



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

ON LOVING GOD

Bernard of Clairvaux

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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by

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DEDICATION

To the illustrious Lord Haimeric, Cardinal Deacon of the Roman Church, and Chancellor: Bernard, called Abbot of Clairvaux, wisheth long life in the Lord and death in the Lord.

Hitherto you have been wont to seek prayers from me, not the solving of problems; although I count myself sufficient for neither. My profession shows that, if not my conversation; and to speak truth, I lack the diligence and the ability that are most essential. Yet I am glad that you turn again for spiritual counsel, instead of busying yourself about carnal matters: I only wish you had gone to some one better equipped than I am. Still, learned and simple give the same excuse and one can hardly tell whether it comes from modesty or from ignorance, unless obedience to the task assigned shall reveal. So, take from my poverty what I can give you, lest I should seem to play the philosopher, by reason of my silence. Only, I do not promise to answer other questions you may raise. This one, as to loving God, I will deal with as He shall teach me; for it is sweetest, it can be handled most safely, and it will be most profitable. Keep the others for wiser men.

WHY WE SHOULD LOVE GOD AND THE MEASURE OF THAT LOVE

You want me to tell you why God is to be loved and how much. I answer, the reason for loving God is God Himself; and the measure of love due to Him is immeasurable love. Is this plain? Doubtless, to a thoughtful man; but I am debtor to the unwise also. A word to the wise is sufficient; but I must consider simple folk too. Therefore I set myself joyfully to explain more in detail what is meant above.

We are to love God for Himself, because of a twofold reason; nothing is more reasonable, nothing more profitable. When one asks, Why should I love God? he may mean, What is lovely in God? or What shall I gain by loving God? In either case, the same sufficient cause of love exists, namely, God Himself.

And first, of His title to our love. Could any title be greater than this, that He gave Himself for us unworthy wretches? And being God, what better gift could He offer than Himself? Hence, if one seeks for God's claim upon our love here is the chiefest: Because He first loved us (I John 4.19).

Ought He not to be loved in return, when we think who loved,

whom He loved, and how much He loved? For who is He that loved? The same of whom every spirit testifies: 'Thou art my God: my goods are nothing unto Thee' (Ps. 16.2, Vulg.). And is not His love that wonderful charity which 'seeketh not her own'? (I Cor.13.5). But for whom was such unutterable love made manifest? The apostle tells us: 'When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son' (Rom. 5.10). So it was God who loved us, loved us freely, and loved us while yet we were enemies. And how great was this love of His? St. John answers: 'God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life' (John 3.16). St. Paul adds: 'He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all' (Rom. 8.32); and the Son says of Himself, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15.13).

This is the claim which God the holy, the supreme, the omnipotent, has upon men, defiled and base and weak. Some one may urge that this is true of mankind, but not of angels. True, since for angels it was not needful. He who succored men in their time of need, preserved angels from such need; and even as His love for sinful men wrought wondrously in them so that they should not remain sinful, so that same love which in equal measure He poured out upon angels kept them altogether free from sin.

ON LOVING GOD. HOW MUCH GOD DESERVES
 LOVE FROM MAN IN RECOGNITION OF HIS
 GIFTS, BOTH MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL: AND
 HOW THESE GIFTS SHOULD BE CHERISHED
 WITHOUT NEGLECT OF THE GIVER

Those who admit the truth of what I have said know, I am sure, why we are bound to love God. But if unbelievers will not grant it, their ingratitude is at once confounded by His innumerable benefits, lavished on our race, and plainly discerned by the senses. Who is it that gives food to all flesh, light to every eye, air to all that breathe? It would be foolish to begin a catalogue, since I have just called them innumerable: but I name, as notable instances, food, sunlight and air; not because they are God's best gifts, but because they are essential to bodily life. Man must seek in his own higher nature for the highest gifts; and these are dignity, wisdom and virtue. By dignity I mean free-will, whereby he not only excels all other earthly creatures, but has dominion over them. Wisdom is the power whereby he recognizes this dignity, and perceives also that it is no accomplishment of his own. And virtue impels man to seek eagerly for Him who is man's Source, and to lay fast hold on Him when He has been found.

