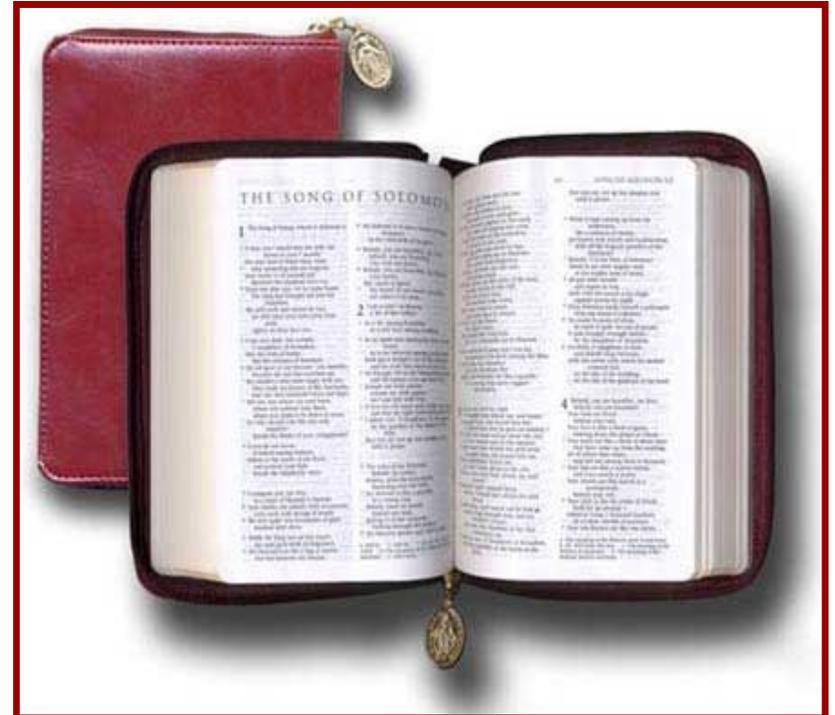




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SONG OF SONGS—25

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***DETRACTION
AND
MAN'S RIGHTEOUSNESS***

The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.

Detraction and Man's Righteousness

On this third return from Rome, my brothers, a more merciful eye has looked down from heaven and a more serene countenance has smiled on us. The Lion's rage has cooled, wickedness has ceased, the Church has found peace. The reprobate, the man who for almost eight years has bitterly embroiled her in schism, has been brought to nothing in her sight. But have I returned from so great dangers to be useless to you? I have been granted to your desires; I am ready to serve your advancement. Through your merits I am still alive, so I wish to live for your welfare, for your salvation. And because you wish me to continue the sermons I began a while back on the Song of Songs, I gladly acquiesce, thinking it better to resume where I broke off than to commence with something new. But I fear that my mind, alienated all that time from a doctrine so sublime and preoccupied with manifold affairs of much less consequence, may prove inept for the task. But if I give you what I have, then God can take account of my well-meant effort and enable me to give even what I have not. If events should prove otherwise, the fault will lie in the skill, not the will.

***“Do not be disturbed,”
they say,***

***“by the wicked words of these blasphemers,
because the righteous do love you.”***

2. We ought to begin, if I be not mistaken, with the words: "The righteous love you." Before we begin to explain what this means, let us take a look at its origin, see who spoke it. For we are expected to understand what the author omits to say. Perhaps it is better to assign it to the maidens, as a continuation of their previous conversation. For when they said: "We will exult and rejoice in you as we remember your breasts, more delightful than wine," it is certain they were speaking to their mother; and they continued with the words: "The righteous love you." I think they may have said this because of members of their party who were not of the same mind although they traveled in their company, who insisted on their own way, their lives being neither simple nor sincere. These were filled with envy of their mother's unique glory and took occasion to murmur against her on the grounds that she alone had entered the storehouses. This is the situation described in the Apostle's words: "Danger from false brothers." It is against their reproaches that she is later compelled to justify herself with the answer: "I am black but lovely, daughters of Jerusalem." It is because of these murmurers, these blasphemers, that the good and the simple, the humble and the meek, try to console the bride by telling her; "The righteous love you." "Do not be disturbed," they say, "by the wicked words of these blasphemers, because the righteous do love you." When we are reviled for doing good by evil-minded men, it is a sweet consolation if the righteous love us. The esteem of the good and the testimony of our conscience make full amends for lying mouths. "My soul glories in the Lord, let the humble hear Let the humble rejoice, he said; let me but please the humble and I shall bear with equanimity whatever the envy of wicked men may fling in my face.

