving God, not for his own sake but ours. It is good for us to know how little we can do by ourselves, and how much we can do with God's help, and therefore to live rightly before God, our trusty support. But when recurring troubles force us to turn to God for help, even a heart as hard as iron, as cold as marble, would be softened by the goodness of such a Savior, so that we love God not altogether selfishly, but also simply because he is God. If frequent troubles drive us to frequent prayer, surely we will taste and see how gracious the Lord is. [Ps. 34.8] Then, realizing how good he is, we find ourselves drawn to love him unselfishly, even more powerfully than we are drawn by our own needs to love him selfishly.

Remember how the Samaritans told the woman who announced that it was Christ who was at the well, "Now we believe, not because you told us, but because we have heard

him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the savior of the world." [Jan 4.42] In the same way, we give testimony to our own fleshly nature, "Now we love God, not because of our own need, but because we have tasted and seen how gracious the Lord is." Our worldly wants have a speech of their own, broadcasting the gifts they have received from God.

Once this is recognized it will not be hard to fulfill the commandment touching love to our neighbors, for anyone who truly loves God loves all God's creatures. Such love is pure, and finds no burden in the command that tells us to purify our souls, obeying the truth in unfeigned love of our brothers. [1 Pet. 1.22] When we love as we should, we consider that command only right. Such love is thankworthy, because it is spontaneous. It is pure, because it is shown not in word nor tongue, but in deed and truth. [1 John 3.18] It is just, because it repays what it has received. Whoever loves like this, loves as he is loved, and no longer pursues his own desires but Christ's, even as Jesus did not pursue not his own welfare, but ours - or rather pursued ourselves. Such love was what drove the psalmist to sing, "Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is gracious." [Ps. 118.1] Whoever praises God for his essential goodness, and not merely because of the gifts he has given, truly love God for God's sake, and not selfishly. The psalmist was not speaking of such love when he said: "As long as do well for yourself, men will speak well of you." [Ps. 49.18]

The third degree of love, we have now seen, is to love God on His own account, solely because He is God.

10. The fourth degree of love: Loving self for God's sake.

How blessed is he who reaches the fourth degree of love, in which one loves oneself only for God's sake! Your righteousness stands like the strong mountains, God. This kind of love is God's hill: "Who shall ascend into the hill of

the Lord?"

"If only I had wings like a dove, I would flee away and be at rest." "His tabernacle is at Jerusalem, and his dwelling is in Zion." "Woe is me, that I am constrained to dwell with Mesech!" [Ps. 24.3; 55.6; 76.2; 120.5]

When will this flesh and blood, this clay pot which is my soul's tabernacle, reach that place? When will my soul, raptured with divine love and utterly self-forgetting, like a broken vessel, long only for God, and, joined to him, be one spirit with him? When will it exclaim, "My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my everlasting inheritance"? [Ps. 73.26]

I would consider anyone who experiences such rapture in this life to be blessed and holy. To lose yourself even for an instant, as if you were emptied and lost and swallowed up in God — this is not human love; it is heavenly. But if a poor mortal sometimes feels that heavenly joy for one ecstatic moment, then this wretched life envies his happiness and the malice of daily trifles disturbs him, this body of death weighs him down, the needs of the flesh are insistent, the weakness of corruption fails him, and above all brotherly love calls him back to duty. What a shame! That voice summons him to re-enter his own life, and he will ever cry out forever pitifully, "Lord, I am oppressed. Help me!" [Isaiah 38.14] and again, "What a wretched man I am! Who shall save me from the body of this death?" [Rom. 7.24]. If, as the Bible says, "God has made all for his own glory" [Isaiah. 43.7], surely his creatures should submit, as much as they can, to his will. Our whole heart should be centered on him, so that we only ever seek to do his will, not to please ourselves. And real happiness will come, not in gratifying our desires or in transient pleasures, but in accomplishing God's will for us. This is what we pray every day: "Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." [Matt. 6.10]

O chaste and holy love! O sweet and gracious affection! O pure and cleansed purpose, thoroughly washed and purged from any selfishness, and sweetened by contact with God's will! To reach this state is to become godlike. As a drop of water poured into wine loses itself, and takes the color and savor of wine; or as a bar of iron, heated red-hot, becomes like fire itself, forgetting its own nature; or as the air, radiant with sun-beams, seems not so much to be lit as to be light itself; so for those who are holy all human affections melt away by some incredible mutation into the will of God. I believe that in this life, we can never fully and perfectly obey the command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind." [Luke. 10.27] For down here the heart must be concerned with the body, and the soul must energize the flesh, and the strength must protect itself, and, by God's favor, increase. This makes it impossible to give our whole being to God and yearn for nothing but his face, as long as we have to bend our plans and hopes to these fragile, sickly bodies of ours. So, the soul may hope to possess the fourth degree of love — or rather to be possessed by it — only when it has been clothed with that spiritual and immortal body which will be perfect, peaceful, lovely, and in everything wholly subjected to the Spirit. This degree no human effort can attain: it is in God's power to give it to whomever he will.

Discussion Starters:

- What are the four degrees of love? Would you have put them in the same order yourself?
- Does Bernard see self-love as a good thing or bad thing?
 - Do you think he's right about the part it plays in the spiritual life?
- How does Bernard balance self-love against love for one's neighbor? Is this a helpful way of looking at it?
- "What if you are reduced to poverty by your benevolence?"
 - What is Bernard's answer to this? Do you think it is realistic?
- How does self-love lead us to love God? What is the

difference between “loving God for self’s sake” and
“loving God for God’s sake”?

What things, according Part 10, prevent us from
experiencing the fullness of love for God?

Do you think Bernard’s way of looking at spiritual life is a
useful one? How does your own life compare to what he
says?

Bible Verses

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Psalms 31:16-24

John 15:9-17

1 Corinthians 13

1 John 4:7-21