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Prayer Before Studying Theology (A Prayer of Longing For Christ and His Return)

What use to me, O Lord, are all the solemnities and rituals of worship?
I did not see you hanging on the cross.
I did not suffer with you,
 nor follow you to the grave, my tears bathing your wounds.
I did not see you rise into the heavens.
On earth you never greeted me,
 and when you ascended to heaven you never bid me farewell.
I missed your first coming,
 and my soul is bitter and sad.

But your angels comfort me
 when they promise that you shall return in the same manner that you left,
 as King of kings.
When you first came to Bethlehem you were humble and lowly.
When you return the fullness of your glory and power shall be revealed.

Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills the breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
and in Thy presence rest.
--Bernard of Clairvaux

Week #7b: Bernard of Clairvaux on Loving God

Opening Question: If a non-Christian visited your church and asked one of the pastoral staff, "Why should I become a follower of Jesus?"

Bernard's answer would be this:
"You will be changed by the love and power of God in ways that you never expected. You will in turn find that you love God passionately and that you could never have discovered this kind of love without having had this experience of fundamental conversion toward God."

Cf. the distinction between

- (1) loving the feeling of being in love and
- (2) later discovering what it is to love the beloved for who they are (that their surpassing excellence compels and draws forth our love).

(1) looks like love and is generally regarded as love.

When one discovers (2), (1) is seen to have nothing to do with the reality of love. It is not even a pale imitation of the real thing.

So also with our claims, prior to conversion, that we know what it is to love God.

(Ex. Susannah's desire for marriage)

Questions:

- (1) What is "love" anyway?
 - a. How would the ideal of love be defined in popular culture today? (Movies, music, the responses you might expect from high school or college age people you know, etc.)
 - b. How would the elders (deacons) in your church react to such ideas?

(The fact-faith-feeling train considered)

Love as the Means to True Knowledge of God, Which Is the Goal and Purpose of Our Lives

The only way truly to know God is to love God; a speculative knowledge (involving the only the judgment of the mind but not the personal commitment of the will) is of little value.

The knowledge that matters is the knowing associated with desiring what is supremely desirable and being moved to selfless love and gratitude. Certainly this involves a component of knowledge--knowledge that the thing is supremely desirable and that this calls for our response--but knowledge is only a part of what is fitting and required here. What God desires of us is our whole selves, our unreserved commitment of ourselves (all that we are and all that we have) to him through the act of love.

How God Ought to Be Loved

To understand how God ought to be loved, we must first reflect upon

- (a) who it is that first extends love and what he is like;
- (b) whom God loves;
- (c) how much God loves

(a) *God's character (His intrinsic excellence) compels our love*

God is infinitely good and beautiful and therefore in and of himself is supremely desirable. He therefore deserves to be loved for his own sake (it is fitting and appropriate that he be loved above all things because he is manifestly superior to everything else).

As if this were not already enough, God also provides us with

- (i) our existence,
- (ii) the necessities of life and
- (iii) the dignity of being a rational creature made in God's image (and therefore capable of free will).

Furthermore, because every good thing is from God,

(iv) any virtue that may be found in us is itself the result of God's grace at work in us

- ("Virtue is that by which man seeks continuously and eagerly for his Maker and when he finds him, adheres to him with all his strength" [DD.2.2]--thus virtue is synonymous with all Godward activity of creatures and this is defined as initiated and sustained by God's grace.)

God therefore deserves to be loved not only for his intrinsic excellence but also for all *his* gracious *action toward us*.

Innate justice thus requires that the creature "ought to love with his whole being the one to whom he owes all that he is." (One could describe this as a "debt of love" that we owe to God if one interprets this in terms of sheer gratitude rather than crudely legal or mechanical conceptions of relationship.)

(b) *The character of the love God has shown us in Christ (in his actions toward us) compels our love*

In taking upon himself our frail, suffering humanity when he became incarnate in Christ, God loved us

- first and
- at great cost to himself
- without seeking his own advantage
- with an infinite (unending and unlimited) love
- precisely at the time when we were his enemies and least deserving.