Now, these three best gifts have each a twofold character. Dignity appears not only as the prerogative of human nature, but also as the cause of that fear and dread of man which is upon every beast of the earth. Wisdom perceives this distinction, but owns that though in us, it is, like all good qualities, not of us. And lastly, virtue moves us to search eagerly for an Author, and, when we have found Him, teaches us to cling to Him yet more eagerly. Consider too that dignity without wisdom is nothing worth; and wisdom is harmful without virtue, as this argument following shows: There is no glory in having a gift without knowing it. But to know only that you have it, without knowing that it is not of yourself that you have it, means self-glorying, but no true glory in God. And so the apostle says to men in such cases, ‘What hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now, if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it? (I Cor. 4.7). He asks, Why dost thou glory? but goes on, as if thou hadst not received it, showing that the guilt is not in glorying over a possession, but in glorying as though it had not been received. And rightly such glorying is called vain-glory, since it has not the solid foundation of truth. The apostle shows how to discern the true glory from the false, when he says, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord, that is, in the Truth, since our Lord is Truth (I Cor. 1.31; John 14.6).

We must know, then, what we are, and that it is not of ourselves that we are what we are. Unless we know this thoroughly, either

we shall not glory at all, or our glorying will be vain. Finally, it is written, 'If thou know not, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock' (Cant. 1.8). And this is right. For man, being in honor, if he know not his own honor, may fitly be compared, because of such ignorance, to the beasts that perish. Not knowing himself as the creature that is distinguished from the irrational brutes by the possession of reason, he commences to be confounded with them because, ignorant of his own true glory which is within, he is led captive by his curiosity, and concerns himself with external, sensual things. So he is made to resemble the lower orders by not knowing that he has been more highly endowed than they.

We must be on our guard against this ignorance. We must not rank ourselves too low; and with still greater care we must see that we do not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, as happens when we foolishly impute to ourselves whatever good may be in us. But far more than either of these kinds of ignorance, we must hate and shun that presumption which would lead us to glory in goods not our own, knowing that they are not of ourselves but of God, and yet not fearing to rob God of the honor due unto Him. For mere ignorance, as in the first instance, does not glory at all; and mere wisdom, as in the second, while it has a kind of glory, yet does not glory in the Lord. In the third evil case, however, man sins not in ignorance but deliberately, usurping the glory which belongs to God. And this arrogance is a more grievous and deadly fault than the ignorance of the

second, since it contemns God, while the other knows Him not. Ignorance is brutal, arrogance is devilish. Pride only, the chief of all iniquities, can make us treat gifts as if they were rightful attributes of our nature, and, while receiving benefits, rob our Benefactor of His due glory.

Wherefore to dignity and wisdom we must add virtue, the proper fruit of them both. Virtue seeks and finds Him who is the Author and Giver of all good, and who must be in all things glorified; otherwise, one who knows what is right yet fails to perform it, will be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12.47). Why? you may ask. Because he has failed to put his knowledge to good effect, but rather has imagined mischief upon his bed (PS. 36.4); like a wicked servant, he has turned aside to seize the glory which, his own knowledge assured him, belonged only to his good Lord and Master. It is plain, therefore, that dignity without wisdom is useless and that wisdom without virtue is accursed. But when one possesses virtue, then wisdom and dignity are not dangerous but blessed. Such a man calls on God and lauds Him, confessing from a full heart, 'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory' (PS. 115.1). Which is to say, 'O Lord, we claim no knowledge, no distinction for ourselves; all is Thine, since from Thee all things do come.'

But we have digressed too far in the wish to prove that even those who know not Christ are sufficiently admonished by the natural law, and by their own endowments of soul and body, to

love God for God's own sake. To sum up: what infidel does not know that he has received light, air, food—all things necessary for his own body's life—from Him alone who giveth food to all flesh (Ps. 136.25), who maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust (Matt. 5.45). Who is so impious as to attribute the peculiar eminence of humanity to any other except to Him who saith, in Genesis, 'Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness'? (Gen. 1.26). Who else could be the Bestower of wisdom, but He that teacheth man knowledge? (Ps. 94.10). Who else could bestow virtue except the Lord of virtue? Therefore even the infidel who knows not Christ but does at least know himself, is bound to love God for God's own sake. He is unpardonable if he does not love the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind; for his own innate justice and common sense cry out from within that he is bound wholly to love God, from whom he has received all things. But it is hard, nay rather, impossible, for a man by his own strength or in the power of free-will to render all things to God from whom they came, without rather turning them aside, each to his own account, even as it is written, 'For all seek their own' (Phil. 2.21); and again, 'The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth' (Gen. 8.21).