

Classics

Love Without Limits

We must love God beyond measure, but such love grows through stages.

By Bernard of Clairvaux



Illustration Provided by the Billy Graham Center Museum

There is no limit to [God's] love, for He loved us first. Such a One loved us so much and so freely, insignificant as we are and such as we are, that . . . we must love God [in return] without any limit . . .

Love offered to God has for [its] object the One who is immeasurable and infinite—what [then], I ask, should be the . . . degree of our love? What about the fact that our love [to God] is not given gratuitously but [rather] in payment of a debt [we owe Him]? God, whose greatness knows no end, to whose wisdom there is no limit, whose peace exceeds all understanding, loves [us]—and [yet we dare to] think we can requite Him with some [limited] measure of love? . . . The measure of love due to Him is immeasurable love. . . . This is the claim that God the holy, the supreme, the omnipotent, has upon [us] . . .

Love in Redemption

Good Jesus, the chalice You drank, the price of our redemption, makes me love You more than all the rest. This alone would be enough to claim our love. This, I say, is what wins our love so sweetly, justly demands it, firmly binds it, deeply affects it . . .

In saving us He had to endure men who contradicted His words, criticized His actions, ridiculed His sufferings, and mocked His death. See how much He loved us! Add to this fact that He was not returning love but freely offering it. For who had given Him anything first, that it should be returned to him? As St. John said: “Not that we had loved Him, but that He had first loved us.”

He loved us even before we existed, and in addition He loved us when we resisted Him. According to St. Paul: “Even when we were still His enemies we were reconciled to God by the

blood of His Son.” If He had not loved His enemies, He could not have had any friends, just as He would have had no one to love if He had not [first] loved those who were not [His friends].

Learn to Love

Christian, learn from Christ how you ought to love Christ. Learn a love that is tender, wide, and strong; love with tenderness not

[disordered] passion, with wisdom not foolishness, and with strength, lest you become weary and turn away from the love of the Lord. Do not let the glory of the world or the pleasures of the flesh lead you astray; the wisdom of Christ should become sweeter to you than these . . . Your affection for your Lord Jesus should be both tender and intimate, to oppose the sweet enticements of sensual life. Sweetness conquers sweetness as one nail drives out another.

Love is a great reality, but there are degrees to it. I [am suspicious of] the love which seems to be founded on some hope of gain. It is weak, for if the hope of gain is removed it may be extinguished, or at least diminished. It is not pure, as it desires some return. Pure love has no self-interest. Pure love does not gain strength through expectation, nor is it weakened through distrust.

God is [never] loved without a reward, although He should be loved without regard for one . . . 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 . . .

True love merits its own reward, it does not seek it. A reward is offered to him who does not yet love; but it is due to him who loves, and it is given to him who perseveres . . .

The soul that loves God seeks no other reward than the God whom it loves. Were the soul to demand anything else, then it would certainly love that other thing and not God.

Because we are flesh and blood born of the desire of the flesh, our desire or love must start in the flesh, and it will then, if properly directed, progress under grace until it is fulfilled in the spirit.

At first a person loves himself for his own sake. He is flesh and is able only to know himself. But when he sees that he cannot subsist of himself, then he begins by faith to seek and love God as necessary for himself. And so in the second stage he loves God, not yet for God’s sake, but for his own sake. However, when on account of his own necessity he begins to meditate, read, pray, and obey, he becomes accustomed little by little to know God and consequently to delight in Him.

When he has tasted and seen how sweet is the Lord, he passes to the third stage, wherein he loves God for God’s sake and not for his own. And here he remains, for I doubt whether the fourth stage has ever been fully reached in this life by any man—the stage . . . wherein a man loves himself only for God’s sake.

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BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153), one of the most influential religious figures of his time, was a French abbot and monastic reformer known for the persuasive power of his preaching, the lyrical beauty of his writing, and the deep holiness of his personal life. This excerpt comes from his treatise “On Loving God,” perhaps the best known of all his written works.