In coming to know Christ (and him crucified) we come to see the fittingness and necessity of surrendering our will to God in Christ.

We therefore ought to return this love to God and Christ in a manner similar to the way in which God loved us, i.e. we must love God without any consideration of our own advantage and without any limit.

- "You wish, therefore, to hear from me why and how God should be loved?...the reason for loving God is God Himself; the measure of loving God is to love Him beyond measure" (*Causa diligendi Deum, Deus est; modus, sine modo diligere =De diligendo Deo. ch. 1*)

In point of fact, however, we are finite and ultimately too limited to render to God an unlimited love or even what we as finite creatures could offer him (which is our all), so we must depend upon God's own grace to create in us a greater and more perfect love, which is more befitting.

At the same time, there is no point at which this debt of love to God can be regarded as fully and finally paid ("That's enough, I've given God his due"). God in his goodness does respond to our increasing desire for him by offering to us more of Himself. This graciousness reveals more of God's goodness to us and makes us desire him more (and more purely for himself alone, because of his own character, apart from any benefits we might receive). (Tasting the sweetness of pure love both satisfies us and yet makes us yearn for more of what is supremely pleasing.)

This creates a dynamic of desire, in which receiving more, we are more greatly satisfied and yet desire more and by grace our capacity to receive more at the same time increases. a process that goes on without end, since it is impossible ever to reach an end in knowing the infinite God or to love and know enough (as much as one can or as much as one ought):

"He must still be sought who has not yet sufficiently been found and who cannot be sought too much" (*De consideratione* 5.32)

(God is experienced only according to one's power to enjoy him, which is dynamic and increases.)

Since there is to be no limit (restriction) to our love for God, it follows that we ought to love God so totally that we do not even think of ourselves (our love is supremely other-regarding, wholly absorbed in doing God's will, without calculating the cost to ourselves or the benefits that will accrue to themselves). The goal we have in relating to God is therefore to arrive at "the unity of desire which the soul, clinging to God with all its desires, is 'one spirit with him' (1 Cor. 4:7)" (*De consideratione* 5.18).

The goal, in other words, is to arrive at a unity of wills, so that conformity to the will of God becomes the means by which we

- are transformed into the moral likeness of God (we image in a created way the qualities that make God supremely good) and
- are united to God by and in that supernatural love (charity) by which we come to most nearly resemble God

This is as great a likeness to God and as great a union with God as frail, finite creatures are able to arrive at.

- Note that divine love and union with Christ produce certain effects in us—fervor, zeal, and other types of change, as well as the transitory experience of contemplating God without reasoning [contemplation by the intellect] and coming to a deeper awareness of one's union with Christ through love ("spiritual marriage" as the consummation of contemplation by the heart).
- At the same time the love of God is more important than its effects and knowing God through love must remain preeminent if, with the passage of time, its effects are not to be corrupted and take a turn for the worse.
 - "Zeal without knowledge is insufferable. When love is very ardent, discretion, which regulates charity, is especially necessary. Zeal unenlightened by knowledge always loses its force, and sometimes becomes harmful...Discretion, indeed, regulates all the virtues, and thus makes them moderate, beautiful and stable. It [sc. love, working through discretion] is not so much a virtue itself as the chastener and guide of the other virtues...Take it away, and virtue is changed to vice" (*In Cantica*, Sermon 49, quoted in Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985, p. 100)

Why We Have Trouble Loving God and What God Can Do About It: Bernard's Doctrine of the Fall, Sin and Grace

In thinking about the way that human beings become subject to sin, several distinctions need to be made

(a) the mind makes a (rational) choice of the good (=decision);

(b) bodily desires, corrupted by the fall, are attracted to what seems pleasant
(c) the will as an independent intermediate faculty, moves one to action in accordance with a goal. This goal can be either the good recognized by the mind or the pleasures to which one's bodily desires are inclined. (Strictly speaking, the will can pursue a good other than that recognized by the mind or one's standing desires but let's forget about this for the moment, as it makes the whole theory more complicated and therefore potentially more confusing.)

