

The four degrees of love

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) invites us to consider four degrees of love:

1. **The love of self for the sake of self.**
2. **The love of God for the sake of self.**
3. **The love of God for the sake of God.**
4. **The love of self for the sake of God**

We may illustrate these from the parable of the prodigal son. (Luke 15:11-32)

1. The prodigal was starving, denied even the husks on which the pigs were feeding. His misery was absolute. He had no motive higher than to escape from his degradation. There was no love for his father, only for himself. **Here is the love of self for the sake of self.** So, too, for ourselves when sunk in misery and sin in our unregenerated life.
2. The prodigal reached home and was freely forgiven. Restored as a son he worked for his father and was taken into the family home. He loved his father but he was weakened by the previous life he had chosen. He needed his father for the wisdom and love as children need their parents to help form their character, and as we all need God for the formation of ours. **Here then is the love of God for the sake of self.**
3. Time went by. The son is now middle aged and his father an old man. He has drawn on his father for many years and is filled with gratitude for what he has received. He loves his father dearly for his goodness. **And so we approach the love of God for the sake of God.**
4. For the fourth degree of love we must picture the father as one whose greatest delight is to be found in the enjoyment and love of his son. But that can only reach its peak in the joy that it will bring his father. In the same way God's great delight is in loving his children and those called to this fourth stage have no greater desire than to give God that joy. Hence there follows the immolation of all that remains false that God's joy may be made complete. **Here is the love of self for the sake of God.**

St Bernard says that there are very few who reach this fourth degree. Indeed, there must be few who reach the third degree at any advanced level. But we are encouraged to press towards the mark (Phil .3:14-15) It is the way of prayer in which we open ourselves to God and, without strain or anxiety, allow God to love us which will help us most to grow towards the place where God would have us to be. Beloved, be loved.

Robert Llewellyn used with permission

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