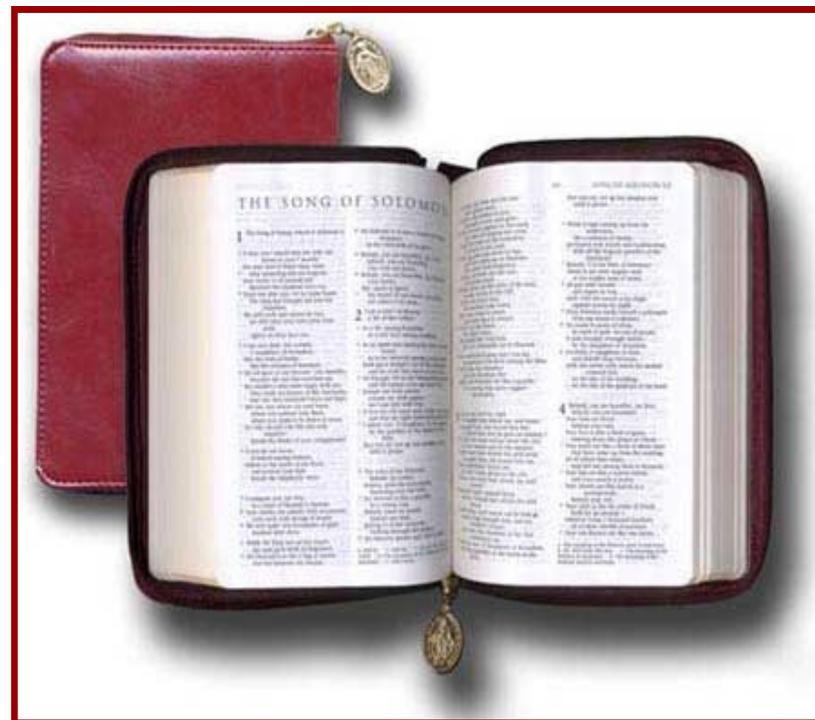




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## ***SONG OF SONGS—51***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***CONCERNING LOVE  
IN THE AFFECTIONS  
AND IN ACTION***

*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.*

## **Concerning Love in the Affections and in Action**

Perhaps you expect a discussion of the next verses, thinking that the verse just dealt with is finished. But I am working on something else, for I have still to set before you some left-overs from yesterday's feast that I collected to prevent them spoiling. They will spoil if I give them to nobody: and if I wish to enjoy them alone, I myself shall be spoiled. I am unwilling then to keep them from that gullet of yours which I know so well, especially as they are presented from the tray of love, as sweet as they are delicate, as tasty as they are small. Furthermore it is altogether contrary to love to deprive people of love. So here I am: 'he has set love in order in me.'

2. Love exists in action and in feeling. And with regard to love in action, I believe that a law, an explicit commandment, has been given to men; yet how can one's feelings correspond to the commandment? The former therefore is commanded in view of merit, the latter is given as a reward. We do not deny that the present life, by divine grace, can also experience its beginning and progress, but we unreservedly maintain that its consummation is in the happiness of the life to come. How then should that be ordered which can in no way be fulfilled? Or if you prefer to hold that affective love has been commanded, I do not dispute it, provided you agree with me that in this life it can never and will never be able to be fulfilled by any man. For who will dare to arrogate to himself what even Paul confessed he did not comprehend? The Lawgiver was not unaware that the burden of the law exceeded the powers of men, but he judged it useful for this reason to advise men of their own insufficiency, that they might know the proper end toward which they ought to strive according to their powers. Therefore in commanding impossible things he made men humble, not prevaricators, so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world be made subject to God, because nobody will be justified in his sight by the works of the law. Accepting that command then, and conscious of our deficiency, we shall cry to heaven and God will have mercy on us. And on that day we shall know that God has saved us, not by the righteous works that we ourselves have done, but according to his mercy.

**'What you would not wish done to yourself,  
avoid doing to another'**

**and also:**

**'Always treat others as you like them to treat you'**

8. Give me a man who loves God before all things and with his whole being, self and neighbor in proportion to their love of God, the enemy as one who perhaps some day will love, his physical parents very deeply because of the natural bond, but his spiritual guides more generously because of grace. In like manner let him deal with the other things of God too with an ordered love, disregarding the earth, esteeming heaven, using this world as if not using it, and discriminating between the things used and those enjoyed with an intimate savoring in his mind. Let him pay but passing attention to things that pass, as existing need demands. Let him embrace eternal things with an eternal desire. Give me such a man, I repeat, and I shall boldly proclaim him wise, because he appreciates things for what they really are, because he can truthfully and confidently boast and say: 'he set love in order in me.' But where is he, and when shall these be? In tears I ask. How long shall we smell and not taste, gazing toward the fatherland and not taking possession, sighing for it and saluting from afar? O Truth, fatherland of exiles, end of their exile! I see you, but held fast by the flesh I may not enter. Filthy with sins, I am not fit to be admitted. O Wisdom, reaching mightily from end to end in establishing and controlling things, and arranging all things sweetly by enriching the affections and setting them in order! Guide our actions as your eternal truth requires, that each of us may confidently boast in you and say: 'he set love in order in me.' For you are the strength of God and the Wisdom of God, Christ the Church's bridegroom, our Lord and God who is blessed for ever. Amen.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS — 51***

3. This is what I should say if we were agreed that affective [love] were a law commanded. But that seems especially to apply to [love in] action, because when the Lord said: 'Love your enemies', he referred right afterwards to actions: 'Do good to those who hate you.' Scripture also says: 'If your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink.' Here you have a question of actions, not of feeling. But listen also to the Lord's command about love of himself: 'If you love me keep my words'. And here too, by enjoining the observance of the commandments, he assigns us to action. It would have been superfluous for him to warn us to act if love were but a matter of feeling. Hence it is necessary that you accept as well that commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, even if it is not expressed as clearly as this. Do you then consider that you do enough to fulfill the command to love of neighbor if you observe perfectly what the natural law prescribes for every man: 'What you would not wish done to yourself, avoid doing to another'; and also: 'Always treat others as you like them to treat you'?