Bernard assumes some distinctions that Augustine had developed during the Pelagian controversy:

- 1) Before the Fall, Adam was **able not to sin** (*posse non peccare*) and therefore had the ability to offer free, conscious and willing obedience to God.
- 2) After the Fall, Adam and his descendants experienced, as a consequence of original sin,
 - a clouding and darkening of the mind by ignorance and
 - a weakness (infirmity) of the will combined with
 - the arising of powerful, disordered bodily desires which move one to pursue self-gratification.

Because of this, we find that our lives are disordered by the experience of temptation (suggestions and enticements to commit evil) and our wills move us to pursue not the good known and chosen (preferred) by the mind but the self-gratification proposed by our desires.

We therefore are unsuccessful at holding out against temptation and after a time give in to sin. This giving in to sin generally happens in two stages:

(a) We find pleasure in dwelling upon the thing (contemplating it and savoring its sweetness), giving an initial, unformed consent to the thing (consent to pleasure).

- Thus, for example, I may relish the thought of telling the boss precisely what I think of him and then quitting on the spot. Here I give an initial, unformed consent to my anger and desire for retribution.
- Or, to give another example, perhaps one might savor various sexual images or erotic mental scenarios, replaying them over and over again in one's mind (lust).
- In some cases, what moves one is not pleasure but fear (which like pleasure is a powerful incentive that resists and overrides reason to promote the immediate interests of the self)

(b) After giving initial, unformed consent, one eventually moves on to give explicit consent, which moves one beyond inward commitment to outward action (actually trying to pursue and obtain the object of one's desire).

(c) This will's pursuit of what is pleasant and gratifying to oneself soon gains the force of habit, so that the will moves more easily, impulsive and unreflectively to act in accordance with the pattern that has been established by one's previous actions (creating a sort of inertia).

In this state, in which we are unable to repair the damage to our will, one loses the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*) and finds oneself **not able not to sin** (*non posse non peccare*). Even though one's reason may still be able to distinguish and

- choose (prefer) the good, it is often ineffective in directing the will, so that one's will leads one to pursue some other goal (a different course of action).
- 3) Christ's work on the Cross secures the forgiveness of our sins, renews us in the image of God and restores to us the freedom not to sin (**being able not to sin**= *posse non peccare*) that Adam had lost at the Fall. It is now possible for
- a) the mind to rise above the ignorance that afflicted and limited it and to distinguish and choose the good (it is recognized that God is the supreme good and that he is to be loved for his own sake, not for the benefits he can provide)
 - b) the will to act in accordance with what the mind has judged good and chosen (i.e. pursuing God out of love for God, God being loved for his own sake)
- Freedom from compulsion by evil habits is nonetheless not sufficient to lead us to the good. Our restored power of choice (insufficient of itself) must be joined with grace and it is this grace that makes it possible for us to do the good we desire.
- It is therefore true both that
- the beginning of our salvation rests with God and depends upon divine grace (since we unable to restore the damage done to our wills by sin, but must rely on God to do this--conversion is a divine work rather than a human achievement)
 - divine grace is strictly necessary for us to pursue and do the good (undercutting all claims for the sufficiency of human action or human merit)

The Relation Between Divine Grace and Human Action

God thus requires a confluence of divine and human action in salvation and the Christian life. God's grace is prevenient (i.e. God's gracious action comes before our action, protecting us and preparing us for salvation) and operative (active and at work in bringing us to salvation and sustaining us in the Christian life) but this does not mean that we do not *receive* this grace by way of assent (i.e. we receive this healing and saving grace gladly and not as something forced upon the compelled and unwilling). At the same time, even this assent itself owes something to the Spirit's prior gracious action, which

- heals our wills (restoring them to health) and frees them from their bondage to sin so that we are now able not only to aim at and desire the good, but also to do it/carry it out
- turns the will to the good so that it is subject to the Creator (this is conceived of a transfer of the will's allegiance from sin and habitual evils to God)

This turning of the will to the Creator will ultimately (in the next life) lead us to such an intense desire for God that God can effect a perfect unity of our wills with His own will, so that we finally become **not able to sin** (*non posse peccare*) and therefore rise to a height of communion with God and perfection in God that even Adam prior to the Fall had not experienced.

