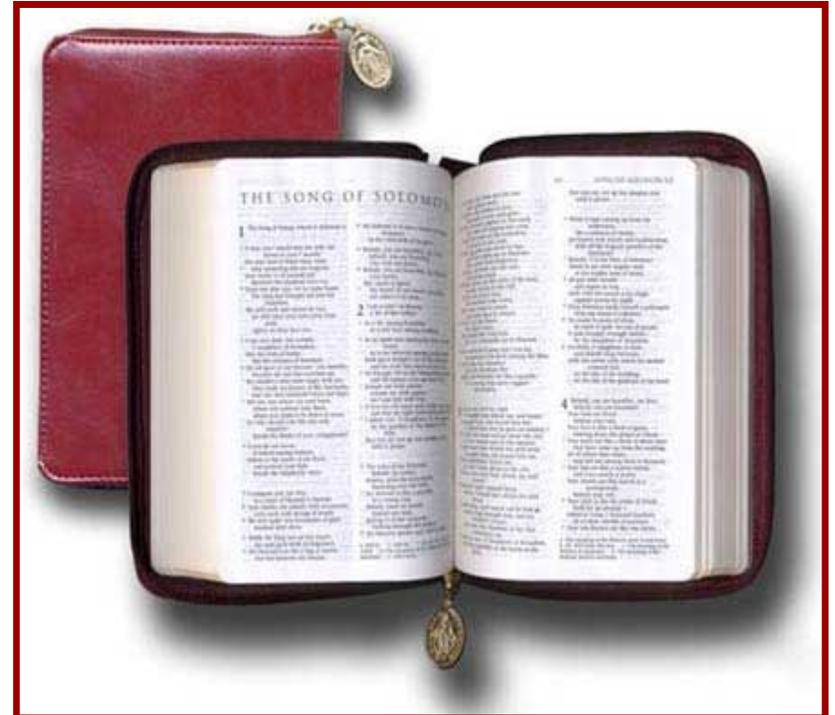




SONG OF SONGS—43

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***FRATERNAL CORRECTION
TWO KINDS OF HUMILITY***

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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.

Fraternal Correction - Two Kinds of Humility

"While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance."
These are the bride's words that we have left until today. This is the answer she gave when rebuked by the Bridegroom, not to the Bridegroom however but to his companions, as can easily be gathered from the words themselves. For since she does not address him directly and say: "When you were on your couch, O King," but: "when he was on his couch," it is clear that she does not speak to him but of him. Try to imagine therefore how the Bridegroom, seemingly after he had reproved or repulsed her, sees the blush of shame that covers her cheeks and departs from the room to give her the opportunity to express her feelings freely. If, as often happened, she yielded more than was becoming to dismay and depression, his companions would console and re-assure her. Not that he omits to do this himself, but he waits for the opportune moment. And to show clearly how pleasing to him she was even while correcting her, for she bore that correction becomingly and in the proper spirit, he could not depart till he had praised the beauty of her cheeks and neck in words that came from his heart. Hence those who remain with her, knowing what the Lord has in mind, try to charm her out of her sadness and present her with gifts. Her words then are addressed to them. This is how they fit within the context.

**How good the fragrance of humility
that ascends from the valley of tears,
that permeates all places within reach,
and perfumes even the royal couch with its sweet delight.**

11. You may very suitably apply the text of this sermon to the early Church, if you recall those days when, after the Lord had ascended to where he was before and seated himself at the Father's right hand, on that ancient, magnificent and glorious couch, the disciples came together in one place, persevering with one mind in prayer along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers. Do you not feel that was a time when the nard of the tiny and timorous bride gave forth its fragrance? And when suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind and filled all the house where they were sitting, could she not say in her littleness and indigence: "While the king was on his couch my nard gave forth its fragrance"? All who lived in that place clearly perceived the ascent of that fragrance of humility, so agreeable and so welcome, and the immediate response of a rich and glorious reward. Nor was the bride ungrateful for that favor. For hear: no sooner is she possessed by the ardor then she professes herself ready to endure any evil for the sake of his name, for the following text runs: "My beloved is to me a bunch of myrrh that lies between my breasts." But I feel too weak to speak any further. I shall say that under the name of myrrh she includes all the bitter trials she is willing to undergo through love of her beloved. Some other time we shall continue with the remainder of the text, provided that the Holy Spirit will be attentive to your prayers and enable me to understand the words of the bride, since he himself has inspired and composed them in a way befitting the praises of him whose Spirit he is, the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 43

