

Stages of Love in the Spiritual Life



There are three stages in our love for God: servile love, mercenary love and filial love. The word servile derives from “servant”. A servant (or employee) does his master’s will out of fear of punishment. Likewise, beginners in the spiritual life do God’s will, obey the Commandments, avoid sin, and go to Mass on Sunday, etc, because otherwise they fear and expect God’s anger and punishment. This is a necessary step in our growth, as it is in the maturing of a child who does the right thing and avoids the wrong thing because otherwise dad or mom (a good and responsible dad or mom) will discipline or punish them. God’s love is tough love, trying to move us beyond self to Himself and to love. Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, Scripture says.

The second degree of love is mercenary love. A mercenary is a soldier who fights because he is paid, not because he is committed to the cause of defending home and country. Colonel Gadhafi hires sub-Saharan mercenaries to help him survive as the dictator of Libya. Our love for God is mercenary when it is focused on our gain, on what we hope to get from God, rather than on what we want to give God. Here is a great trap for many of us, and a trap we remain caught in for many years if not a whole lifetime. Even Jesus’ close friends, James and John, were hoping to have positions of honor when Jesus established His kingdom. We must constantly strive to purify our motives and our faith in order to put God and His will first. We must “lose our life in order to find it” as Jesus tells us.

We are all called to enter the third degree of love, filial love, the love of a son or daughter for their Father whom we love for His own sake. Why? Because God is total Goodness, Beauty, Truth, Being, everything our heart was made for! Human analogies may help: spouses and friends are able to love each other more than their own selves, and are ready to sacrifice everything for their beloved. This third degree of love is called by the Greek word, Agape, in the New Testament. It is divine love. Jesus lives it, and only His grace enables us to live it. It will help if we constantly practice love of God and neighbor and if we constantly ask for this grace to do everything we do out of pure love for God and neighbor. In our prayer, whether personal or liturgical, we need to concentrate on loving God for His own sake and avoid seeking for signs and “prayer experiences” and good feelings. We need naked trust in God’s pure, tender and merciful love for ourselves. Let us imitate the “Our Father” prayer which Jesus gives us as the model of all prayer. There Jesus teaches us to first seek to give glory and obedience to the Father before asking for any our own legitimate needs. This heals our soul.

The spiritual life is like a spiral. We have intermittent experiences of all three degrees of love but one tends to predominate. For instance, we can be in the third degree of love of God but have temptations or trials that cause us to do God’s will out of fear of punishment (first degree) or out of a desire to earn his love or help (second degree). Likewise, even at the beginning of our spiritual life, Our Lord gives us sweet consolations of purely loving Him and enjoying His goodness and glory; these graces spur us on to greater effort and love and give us strength to persevere and follow Jesus through the passions and crosses of life to the glorious resurrection of true Christian life.

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