The Dynamics of Grace and the Stages in Christian Spiritual Experience

The assent that occurs under the influence of grace involves a humility (a truthful assessment of oneself in relation to God) that recognizes and accepts the truth of one's own insufficiency and therefore surrenders itself to the workings of divine grace and the divine purpose. This humility is a prerequisite for the next step in the life of grace, in

which one develops a sympathetic and compassionate identification with others and shows mercy to others (particularly those in need). This in turn is a prerequisite for the growth of charity (a supernatural love for God and others). This love for God leads on to the highest stage in the life of grace, i.e. the ecstasy of contemplating and knowing God in the purity of the truth.

Bernard takes over and adapts the Gregory the Great's concept of the three stages by which we progress toward contemplation of God. As you will remember from the previous week's lecture, Gregory's scheme was as follows:

- (a) *purgation* –The fact that spiritual disciplines are often used by persons seeking to advance in the Christian life often misleads the uninstructed into an interest in/focus upon outward acts. Our attention should rather be directed toward understanding and repenting of improper root motivations (*radix intentionis*) so that with divine help we might arrive at purity of heart and a single-minded attentiveness to the will of God. Renouncing the immoderate (and often violent) passions associated with self-will, we recover our proper place in relation to others and become capable of patience and humility, which are prerequisites to arrive at purity of heart and deeper communion with God.
- (b) *compunction*—Not a prerequisite to contemplation but rather a particular aspect of it, in which we have a vivid awareness of our past and present spiritual limits: “Man has fallen very far beneath himself...having lost sight of his Creator, he has at the same time lost his strength and firmness of purpose” (*Moralia* VIII,8; loose translation). Since this awakening to a clear awareness of one's true state is a product of the action of grace and the soul's conversion, compunction leads one to a deep sense of our need for God and our utter dependence upon God (=evangelical humility): “When God enters into a soul, his entry is followed by the laments of repentance so that henceforth the soul's greatest joys lies in shedding tears over its salvation...It is as if by a clap of thunder that he strikes us when, by his grace, he awakens us to our negligence and heaviness [i.e. sloth]” (*Moralia* 27,40). Over time, grace transmutes these tears over our lack into tears of gratitude for the salvation granted to us: “They do not cease to desire to see the King in his beauty and to weep from love each day” (*Hom. Ez.* II,10,21). Compunction is thus not shame or guilt but rather a dynamic, multifaceted emotion which is capable of
 - (i) looking with a sober and truthful eye at where one was (*ubi fuit*);
 - (ii) looking forward with anticipation to where one will be (*ubi erit*) as a result of salvation by God's grace;
 - (iii) seeing where one is (*ubi est*) presently in one's pilgrimage toward this goal;
 - (iv) seeing what one has not yet attained on this pilgrimage (*ubi non est*), leading the soul to send forth fervent prayers arising from a growing love for the Good one seeks (*Moralia* 23,41; cf. the “prayer of fire” in the Desert Fathers and Cassian **Conf.* IX,26-

28=Luibheid, p. 117-118, which is very worth reading and certainly a source of Gregory's doctrine).