2. But before attempting to extract the kernel of spiritual truth from this shell, I make one brief remark.

Happy the Superior who finds a reaction to his reprimand similar to the example given here. Far more desirable that there should never be a need to reprimand! That would be the better thing. But because "we all make many mistakes," and duty obliges me to correct those who err, I may not remain silent; and indeed love impels me to act. And if, in the fulfilling of my duty, I do correct someone only to see that my reprimand fails entirely to achieve its purpose, echoing its futility back to me like a javelin that strikes and recoils, what do you think, brothers, are my feelings then? Am I not frustrated! Am I not angered! Because of my own lack of wisdom let me quote the words of a Master: "I am caught in a dilemma and know not what to choose." Should I be complacent about what I have said because I have done my duty, or perform a penance for what I have said because I have failed in my purpose? For I wished by overthrowing an enemy to rescue a friend, and did not do so; rather the contrary happened, I have offended him and set him deeper in the wrong. He now despises me. "They will not listen to you," said the Prophet, "because they will not listen to me. Note the greatness of him who is involved in this contempt. Do not imagine that you have despised only me. The Lord has spoken, and what he said to the Prophet he also said to the Apostles: "He who despises you, despises me." I am neither prophet nor apostle, but I dare to say that I fulfill the role both of prophet and apostle; and though far beneath them in merits I am caught up in similar cares. Even though it be to my great embarrassment, though it put me at serious risk, I am seated on the chair of Moses, to whose quality of life I do not lay claim and whose grace I do not experience. What then? That one must withhold respect for the chair because the man sitting there is unworthy? But even though the Scribes and Pharisees be seated on it, Christ has said: "Do what they tell you."

3. Quite often impatience is joined to the contempt, so that the man rebuked not only neglects to amend but is even angry with his corrector, like a madman who spurns his doctor's hand. What extraordinary perversity! While refusing to be angry with the archer who shot him, he is angry with his physician! That one who shoots in the dark at the upright of heart has now shot the death-blow into your own self; and you fail to react against him? Yet you are annoyed with me when all I want is to put you right! "Be angry but do not sin," Scripture says. If your anger is directed against your sin, not only do you not sin but you destroy the sin you had committed. Now however you add sin to sin by spurning the remedy in this senseless fit of anger; this is a sin of special malice.

4. Sometimes the anger is spiced with impudence, as when the correction is not only met with impatience but the error impudently defended. This is obvious recklessness. God can say to such a man: "You have a harlot's brow, you refuse to be ashamed;" and again: "My jealousy will depart from you, I shall be angry with you no more." Merely to hear these words makes me shudder. Do you not feel how perilous it is, how horrible and frightening, to defend one's sin? For God also says: "All whom I love I reprove and discipline." If God's jealous anger has turned away from you, so also has his love; if you think yourself unfit for his chastisement, you will not be fit for his love. It is when God does not show his anger that he is most angry: "We have shown favor to the wicked," he says, "and he does not learn righteousness." This kind of favor is not for me. To be spared on these terms is worse than any anger, it leaves me shut off from the paths of righteousness. Better for me to follow the Prophet's advice and learn discipline, lest the Lord be angry and I fall away from the true path. I prefer that you be angry with me, O Father of Mercies, but with that anger by which you put the sinner right rather than drive him off the path. A correction benignly administered begets the former, an ominous concealment of your anger leads to the latter. It is not when I am ignorant of your anger but when I feel it, that I trust most in your goodwill for me, because when you are angry you will remember to be merciful. "You were a forgiving God to your people," according to the Psalmist, "but an avenger of their wrong-doings." He is speaking of Moses and Aaron and Samuel whom he had previously mentioned, and considers it a mercy that God did not spare their waywardness. But you? Go on defending your error and condemning the correction, and cut yourself off from this mercy forever! But that is surely to call evil good and good evil. And out of this odious impudence shall we not soon see emerging the buds of impenitence, the mother of despair? For who will repent of what he thinks good? Woe to them the Prophet says. And that woe is for eternity. It is one thing for a person to be tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire, but quite another to freely pursue evil as good, to speed toward death with a false security as if on the way to life.