3. I think this to be the meaning of the appendage: "The righteous love you." Nor is it mere fantasy, for in almost any group of young maidens I find some who curiously watch the bride's actions, not to imitate but to disparage them. They are embittered by their elders' good deeds, they feed on what is evil. You may see them walking apart, banding together, sitting in a huddle and immediately unleashing their wanton tongues in odious gossip. They are linked, one to the other, without an air space between them, so great is the desire to smear or listen to the smear. They combine in intimate groups whose end is slander, their unions promote disunion. Among themselves they develop most mischievous friendships, and equally impelled by unanimous malevolence, fete each other in a camaraderie of spite. Herod and Pilate once behaved just like this, for the Gospel says of them that "they became friends with each other that very day," that is, on the day of the Lord's passion. When they meet thus together it is not to eat the Lord's supper, but rather to offer to others "the cup of demons" and to drink of it themselves. They bear on their tongues the virus of death for their fellows, and gladly welcome the death that enters by their own ears. When with prattling mouths and itching ears we busy ourselves in administering the poisoned cup of slander to each other, we fulfill the Prophet's words: "Death has climbed in at our windows." I have no wish to be trapped in the plots of detractors, for the Apostle tells us they are hated by God: "Detractors, hateful to God." God himself through the Psalm confirms this judgment: "Him who slanders his neighbor secretly, I will destroy."

8. The death of faith is the departure of love. Do you believe in Christ? Do the works of Christ so that your faith will live; love will animate your faith, deeds will reveal it. Let no earthly preoccupation bend down the mind that is raised on high by faith. If you say you abide in Christ you ought to walk as he walked. But if you seek your own glory, envy the successful, slander the absent, take revenge on those who injure you, this Christ did not do. You profess to know God, yet reject him by your deeds. There is certainly nothing righteous, but plainly impious, in giving Christ your tongue while surrendering your soul to the devil. Listen then to what he says: "That man honors me with his lips, but his heart is far from me." You are obviously not righteous in maintaining this unrighteous division. You cannot lift a head upwards that is weighed down by the devil's yoke. You have no means at all of raising yourself, for you are held by an evil power. Your iniquities have gone over your head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for you. Iniquity sits upon a talent of lead. You see then that right faith will not make a man righteous unless it is enlivened by love? The man who has no love has no means of loving the bride. But on the other hand, deeds, however righteous, cannot make the heart righteous without faith. Who would call that man righteous who does not please God? But "without faith it is impossible to please God." And God cannot please the man who is not pleasing to him; for if God is pleasing to a man, that man cannot displease God. Furthermore, if God is not pleasing to a man, neither is his bride. How then can he be righteous who loves neither God nor God's Church, to whom is said: "The righteous love you"? If therefore neither faith without good works nor good works without faith suffice for a man's righteousness, we, my brothers, who believe in Christ, should strive to ensure that our behavior and desires are righteous. Let us raise up both our hearts and hands to God, that our whole being may be righteous, our righteous faith being revealed in our righteous actions. So we shall be lovers of the bride and loved by the Bridegroom Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God, blessed for ever. Amen.

7. Those whose souls are warped in this fashion cannot love the Bridegroom, because they are not friends of the Bridegroom, they belong to this world. Scripture says: "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Therefore to pursue and enjoy the worldly warps the soul, while, on the contrary, to meditate on or desire the things that are above constitutes its uprightness.

But if this is to be perfect, it must be not only a conviction of the mind, but a habit of life. I shall judge you to be righteous if your opinions are correct and your deeds do not contradict them. For the state of the invisible soul is made known by one's belief and practice. You may consider a man righteous if you prove him just by his work and Catholic by faith. If otherwise, do not hesitate to appraise him as warped. For Scripture says: "If you offer rightly, but do not divide rightly, you have sinned." You offer rightly either of these, faith or good work, however you do not rightly separate one from the other. Be not one who is righteous in offering but unrighteous in dividing. Why should there be a division between your faith and your conduct? It is a wrong division, it destroys your faith, for "faith without good works is dead." The gift you offer to God is dead. For if devotion is the soul of faith, what is faith that does not work through love but a dead corpse? Can you pay due honor to God with a gift that stinks? Can you who murder your faith hope to please him? What becomes of the sacrifice of peace where this cruel discord reigns? What wonder if Cain attacked his brother when he had already slain his own faith? Why be surprised, O Cain, if your gift is refused by him who holds you in contempt? Divided as you are against yourself, it is no surprise that he pays you no heed. If you set your hand to the sacrifice, why yield your mind to envy? You cannot be reconciled with God while at odds with yourself; you do not please him, rather you sin, not yet because of the impious blow but because of the unrighteous division in your life. Though not yet your brother's murderer, you have murdered your own faith. How can you be right when, while raising up your hand to God, your heart is drawn to earth by envy and fraternal hate? How can you be right when your faith is dead, your purpose to kill, your heart empty of devotion and laden with bitterness? There was faith indeed in your act of worship, but faith devoid of love: the offering was right but the division cruel.