- A keen sense of our limits therefore leads not shame, guilt or a focus upon penitential acts but instead paradoxically to a deeper trust in God and a greater joy and confidence in our salvation by God: "*Blessed is the people who knows rejoicing* (Ps. 88): the soul is moved by tears of joy. The spirit conceives an ineffable joy which can no longer be hidden and which no word can express...It is not said 'Blessed are the people who *speaks their joy*,' but '*who knows rejoicing*'—that joy which can be known cannot be expressed in words. It can be felt but it is far beyond any feeling. The perception of the one who feels it is not sufficient to contemplate it—how could perception ever express it?" (*Moralia* 23,10)
 - In undergoing this change, we discover the both the conviction of conscience (recognition of our limits) and the joy and gratitude we have in God's salvation are actually a work of God in us (not something that we initiated or produced in ourselves) and that what God asks of us is simply to consent to receive these things, acknowledging them to be the gifts given by a grace greater than we could ever have imagined.
- c) Ever-increasing desire, the knowledge one has through love, and the role Christ as mediator plays in this. This advance in love may be thought of as involving four stages (see next section for the details).

The Four Stages of Love By Which We Return to God and Advance Toward the Perfect Love of God

The four stages of love (the idea of stages being a common monastic teaching device to promote memorization):

- 1) love themselves for their own sake (a carnal form of natural, instinctive self-love=self-love distorted by the influence of sin)
 - a. Latin: *homo diligit se ipsum propter se ipsum* (ch. 8)
 - b. The Stoic doctrine of *oikeiosis* is here adapted to Christian usage: self-regard/self-concern oriented toward self-preservation/self-protection due to our recognition of our own weakness-->when this becomes immoderate after the Fall, it leads to carnal pursuit of one's own interests without proper reference to the interests of others or the common good
 - c. Once one has obtained the created thing one desires, one will inevitably find it unsatisfying, since only God is inexhaustibly and infinitely[=permanently] desirable and finally satisfying.
 - d. What will satisfy their desires then is not what they presently pursue but the true end/goal they currently neglect.
 - i. Ambition=you have lots but want more and better things; the law of human desire to want what one lacks in place of what one has.
 - ii. Carnal society based on mutual assistance of self-regarding persons=group-based self-indulgence in pursuing wants/felt needs without attention to what is owed to God or what will benefit the

neighbor for God's sake, since the neighbor can only be loved for God's sake when we are in God and love God--without this we can do nothing truly good)

- 2) love God for their own sakes (i.e. for the benefits he provides=a mercenary, servile love, which does however acknowledge one's need for God)
 - a. Latin: *amat ergo iam Deum, sed propter se interim* (ch. 8-9)
- 3) love God for God's sake (filial love) (i.e. one loves God for who he is [his character] apart from his actions toward us and the benefits he provides--this makes it possible for us to learn to love unselfishly, apart from mixed motives and self-regard; the active love of neighbor for God's sake may also play a preparatory role in preparing us for the experience of unselfish love in relation to God in contemplation) (cf. the later French idea of *amour désintéressé*)
 - a. Latin: *iam propter se ipsum DEUS diligitur, non propter ipsum [hominem]* (ch. 9)
- 4) receiving the love of God, they love themselves for God's sake (a pure love of God which is devoid of self-interest, so that one that can pray "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and really mean it, even to the point that one no longer loves oneself except for God's sake) (cf. the later French idea of *amour pur*)
 - a. Latin: *nec se ipsum diligit homo nisi propter Deum* (ch.10).
 - b. Through perfect surrender, they accept God's judgments and loves as their own without reservation.
 - c. Those whose wills are fixed on God in this way feel that they have nothing more to desire and that no one can be loved more rightly and with greater benefit than God and Christ and that there is nothing God could give us better than himself (=allowing us to experience the ecstasy of mystical love).
 - d. Because one's delight is in God and in seeing God's will done and knowing that God willed everything to exist for himself, one is led to view God's creation in accordance with the divine purpose, desiring that God may be the reward of those who seek him, a group of which incidentally we ourselves are a part.

In this schema, note the identification of the will of God with the common good, so that accepting the will of God as one's own will inevitably turns one outward, caring practically for others out of the love of God.

Note also the paradox in this account of desire and fulfillment:

- We must stop looking for fulfillment (a self-regarding concept) before we will actually find and experience that fulfillment (in God and love of the neighbor).