For this reason I should sometimes prefer to remain silent and pretend I had not seen some wrong being done, rather than to bring about so great a calamity by a reprimand.

10. Therefore: "while the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance."

The king's couch is the heart of the Father, because the Son is always in the Father. Never doubt of the mercy of this king, whose eternal resting place is the abode of the Father's love. What wonder that the cry of the humble should reach to him whose dwelling-place is at that source of all kindliness, where his happiness is most intimate and his goodness consubstantial with that of the Father; for he receives all that he is from the Father, and the timorous glance of the lowly will see in his royal power nothing that is not fatherly. Therefore the Lord says: "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now arise." The bride knows this because she is a well-loved member of his household; she knows that her Bridegroom's favors will not be limited by the poverty of her merits, for she puts her trust solely in her lowliness. Yet she gives him the title of king, for while smarting from the reprimand she does not dare to call him Bridegroom. He is said to dwell on high, but this does not weaken the trust that permeates her humility.

9. It counts for little, however, that you are submissive to God, unless you be submissive to every human creature for God's sake, whether it be the abbot as first superior or to the other officers appointed by him. I go still further and say: be subject to your equals and inferiors. "It is fitting," said Christ, "that we should in this way do all that righteousness demands." If you seek an unblemished righteousness, take an interest in the man of little account, defer to those of lesser rank, be of service to the young. Doing this you may dare to say with the bride: "My nard gave forth its fragrance."

That fragrance is the fervor of your life, the good repute in which all men hold you, so that you might be the good odor of Christ in every place, seen by all, loved by all. Such influence is beyond the man whose humility is compelled by the truth; he is so caught up in self-interest that it cannot flow out so that it will spread abroad. His life bears no fragrance because he lacks fervor, his humility is neither free nor spontaneous. But the bride's humility, like the nard, spreads abroad its fragrance, the warmth of its love, the vigor of its fervor, the inspiring power of its good name. The bride's humility is freely embraced, it is fruitful and it is forever. Its fragrance is destroyed neither by reprimand nor praise. She has heard: "Your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's, your neck like strings of jewels." When promised pendants of gold she acquiesced with humility; the more she is honored the more she humbles herself in all things. She does not boast of her merits nor forget her humility when she hears her praises multiplied. Under this name of nard she humbly vows her lowliness in the spirit of the Virgin Mary's words: "I am unaware of any merit that would warrant all this honor, except that God has been pleased with the lowliness of his handmaid." What else can she mean by saying: "My nard gave forth its fragrance," than that my lowliness was pleasing to him? It was not any wisdom of mine, not any nobility, not any beauty, for these meant nothing to me; it was my humility alone that gave forth fragrance, in its accustomed way. God is habitually pleased with humility; the way of the Lord is to look down lovingly on the humble from the heights of heaven; and therefore while the king was on his couch, in his dwelling-place in the heavens, the fragrance of my humility mounted even to the presence of him of whom the Psalmist says: "He dwells on high and takes account of the lowly things in heaven and on earth."

5. Perhaps you will tell me that my good deed will redound to my welfare; that I have freed my own soul and am innocent of the blood of that man in speaking and warning him to turn away from his evil path that he might live. But though you give me countless reasons they will not comfort me because my eyes rest on a son who is dying. It is as if by that reprimand I sought to achieve my own salvation rather than his. Where is the mother who will be able to restrain her tears when she sees her ailing son at the point of death, even if she knows she has devoted all possible care and attention to him, but in vain, since all her efforts now come to nothing? She weeps because death takes him from her for a time. How much more should I weep and lament for the eternal death of a son of mine even if I am conscious of no failure on my part, even though I have warned him? You see then how great the evils from which a man delivers both himself and me when he responds with meekness on being corrected, submits respectfully, obeys modestly, and humbly admits his fault. To a man like this I shall in all things be a debtor, I shall minister to and serve him as a genuine lover of my Lord, for he is one who can truly say: "while the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance."