4. I am not saying that we should be without affection, and that with an arid heart we move only our hands to work. Among the many great and grievous evils that the apostle ascribes to men I have read this one is reckoned: to be without affection. But there is an affection which the flesh begets, and one which reason controls, and one which wisdom seasons. The first is that which the apostle says is not subject to the law of God, nor can be; the second, on the contrary, he shows in agreement with the law of God because it is good—one cannot doubt that the insubordinate and the agreeable differ from each other. The third, however, is far from either of them, because it tastes and experiences that the Lord is sweet; it banishes the first and rewards the second. The first is pleasant, of course, but shameful; the second is emotionless but strong; the last is rich and delightful. Therefore by the second good deeds are done, and in it love reigns: not that of the feelings, which, growing richer with the seasoning of wisdom's salt, fills the mind with a mighty abundance of the sweetness of the Lord, but that rather which is practical, not yet indeed imparting the delightful refreshment of sweet love, but still vehemently aflame with the love of love itself 'Do not love in word or speech,' he said, 'but in deed and in truth.'

5. Do you see how cautiously he takes a middle path between vitiated and affective love, while distinguishing from both the love that is active and salutary? He neither finds room in this love for the figment of a lying tongue, nor does he yet demand the flavor of loving wisdom. 'Let us love in deed and in truth', he says, because we are moved to do good more by the vigorous urging of truth than by the feeling of relished love. 'He set love in order in me.' Which of these loves do you think? Both of them, but in reverse order. Now the active prefers what is lowly, the affective what is lofty. For example, there is no doubt that in a mind that loves rightly, the love of God is valued more than love of men, and among men themselves the more perfect [is esteemed] more than the weaker, heaven more than earth, eternity more than the flesh. In well-regulated action, on the other hand, the opposite order frequently or even always prevails. For we are more strongly impelled toward and more often occupied with the welfare of our neighbor; we attend our weaker brothers with more exacting care; by human right and very necessity we concentrate more on peace on earth than on the glory of heaven; by worrying about temporal cares we are not permitted to think of eternal things; in attending almost continually to the ills of our body we lay aside the care of our soul; and finally, in accord with the saying of the Apostle, we invest our weaker members with greater honor, so fulfilling in a sense the word of the Lord: 'the last shall be first and the first last'. Who will doubt that in prayer a man is speaking with God? But how often, at the call of charity, we are drawn away, torn away, for the sake of those who need to speak to us or be helped! How often does dutiful repose yield dutifully to the uproar of business! How often is a book laid aside in good conscience that we may sweat at manual work! How often for the sake of administering worldly affairs we very rightly omit even the solemn celebration of Masses! A preposterous order; but necessity knows no law. Love in action devises its own order, in accord with the command of the house holder, beginning with the most recent; it is certainly dutiful and correct, without favoritism, swayed not by worldly values but by human needs.

6. But not so affective love, since it always leads the ordering from the first. It is the wisdom by which all things are experienced as they are; as for example, the higher the nature the more perfect the love it evokes; the lower evokes less, the lowest nothing. The truth of love determines the previous order, but this order the love of truth lays claim to itself. Now true love is found in this, that those whose need is greater receive first; and again loving truth is evident if we maintain in our feelings the order it maintains in the reason. But you, if you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, whole mind, whole strength, and leaping with ardent feeling beyond that love of love with which active love is satisfied and having received the Spirit in fullness, are wholly aflame with that divine love to which the former is a step, then God is indeed experienced, although not as he truly is, a thing impossible for any creature, but rather in relation to your power to enjoy. Then you will experience as well your own true self, since you perceive that you possess nothing at all for which you love yourself, except insofar as you belong to God: you pour out upon him your whole power of loving. I repeat: you experience yourself as you are, when by that experience of love of yourself and of the feeling that you feel toward him, you discover that you are an altogether unworthy object even of your own love, except for the sake of him without whom you are nothing.

7. As for your neighbor whom you are obliged to love as yourself: if you are to experience him as he is, you will actually experience him only as you do yourself: he is what you are. You who do not love yourself then, except because you love God, consequently love as yourself all those who similarly love him. But you who love God cannot love as yourself a human enemy, for he is nothing in that as he does not love God; yet you will love him so that he may love. But, to love in order that he may love, and to love because he loves, are not the same thing. That you may experience him as he is, therefore, you must experience him not for what he is, because he is nothing, but for what perhaps he will become, which is almost nothing since it still hangs in doubt. But when it becomes clear that he will not return to the love of God, it is essential that you regard him, not as almost nothing but as totally nothing, in that he will be eternally nothing. With this one exception, since not only is he not to be loved, but even to be looked on with hatred, in accord with the text: 'Lord, do I not hate those who hate you, and loathe those who defy you?' the love that is open does not permit the refusal of some feeling, however small, to any man, even to one's greatest enemy. Who is wise enough to understand these things?