4. No wonder if he should, since this vice is known to assail and victimize more bitterly than the others the love which is God, as you can see for yourselves. For every slanderer first of all betrays that he himself is devoid of love. And secondly, his purpose in slandering can only be to inspire hatred and contempt in his audience for the victim of his slander. The venomous tongue strikes a blow at charity in the hearts of all within hearing, and if possible kills and quenches it utterly; worse still, even the absent are contaminated by the flying word that passes from those present to all within reach. See how easily and in how short a time this swift-moving word can infect a great multitude of men with its sickly malice. Hence the inspired Prophet said of such: "Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood." Swift with the speed of news that brooks no delay. One man speaks, one word is spoken; but that one word, in one moment, penetrates the ears of the multitude and destroys their souls. For a heart embittered by the poison of envy can use the tongue to broadcast only bitter words, just as the Lord said: "A man's words flow out of what fills his heart." This malady has varying forms. Some will spew out, with barefaced disrespect, any wicked slander that enters their heads; others try to hide an irrepressible evil purpose under the guise of simulated modesty. See the prelude of deep sighs, the mingled gravity and reluctance blazoned on his unhappy face, the downcast eyes and somber tones, as the slanderer tells his tale, all the more persuasive the more the audience believes that he speaks with regret and with sympathy rather than malice. "I am really sorry for him," he says, "because I like him so much, but I could never induce him to set himself right in this matter." "I knew well," says another "that he was guilty of that fault, though I should never have been the one to reveal it. But now that it has been divulged by another I cannot deny that it is true; it pains me to say it, but facts are facts." And he goes on: "It's a great pity, he has so many good qualities; but if we are to be candid, he cannot be excused in this particular thing."

5. I have said my few words about this most deadly vice, so let me return to the theme I set out to explain, and show who are to be understood here as the "righteous." I am sure that nobody here with a right understanding would hold that those who love the bride are being spoken of in regard to physical perfection. It is spiritual righteousness, that of the soul, that must be explained. It is the Spirit who teaches, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. Therefore God made man righteous in his soul, not in the body made of earthly slime. He created him according to his own image and likeness. He is the one of whom you sing: "The Lord our God is righteous, and there is no iniquity in him." God in his righteousness made man righteous like himself, without iniquity, since there is no iniquity in him. Iniquity is a fault in the heart, not in the flesh, and so you should realize that the likeness of God is to be preserved or restored in your spirit, not in the body of gross clay. For "God is a spirit," and those who wish to persevere in or attain to his likeness must enter into their hearts, and apply themselves spiritually to that work, until "with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord," they "become transfigured into the same likeness, borrowing glory from that glory, as the Spirit of the Lord enables them."

6. God indeed gave man an upright stance of body, perhaps in order that this corporeal uprightness, exterior and of little account, might prompt the inward man, made to the image of God, to cherish his spiritual uprightness; that the beauty of the body of clay might rebuke the deformity of the mind. What is more unbecoming than to bear a warped mind in an upright body? It is wrong and shameful that this body shaped from the dust of the earth should have its eyes raised on high, scanning the heavens at its pleasure and thrilled by the sight of sun and moon and stars, while, on the contrary, the heavenly and spiritual creature lives with its eyes, its inward vision and affections centered on the earth beneath; the mind that should be feasting on dainties is wallowing in the mire, rolling in the dung like a pig. The body says: "Look on me, my soul, and blush for shame. Blush, my soul, that you have exchanged the divine for a bestial likeness; blush that despite your heavenly origin you now wallow in filth. Created upright and in your Creator's likeness, you received me as a helper like to yourself, at least in bodily uprightness. Whatever way you turn, to God above or to me below -- 'for no man ever hates his own flesh' -- everywhere you encounter reminders of your own beauty, everywhere you find the friendly admonitions that wisdom imparts, intimating the dignity of your state. If I have retained and preserved the prerogative that I received for your sake, why are you not dismayed at losing yours? Why should the Creator continue to behold the loss of his likeness in you, at the same time that he ceaselessly preserves yours in me? All the help due to you from me you have turned to your own disgrace, you abuse my service to you; a brutish and bestial spirit, you dwell unworthily in this human body."