6. How good the fragrance of humility that ascends from the valley of tears, that permeates all places within reach, and perfumes even the royal couch with its sweet delight.

The nard is an insignificant herb, said by those who specialize in the study of plants to be of a warm nature. Hence it seems to be fittingly taken in this place for the virtue of humility, but aglow with the warmth of holy love. I say this because there is a humility inspired and inflamed by charity, and a humility begotten in us by truth but devoid of warmth. This latter depends on our knowledge, the former on our affections. For if you sincerely examine your inward dispositions in the light of truth, and judge them unflatteringly for what they are, you will certainly be humiliated by the baseness that this true knowledge reveals to you, though you perhaps as yet cannot endure that others, too, should see this image. So far it is truth that compels your humility, it is as yet untouched by the inpouring of love. But if you were so moved by a love of that truth which, like a radiant light, so wholesomely discovered to you the reality of your condition, you would certainly desire, as far as in you lies, that the opinions of others about you should correspond with what you know of yourself. I say, as far as in you lies, because it is often inexpedient to make known to others all that we know about ourselves, and we are forbidden by the very love of truth and the truth of love to attempt to reveal what would injure another. But if under the impulse of self-love you inwardly conceal the true judgment you have formed of yourself, who can doubt that you lack a love for truth, since you show preference for your own interest and reputation?

7. Convicted by the light of truth then, a man may judge himself of little worth, but you know this is far from the equivalent of a spontaneous association with the lowly that springs from the gift of love. Necessity compels the former, the latter is of free choice. "He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant," and so gave us the pattern of humility. He emptied himself, he humbled himself, not under constraint of an assessment of himself but inspired by love for us. Though he could appear abject and despicable in men's eyes, he could not judge himself to be so in reality, because he knew who he was. It was his will, not his judgment, that moved him to adopt a humble guise that he knew did not represent him; though not unaware that he was the highest he chose to be looked on as the least. And so we find him saying: "Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart." He said "in heart;" in the affection of the heart, which signifies the will, and a decision arising from the will excludes compulsion. You and I truly know that we deserve disgrace and contempt, that we deserve the worst treatment and the lowest rank, that we deserve punishment, even the whip; but not he. Yet he experienced all these things because he willed it; he was humble in heart, humble with that humility that springs from the heart's love, not that which is exacted by truthful reasoning.

8. So then, I have said that we attain to this voluntary humility not by truthful reasoning but by an inward infusion of love, since it springs from the heart, from the affections, from the will; you must judge whether I am right. But I also submit to the scrutiny of your judgment the rectitude by which I attribute this to the Lord, who under love's inspiration emptied himself, under love's inspiration was made lower than the angels, under love's inspiration was obedient to his parents, under love's inspiration bowed down under the Baptist's hands, endured the weakness of the flesh, and became liable to death, even the ignominious death of the cross. And one more thing I ask you to consider: whether I have been correct in assuming that this humility, aglow with love, is symbolized by that lowly plant, the nard. And if you do assent to all these opinions - and you must give assent to evidence that is so manifest - then if you feel humiliated by that inescapable sense of unworthiness implanted by the Truth that examines both heart and mind in the very being of one who is attentive, try to use your will and make a virtue of necessity, because there is no virtue without the will's co-operation. You will achieve this if you do not wish to appear externally in any way different from what you discover in your heart. Otherwise you must fear that you will read your fate in words like the following: "He flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated." For "diverse weights and diverse measures are both alike an abomination to the Lord." What am I getting at? Will you despise yourself in your own heart when you weigh yourself in the balance of God's truth, and yet deceive the public with a different estimate by selling yourself to us at a greater weight than Truth has indicated? Let the fear of God prevent you from attempting anything so despicable as to commend the man whose unworthiness is revealed by God's truth: for this is to resist the truth, to fight against God. You must rather submit to God and let your will be docile to the Truth; and more than docile, even dedicated. "Was not my soul subject to God," said the Psalmist.